

The London School of Economics and Political Science

**Lesbian Trouble:
Feminism, Heterosexuality and the French Nation (1970–1981)**

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A thesis submitted to the Department of Gender Studies of the London School of Economics
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, London, August 2018.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the repression of lesbian difference in the 1970s French women's liberation movement (MLF) as a way of investigating the heterosexual complicity between French feminism and the French nation. Combining discourse analysis of archival materials and oral interviews, it seeks to explore how lesbian difference troubled the heterosexual order of 1970s French feminist discourses through an archaeology of the MLF's (buried) controversies on lesbianism and a particular focus on Monique Wittig's biographical and political trajectory. In conversation with queer theory, postcolonial studies, critical history and affect studies, this research argues that the political and affective transmutation of lesbians into (heterosexual) women, which is at the root of the MLF's female universalism, was constituted through lesbian losses that melancholically haunted the 1970s as constant reminders of feminism's exclusions.

Conceiving of abstract universalism as a technology of power, the thesis first explains that feminists sought to absorb the nation's sexual contract through the production of a feminist heterosexual contract, therefore hinging (heterosexual) women's inclusion in the nation on lesbians' illegibility. This "lie" or crisis in representation – claiming to represent all women while foundationally positing lesbians as non-women – was the paradoxical condition of the birth of a lesbian political subjectivity in 1970s France. Exploring lesbians' affective, political and theoretical disidentification with feminism, the thesis then tracks lesbians' melancholic traces in the archive as evidence of feminism's failed lesbian history. Finally, it examines the return of the lesbian repressed, *à contretemps*, at the end of the decade, when a spectacular conflict broke out regarding lesbianism in the wake of Monique Wittig's famous assertion, which was also a deferred exposure of the MLF's founding lie: "lesbians are not women". Revealing how the lesbian was made "un-French" in the 1970s (like queer theory today), this research seeks to understand her as a figure that troubles the heterosexual and colonial norms governing French abstract universalism and feminism's attempts to reiterate it in a female form.

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Although signed by a single author, this thesis would not have been possible without the support and care of so many people along the way. I would first like to thank my supervisor, Professor Clare Hemmings, whose intellectual generosity and incisive comments on my work throughout the four years of this research have pushed me to go further than I could ever have imagined. Clare has been a wonderful and unparalleled source of inspiration, and I can never thank her enough for her level of commitment to my research. She has brought immense knowledge to the thesis, and more than anyone else she has shaped the ways my intellectual curiosity and interests have evolved over the years. I am also enormously grateful to my advisor, Dr Sumi Madhok, who has been a thought-provoking reader of this thesis, bringing invaluable insights to it and guiding me towards fascinating paths.

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I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my grandmother, Marie Sultana Seroussi, to her rebel spirit and unconditional love, which have profoundly inspired the direction my life has taken.

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Who is afraid of lesbians? Men *and* feminists!

Monique Wittig (n. d. [circa 1981a]: 2), Letter to Adrienne Rich (emphasis Wittig's).

Introduction

Epistemology of the French Feminist Closet

1. Mouvement de Libération des Femmes: A History of Homosexual Liberation

“Viscerally libertarian, a particular kind of radical anarchist, full of sparkling, snappy humour” (Corradin 2017: 189, my translation), Brigitte Boucheron was a prominent figure in the 1970s Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF, women’s liberation movement) in Toulouse. When I asked her during our interview if she remembered when she had first identified as homosexual,¹ she linked her narrative to the May ’68 uprisings:

I started socializing in ’68. I became a young adult in ’68. It was really ’68 that was very, very foundational. May ’68. I was in Poitiers. I participated in the general assemblies [...] And... Ha! Yes! It was such a fantastic thing. This, really... It was in Poitiers, in the university canteen, where it was the custom that [...] only male students were allowed to go and get the bread and water. Symbolic... And so one day, I was with my friend Simone, I stood up and I went and got the bread and water. But if you did that, there was a hullabaloo: the entire canteen resounded, everyone started banging their glass or the table and so on... It was a hell of a noise! And at that moment, I turned around with my basket of bread and my big, big jug of water, I spotted the one guy who was banging his glass the most furiously, I went up to him and... Psssshhhh: I poured my [jug] over him! Ahhh, wonder of wonders! And there, I think the hullabaloo stopped... But that... Oh, what a wonder! It was too good! I was in my second year of university, I was twenty.

She paused and then continued:

Yes, ’68! Feminist consciousness arrived in ’68. I was part of a community of leftist

¹ I translate the French substantivized adjective “homosexuelle” with the English word “homosexual”. It must be noted that while the English word “homosexual” is gender-neutral, the term “homosexuelle” in French includes a female ending (“-elle”) and means “female homosexual”. For clarity, I use the word “homosexual” instead of “female homosexual”. However, it is worth bearing in mind that the female ending “-elle” on the French word “homosexuelle” conjures up the female third-person pronoun “elle”, providing a feminine connotation to the word which the English translation (as well as the word “lesbian”) does not convey.

students. [...] There, I was surrounded by heterosexuals... But in the neighbourhood, there was the magic bookshop Pergame. And it was *the* bookshop in Poitiers... A temple... And who owned this bookshop? A girl with white skin and very dark long hair, whose name, I learned, was Béatrice Bousseyrol...² and who lived with a woman! And so, “Ohhh!” For the first time, I encountered a female couple! And so, I remember being... Béatrice was my first surprise party! My first sexual experience... They were the first lesbian couple I met. And there, I think that’s where the revelation happened. I was overjoyed: it was personified! What I was was personified by two other women. [...] We had some wonderful times... Of course we had a threesome, compulsory! That was how it was in those days! So it was them, when [homosexuality] became personified, when I felt it very strongly, in the flesh, and when I was happy to be lesbian. It was because this couple existed and I could see it... I never stopped seeing them afterwards... And so, that was in '68 (Brigitte Boucheron, interview, 11 April 2016, my translation).

This narrative provides a vivid glimpse into the “terrific explosion of May '68” (Domenach 1981: 15) through which politics and life, revolution and desire, activism and emotions fused together to produce “the manifestation, the upsurge of becoming in its pure state” (Deleuze 1990 in Miller 1993: 195). Unforeseen and spectacular, the May '68 events brought together far-left students, workers and artists in the largest general strike in twentieth-century Europe, with the intention to overthrow capitalism and the conservative regime of General de Gaulle. Against the elitist vision of socialist revolution held by the French Communist Party, students who revolted, whether Trotskyist, Castroist, Maoist, anarchist or situationist, laid claim to the politicization of everyday life and a “taking up of speech” to radically transform the social and political order. “Multiform, scattered, polycentric” (Artières and Zancarini-Fournel 2008: 405, my translation), the turmoil was unprecedented and marked a watershed in the political, cultural and intellectual history of post-war Europe.³ The “breach” (Morin et al. 1968) opened

² The name has been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

³ Scholarship on the history of May '68 in France includes Artières and Zancarini-Fournel (2008), Bantigny (2013, 2018), Bantigny et al. (2017a), Bhambra and Demir (2009), Bourg (2007), Bourseiller (1996), Damamme et al. (2008), Dreyfus-Armand et al. (2000), Fields (1988), Fillieule and Sommier (2018), Gobille (2018a, 2018b), Hamon and Rotman (1987, 1988), Jackson et al. (2011), Marwick (1998), Ory (1983), Pagis (2018), Pavard (2018), Ross (2002) and Zancarini-Fournel (2008, 2016). A large number of interpretative commentaries on May '68 appeared in subsequent decades (Bourg 2007: 19–42). These interpretations can be divided between a positive pole celebrating an untimely “breach” in the traditional order

by May '68 gave way to an era of radical upheaval, also called the “‘68 years” (Dreyfus-Armand et al. 2000), which stretched across the 1970s until the election of the Socialist François Mitterrand as president in May 1981. The agitation unfolded on multiple fronts: feminism, anti-colonialism, secondary schools and universities, homosexual liberation, immigration, ecology, etc.⁴ The sociologist Alain Touraine characterized these plural mobilizations, which moved away from exclusively proletarian subject-positions, as “new social movements” (1971 [1968]). Thus, although the MLF grew out of a dissatisfaction with the male chauvinism of the radical left and the May '68 movement's disregard of gender issues, the emphasis on joy in Boucheron's testimony links the May '68 revolts with the birth of the MLF and the liberation of homosexual desire through a shared structure of revolutionary feeling.⁵ Awakenings to adult life, feminism and homosexuality are entangled in Boucheron's memories and woven through the possibilities opened up by the May '68 movement.

It was in this joyful revolutionary atmosphere that the MLF erupted in Paris in 1970.⁶ Anchored in the far-left agitation of the era, and derived from the spontaneist and anarchist tendencies of the May '68 student movement, the MLF rejected centralized structures,

(Deleuze and Guattari 2007 [1984]; Joffrin 1988; Morin et al. 1968; Weber 1979, 1988) and a negative pole (gaining widespread recognition in the late 1970s and 1980s) denouncing the futility of an individualist revolt that championed moral relativism and had the unintended consequence of accelerating the liberal modernization of capitalism (Aron 1969 [1968]; Debray 1979 [1978]; Ferry and Renault 1990 [1985]; Le Goff 1998; Lipovetsky 1983).

⁴ Although radical agitation spread throughout the decade, it waned sharply from 1974 onwards.

⁵ The only feminist group present in the occupied Sorbonne was Féminin-Masculin-Avenir (FMA, Feminine-Masculine-Future), created in 1967 by some of the MLF's future leaders. The Groupe de Vincennes, which was created in October 1968 by Josiane Chanel, Antoinette Fouque and Monique Wittig, and which later gave birth (with FMA) to the MLF, was a response to the “virilism” of the May '68 movement (Fouque 2008: 19; Thibaut 2008). When eighteen participants in the group held the first feminist demonstration in May 1970 at the University of Vincennes, male far-left activists actively disrupted it. These incidents sealed the MLF's decision to be non-mixed (Shaktini 2005: 15–16). On gender politics in the May '68 movement, see Achin and Naudier (2008), Bantigny (2018), Bantigny et al. (2017b), Bourg (2007, 2009), Chaperon (1995), Dreyfus-Armand et al. (2000), Feldman (2009), Frazier and Cohen (2014), Pagis (2018), Pavard (2018), Picq (1993, 2011), Porhel and Zancarini-Fournel (2009), Tristan and de Pisan (1977), Wadia (1993) and Zancarini-Fournel (2002).

⁶ On the genesis of the MLF, see Chaperon (1995), Delphy (1991), Feldman (2009), Fougeyrollas-Schwebel (2005), Fouque (2008), Lasserre (2014), Pavard (2012), Picq (1993, 2011), Prochoix (2008), Ringart (2008), Thibaut (2008), Tristan and de Pisan (1977) and Zelensky (2008).

spokespersons and the politics of representation of the “masses” which characterized far-left organizations, trade unions and political parties. Instead, it claimed to be a collectively lived experience politicizing women’s oppression, an open nebula of feelings and experiments which all women were invited to join. Comprising groups that focused on the family, psychoanalysis, abortion and contraception, married women, homosexuality and single mothers, of consciousness-raising groups, groups in secondary schools, universities, workplaces and neighbourhoods, and thematic groups on music, theatre, cinema and poetry, in the first years of its existence the MLF was an “aggregation of idiosyncrasies, a convergent and sometimes divergent pooling of irreducible singularities” (Lasserre 2014: 51, my translation). Boosted by the biweekly general assemblies held on Wednesday evenings at the École des beaux-arts (School of Fine Arts) in Paris from September 1970 onwards, the MLF was primarily characterized by its non-mixedness (non-mixité), its fight against patriarchy as a universal regime oppressing women, and the centrality of sexual and domestic issues. In “these cries, [...] these laughs, [...] these new forms of life and expression” (La Griffonne 1981: 2, my translation), MLF women joined forces on an ad hoc basis for shared projects (such as editing *Le torchon brûle*, the MLF’s first newspaper), general assemblies, demonstrations, and spectacular happenings – the MLF’s principal mode of public visibility.⁷

MLF historiography as a whole converges around the idea that the women’s movement cheerfully celebrated female homosexuality as an integral dimension of women’s liberation and thus provided lesbians with unprecedented space for visibility (Bard 2004, 2012; Bonnet 1995, 2018; CLEF 1989; Garcia Guadilla 1981, Lasserre 2014; Lesselier 1991; Picq 1993, 2011; Pilon 2013). Historian of modern and contemporary French feminism Christine Bard in particular contrasts the liberation of homosexuality in the MLF with the pre-1970 era, which

⁷ These actions included the MLF’s inaugural happening at the Arc de Triomphe on 26 August 1970; a protest at the Prison de la Petite Roquette on 19 October 1970 against the incarceration of the Maoist activist Alain Geismar; and the disruption of the press conference on first “Woman’s General Estates” organized by the magazine *Elle* on 17 November 1970. In 1971, MLF women supported strikes in all-female factories in Troyes and Nantes, and in maternity homes for young single women in Orléans and Le Plessis-Robinson. They sabotaged an anti-abortion meeting on 5 March 1971, and a radio broadcast on homosexuality with members of the future Front homosexuel d’action révolutionnaire (Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action) on 10 March 1971. MLF activists were also behind the historic “Manifesto of the 343” in support of the decriminalization of abortion (enacted in January 1975), published in *Le Nouvel Observateur* on 5 April 1971, in which 343 women publicly revealed that they had had illegal abortions. MLF activists organized the first mass demonstration on 20 November 1971 for free abortion on demand. Women’s groups were also created in Toulouse, Nice, Rouen, Lyon and a few other cities.

she dubs “the stage of repression” characterized by “moral censorship” and “stigmatization” (2004: 112):

In general sexuality remained confined to the secrecy of the private sphere, except when it was deemed a danger to public order. Female homosexuality thus was barely visible. It benefited, sometimes, from relative tolerance when it was kept hidden (2004: 112, my translation).

Bard foregrounds her diachronic contrast by insisting on the difference between the “taboo”, “fear” and “disapproval” (112) surrounding lesbianism in first-wave feminism and its embrace in the MLF:

After the repression of the issue of homosexuality in first-wave feminism, the Mouvement de libération des femmes became the privileged laboratory for a new political identity: lesbianism (2004: 111).

Speaking of the pleasure of the “homoerotic atmosphere”, of “being with smart women who laughed all the time, who wanted to change society” (Delphy interview in Bard 2004: 114), Bard argues that MLF lesbians found in the movement’s “symbiotic unanimity” “an atmosphere that protected them from ordinary homophobia” (114) and “conditions for a new collective existence” (112). Along similar lines, MLF historian Colette Pipon contends in her book *Et on tuera tous les affreux: le féminisme au risque de la misandrie, 1970–1980* (To Hell with the Ugly: Feminism at Risk of Misandry, 1970–1980) (2013) that the MLF had a “homosexual dimension” and that the movement’s non-mixedness “encouraged [...] the appearance of a form of female cultural behaviour outside the world of men”, which she names “homo-sensuality” or “homo-intellectuality” (2013: 171, my translation). In her canonical history of the MLF, *Libération des femmes: les années-mouvement* (Women’s Liberation: The Movement Years) (1993), historian and sociologist Françoise Picq (herself a former MLF activist) explains that homosexuality was not just accepted or liberated in the movement, but was the means of women’s liberation itself:

So homosexuality looked more coherent with feminist engagement with the MLF’s ideology of rupture. Being able – and wanting – to do without men seemed like an asset on the road to liberation (1993: 188, my translation).

Similarly, sociologist Frédéric Martel, in one of the earliest book-length studies on post-'68 French homosexual movements, writes about the “subversion” of “emotional intimacy” between women in the MLF:

The MLF was characterized, if not by the expression of a freely chosen homosexuality, then at least by a fundamentally monogamous women’s culture in search of emotional intimacy and sharing, and by a female sexuality not exclusively focused on the genitals. [...] It was a particular moment of subversion against male power, a detoxification, at least temporarily (1999: 38).

All these narratives support the idea of a grand liberation of homosexuality in the MLF, conceiving of female homosexuality as the driving force of the movement and the heart of the cultural revolution to come. As evidence of this liberation, they frequently comment on the “numerous conversions to homosexuality, temporary or permanent, among previously heterosexual women” (Chauvin 2005: 119, my translation). Addressing the women’s movement’s “idealization” of “a new way of being homosexual”, in which “one is not born, but rather becomes, a homosexual” (2004: 115), Bard declares: “[e]verywhere the movement existed, heterosexual women, indecisive, often young and trying to find themselves, became homosexual or bisexual”. These women, she continues, experienced “a second birth with a new sexual identity: homosexual” (115). The homosexual woman thus appears as the paradigmatic subject of these MLF histories.

Even when historians or MLF women recognize that lesbianism was not as accepted as these narratives seem to suggest, they systematically integrate their critique within the frame of a progress narrative, treating the issue of the inclusion of homosexual difference as ultimately having been resolved by the feminist movement as a whole. Indeed, it was in reaction to homophobic attitudes that a group of MLF lesbians decided in 1971 to create the first lesbian collective in France: the Gouines rouges (Red Dykes). Cathy Bernheim – a pioneering MLF lesbian – recalls the ways in which she felt violated by the voyeuristic gaze directed at lesbians during a consciousness-raising session on homosexuality in January 1971: “[w]e were asked why, how, how many times my sister, with the same unwholesome curiosity, the same feeling of strangeness, the same suspicion of monstrosity as the censors” (Bernheim 2010 [1983]: 102, my translation). Around the same time, at a meeting of Les petites

marguerites (Daisies), a group of MLF artists, a young woman grimaced while describing an advertising poster: “[y]ou know, this poster with a sort of dyke on it”. “[W]e all swallowed it as if nothing had happened”, remembers Catherine Deudon, another pioneering MLF lesbian (Catherine in Bernadette, Nelly et Suzette 1981: 115, my translation). Immediately after the meeting, Deudon wrote a letter to Monique Wittig – at that time an acclaimed nouveau roman writer as well as an MLF co-founder who hosted the group’s meetings – in which she expressed her disappointment at the incident. In her PhD thesis on the literary history of the MLF, Audrey Lasserre argues that “tongues were loosened” after Deudon’s letter, and “homosexuality, until then scotomized or euphemized in discourse, made a dazzling and lasting appearance” (2014: 137, my translation) – thus solving the problem of homosexual difference once and for all. Similarly, when I asked another MLF lesbian activist why the movement had barely addressed political issues specifically pertaining to lesbians, she responded:

Ha yes, [...] we were really not talking about lesbianism [in the first years]. [...] What I think is that priorities were, in order, abortion, family, marriage, rape... and after rape, it was in 1976–1977, from there on... The field was open (my translation).

The reason she uses 1976–1977 as a marker for the inclusion of lesbianism is that the MLF held its first public action in support of homosexuality on 25 June 1977 in Paris, when MLF women (alongside gay men) organized France’s first autonomous homosexual march. Another lesbian feminist and MLF co-founder upheld the same linear narrative when I asked her why she had never wanted to join the lesbian groups that emerged in the second half of the 1970s:

I decided to stay in feminist groups while waiting for them to make room for lesbianism, which came very late. [...] I would say very, very late, from the 1990s onwards. One day I was on holiday with [a feminist friend] and I told her: “I am the most patient lesbian in the movement!” (laughing) (my translation)

Thus, whether it is Deudon’s letter in 1971, the first homosexual demonstration in 1977 or the decade of the 1990s, there is always a point at which lesbianism is conceived as having *finally* been included in the feminist movement, turning the problem of lesbian exclusion into something anachronistic and irrelevant. Whether the issue of homosexuality was never a

problem in the first place, or was included later on in compliance with the MLF's liberal promise of universal inclusion, the MLF's "official" history is a story about homosexual liberation in and through the feminist movement.

Yet, I find it difficult to imagine that the century-long systemic oppression of homosexuality suddenly disappeared in 1970 (or subsequently) thanks to the women's movement and after the tyrannical "stage of repression". In 2010, to celebrate the fortieth anniversary of the birth of the MLF, a fifteen-minute documentary was aired on French television news. Strikingly, while almost all the MLF activists interviewed in the documentary were self-identified lesbians – most of them had created the Gouines rouges in 1971 – the presenter announced that the MLF had "lifted the taboo around abortion, contraception, but also inequalities at work or within couples" (Szymanski: 0 mins 20 sec, my translation), and none of the interviewees referred to lesbianism as a feminist issue in their testimony. The observation is striking: forty years later, in a discussion of the birth of second-wave feminism for a mainstream audience, lesbianism is entirely absent from the picture. How can we understand this discrepancy between narratives of grand liberation and the actual invisibilization of lesbianism in a public documentary four decades later? What if these narratives of liberation performatively buried another story: that of lesbian unspeakability at the heart of the MLF? Could the emphasis on escape from a dark age of repression be a narrative technique to conceal lesbians' exclusion in the enunciative present of the MLF?

Based on archive and interview work on the years 1970–1981, this thesis argues – in contrast to the dominant narratives of liberation above – that 1970s French feminism was fundamentally inhospitable to lesbianism. It thus seeks to investigate the (heteronormative) epistemology of the French feminist movement in order to understand why and how lesbians' exclusion was replaced by the myth of homosexual liberation. I argue that dominant MLF historiographical narratives are unable to see the repression of lesbianism at the heart of the MLF because, uncritically basing their analysis on what MLF archives tell them, they repeat the dominant terms in which feminism was framed in the 1970s. In the thesis, I reread the history of the MLF from the standpoint of a barely known set of archives that provide a whole new perspective on the MLF: the archives of early-1980s radical lesbians. Although radical lesbian archives have never been taken seriously as a legitimate starting point from which to (re)write MLF history – probably because MLF historians assume they are unworthy of attention or too biased – in fact they provide the exact counter-narrative to the "official"

narratives of homosexual liberation: the narrative that lesbian exclusion was constitutive of the MLF.

2. Mouvement de Libération des Femmes: A History of Lesbian Exclusion

Ten years after the birth of the MLF, in the spring of 1980, a movement called radical lesbianism emerged in Paris. Addressing the ways in which radical feminism had (in their view) obscured heterosexuality's function as a regime of power in its analysis of women's oppression, radical lesbians developed a materialist analysis of heterosexuality, which they conceptualized as “the strategy of patriarchal power exerted against women [...] and antagonistic to the interests of women as a class” (Icamiba 1981 [1980]: 80–81, my translation). Radical lesbians were foundationally inspired by Monique Wittig's paradigm-shifting articles “La pensée straight” (The Straight Mind) and “On ne naît pas femme” (One Is Not Born a Woman), published in the materialist feminist journal *Questions féministes* (Feminist Issues) in February and May 1980. Challenging the idea of an oppression common to all women, on which the MLF had been established ten years earlier, Wittig articulates in these two pieces, and for the first time in the history of the MLF, women's oppression by heterosexuality as a regime of domination. Arguing that sexual difference is a by-product of heterosexual social systems, she famously asserts that “lesbians are not women”:

Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, [...] a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual (Wittig 1992: 20, emphasis Wittig's).

Building on Wittig's politicization of lesbianism as a position of resistance to women's appropriation by men through the institution of heterosexuality, radical lesbians from 1980 onwards relinquished the political signifier “women” – which the MLF had championed throughout the 1970s – in favour of the sign “lesbian”. From the standpoint of their new position as non-women, radical lesbians articulated an unprecedented public discourse on 1970s feminism's exclusionary operations against lesbians, which they started calling “heterofeminism”.

On the rare occasions in MLF historiography when radical lesbianism is addressed, it is always from a derogatory perspective that reads their critique of “heterofeminism” as a feminist-corrupting separation from the MLF’s universality, or as an extremist obtrusion that sealed the decline of the feminist movement after a heroic ten-year battle (Lasserre 2014; Martel 1999; Picq 1993, 2011; Pipon 2013). Yet for anyone willing to listen, radical lesbians provide an unfamiliar MLF history that challenges the most fundamental assumptions in what has been written so far about the MLF. It is from (and for) them that I have written this thesis.

As the repressed subject of a history that had not been conducted (or closed) properly, radical lesbians dedicated a great deal of their discussions in the early 1980s to the renarrativization of the previous ten years of feminist activism. As a participant in the Front des lesbiennes radicales (Radical Lesbian Front), a movement of radical lesbians which officially (and for the first time in the history of the MLF) separated from the feminist movement in April 1981, explains:

It is [...] fundamental for us to begin by redefining feminism, what it has been: its theoretical analyses, the aims of its struggle [...], the “driving” political role which lesbians have played in it... [...] Reinterrogating the history of these past years will give us the means to shed new light on the situation in which we are now and on which we want to act (Graziella 2010 [1981]: 39, my translation).

Addressing “the situation in which [they] are now and on which [they] want to act”, this activist refers to the curious absence of a lesbian movement in France in 1980 after ten years of intense feminist activism. It is this situation that radical lesbians are seeking to understand and rectify by looking back at the immediate history of the MLF. “Reinterrogating”, as she says, that recent history, Graziella continues:

Now that a Front des lesbiennes radicales has been created, it seems fundamental to me to reinterrogate its history. [...] Similarly, it is important to understand why and how we have seen the eruption in France of a women’s liberation movement, of a homosexual (gay) movement, and not a lesbian movement (the thwarted attempts at which have never been cited in the history of the feminist movement) (Graziella 2010 [1981]: 39, my translation).

This statement not only stresses the absence of a proper lesbian movement in 1970s France, but – and this is crucial – it also points to a “thwarting” of lesbians’ “attempts” to start one. This last part sounds an unexpected call: as it might be put by Avery Gordon, theorist of the cultural experience of haunting, it signifies the arrival of a ghost “notif[ying] us of a haunting” (1997: 24). It is minor, almost imperceptible, and yet it tells you a whole new story: it tells you that the non-existence of a lesbian movement in 1980 is a matter not of absence but of erasure. It also tells you that something that was supposed to have been properly buried is alive and well in the archive, and that it takes the shape of a haunting. When suppression is interrupted by the apparition of a ghost, it is speaking to you: the ghost is telling you that if you are willing to stop for her, take her seriously and follow her where she wants you to go, you might discover an entirely unknown, disconcerting and perhaps uncomfortable history of 1970s French feminism – one that has yet to be aired. The ghost tells you that something is missing from the original MLF storytelling: an unrealized, lost and banished lesbian possibility. It would make sense to choose to ignore her: it is never pleasant to encounter ghosts in the archive. Ghosts are scary because they unsettle what we thought we knew about the past. They tell us that a different and dirtier story (also) happened. And it would be understandable to prefer to hold onto the stories I laid out above: stories of homosexual happiness, stories of solidarity, stories of liberation that shut down the tyrannical age of repression once and for all. Yet I felt drawn to the ghost, because for me it was this other, legitimate MLF history that felt unsettling, discomforting, if not oppressive: in the talk about “women” and in some cases about “homosexuals”, the lesbian had disappeared. I started to wonder: where had the lesbian gone in the so-called era of homosexual liberation?

Archival traces of something that had not been properly buried exceeded the orderly narratives of liberation and directed me towards the alternative history of heteronormative hegemony and lesbian silencing. The more I looked into the early-1980s lesbian archive, the more those traces multiplied:

The feminist movement has long been opposed to political lesbianism. When in 1974 Monique Wittig (co-founder of the MLF and Gouines rouges) wanted to create with others a Front lesbien international [International Lesbian Front], she was violently persecuted by lesbian feminists, who accused her of “separating herself from the mass of women”. She was used as a scapegoat, which was even easier as she was isolated (Monique [Plaza] 2010 [1981]: 27, my translation).

How could [...] feminist theories have addressed lesbianism politically when for all those years feminists went to great lengths to destroy lesbian groups who were striving to survive in the MLF, even forced lesbians who were too visible into political exile or historical silence (Graziella 2010 [1981]: 40, my translation)

Let's recall that [the women's movement] was essentially founded by lesbians, even though they did not campaign under that label [...]. Yet, when has the Mouvement de libération des femmes ever taken lesbian claims into consideration? Never. When has it even accepted the existence of a lesbian dimension? Never (De nombreuses femmes du CUARH 1980: 16, my translation).

These testimonies are precious, not only because they are a sign that an erasure took place, but also because they point to an alternative empirical history. I was stunned to come across the reference above to the Front lesbien international. I was stunned because I had never come across this reference before – not in general MLF history, and not even in Bard's article which specifically focus on the history of French lesbian politics (2004). I thought to myself: how could it be that Monique Wittig – one of the most famous MLF activists and internationally renowned feminist thinkers – sought to create a Front lesbien international in the midst of the “glorious” feminist decade and the attempt completely disappeared from MLF history? Why did she leave France just a year after she had tried to create this group? Were the two events related? What is the history behind this absence? What does it say about feminists’ “attempts” to “thwart” a “lesbian movement”? I soon became obsessed with the Front lesbien international. And the less I succeeded in finding archival traces of it, the more I became obsessed with it. This story felt like a ghost story to me, and perhaps like a metonym for the whole history I was trying to retrieve. I soon started asking during my interviews with MLF women: “have you heard about a Front lesbien international allegedly created by Monique Wittig in 1974?” So many times I heard the same response: “yes, I think it rings a bell but I can't remember anything about it, you should ask someone else...” During an interview, one of them said:

I don't know... I have such a bad memory... When things are too horrible, I forget them! When things are really, really great, I remember them forever! (my translation)

This short response says a lot. Although the interviewee claims that she does not remember anything about the Front lesbien international, she nevertheless knows that it was “too horrible”. If she knows that it was “too horrible”, then why can’t she say anything about it? What if she remembered but did not want to talk about it because it said something about the MLF which had to remain hidden? Her response raises crucial questions about how what one experiences as “great” or “horrible” shapes the history that one prefers to tell, and thus the history that gets written. What are the things that are experienced as “really, really great”, and what are the things experienced as “too horrible” to be told? What is the unacknowledged standpoint from which some things appear “great” and some other things “horrible”? What if the thing this interviewee considered “really, really great” in the 1970s, and therefore worth retelling forever, was exactly what radical lesbians referred to as oppressive in their testimonies? And what if the thing she had found “too horrible”, and therefore condemned to erasure, was what radical lesbians were trying to retrieve from oblivion in their early-1980s discussions? What if what she perceived as “horrible” and did not want to remember was precisely the ghostly history I am seeking to tell: that of lesbians’ relentless attempts to be visible in the MLF as lesbians (rather than as women), which MLF women experienced as scandalous interruptions of their (heterocentric) feminist happiness and celebration of women’s sameness?

It is those “horrible” things that I “exorcise” (Derrida 1994: 175) in this thesis: signs of stories that were banished before they could ever happen, and yet which are still there somehow, haunting the archive, demanding accountability and a hospitable new history to be written “out of a concern for justice” (Derrida 1994: 175). The ghost, as Avery Gordon explains, “has a real presence and demands its due, demands your attention” (2011: 2). The ghost found me, but I was also waiting for her: she had left those traces for someone to find them in the archive, while I had been waiting for them all along because I knew, I felt, I sensed without really being able to explain how, that something was not right. I therefore welcomed the ghost with delight, excitement and sometimes fear: where will this lead me? What if the ghost is talking nonsense? What if the ghost is malicious, extremist, paranoiac (as the MLF archive and historiography wanted me to believe), and what if I had made a stupid mistake in taking her seriously? Nevertheless, I persisted, because I trusted her. I trusted her because we spoke the same language: lesbianism.⁸

⁸ On desires, pleasures and affective identifications at work in the writing of queer history, see

Indeed, what drew me so intensely and so inexplicably to the lesbian ghost hidden in the archive was as simple as Wittig's aphorism is startling: I read the archive as a lesbian rather than as a woman. I therefore argue that the reason why dominant narratives on the MLF need reconsideration is because they tell a history from the standpoint of a subject which, they assume, is so evident that it does not need to be explicated, justified or reflected upon: women. They take for granted the fact that MLF lesbians were woman-identified women (thus uncritically repeating the terms in which the MLF subjectivity was established). While these narratives mistakenly conceive of the category "women" as universal and transparent (as MLF women did), they do not interrogate the operations of power that conditioned the possibility of this subject, and thus in their narratives they dismiss (albeit unintentionally) those who actively resisted or challenged it.⁹ In *Lesbian Trouble*, I argue that the MLF's collective woman identification performed the function of a feminist closet for lesbians who sought to be visible as lesbians (lesbian-identified lesbians rather than woman-identified lesbians), which when taken as a starting point from which to write the MLF's history necessarily produces a heterocentric history. I am therefore writing a lesbian history of the MLF that starts from *lesbianism as a difference*, a non-normative sexuality that challenges the stability of gender as a category of analysis, rather than as a commonality among women, a practice of feminism or an irrelevant particularity in the light of women's sameness. In other words, the subject of this thesis is the lesbian who is not a woman.¹⁰ In folding back lesbian difference in the decade of women's sameness, I follow British feminist theorist Clare Hemmings' method of "recitation" as "not the telling of a new story, but a renarration of the

Arondekar (2009), Bravmann (1997), Cvetkovich (2003), Dinshaw (1999), Fradenburg and Freccero (1996), Freccero (2006), Freeman (2010), Halperin (2002), Hemmings (2018), Love (2007), Nealon (2001) and Traub (2002).

⁹ These narratives apply to the MLF a lesbian feminist frame that was first developed in the US second-wave feminist movement and conceived of lesbianism as "conscious woman identification" (Rich 1986: 66). Lesbian feminism understood lesbianism to be the extension or practice of feminism: its function was to encourage emotional connections between women with a view to fostering a female culture independent of men. On US lesbian feminism, see Abbot and Love (1973), Atkinson (1974), Bunch (1975), Cruikshank (1980, 1982), Frye (1983), Lorde (1984), Marotta (1981), Penelope and Wolfe (1980), Radicalesbians (1973 [1970]) and Rich (1980, 1986).

¹⁰ On the queer scholarship which has troubled the lesbian feminist continuum between feminism and lesbianism by promoting an analytic distinction (rather than a causal relation) between gender and sexuality, arguing that normative gender identifications reinforce compulsory heterosexuality and the illegibility of non-normative sexualities, see among others Butler (1999 [1990]), Califia (1983), de Lauretis (1987a, 1987b, 1988), Martin (1993), Rubin (1993 [1984]), Sedgwick (1990), Warner (1993) and Wittig (1992).

same story from a different perspective" (2011: 181). This method "starts from affectively invested erasures in order [...] to open up and foreground absence, provide a break in the monotony of the repeated, and suggest other historiographies that are politically and theoretically transparent" (190).

What happens when we retrospectively invite the lesbian who is not a woman into the decade of women's sameness? What happens to the history of the MLF if we take Wittig's epistemological rupture in 1980 not as the *beginning* of a lesbian story and a separation from feminism (and thus as outside the MLF's history), but rather as the *end point* of a ten-year silencing of lesbian difference? What ghosts and sorrows are we about to encounter? Thus, the thesis anachronistically applies to the history of 1970s women's sameness the latter's own deferred and critical by-product: the lesbian who is not a woman. In that regard, the thesis argues that Wittig's epistemology was a solution to a gravitational "something-to-be-done" (Gordon 1997: 205) that lingered over the 1970s, rather than a radical rupture and a new beginning for lesbian politics. In a sense, I use the solution to a problem to exhume the lost history of that problem. It is thus, I suggest, from the standpoint of lesbianism as difference, of lesbians as not women, that the MLF storytelling of liberation turns into a dark history of repression.

As Hemmings has astutely demonstrated in *Why Stories Matter*, the pervasive progressive frame by which the intellectual history of Western feminism is largely told portrays 1970s feminism as naive or essentialist in its celebration of women's sameness, and the decade of the 1980s as bearing "responsibility for inaugurating the critique of feminism's heteronormativity" and ethnocentrism (2011: 48). Importantly, I suggest that this progress narrative helps to invisibilize the fact that in France the issue of difference among women was raised relentlessly *throughout* the 1970s by lesbian activists – in particular by Monique Wittig – but actively suppressed by dominant universalist feminists.¹¹ This is all the more important because the (allegedly linear) taking into account of differences within feminist theory is seen in France as an exclusively Anglo-American pursuit: France, in contrast, is supposedly

¹¹ Black women also challenged the unstated whiteness of feminism's subject when in 1976 they created the first collective of Black women, the Coordination des femmes noires (Black Women's Coordination) (Larrouy and Laroche 2009: 48–49; Lesselier 2012; Schieweck 2011; Vergès 2017). Collectives of migrant women, Latino women and Algerian women were also created in the mid-to-late 1970s, although they do not appear in the existing MLF historiography. This history remains to be written.

characterized by a “conceptual vacancy” (Lépinard 2005: 109, my translation) regarding “the multiplicity of relations of power among the group of women” (119). Looking back on the history of the MLF from the standpoint of lesbianism *as a difference* is absolutely vital in order to *see* how a history of difference can be traced back into the decade of women’s sameness. In a sense my argument seeks to show that in France the question of differences has been the object not so much of (cultural) “conceptual vacancy” as of active, deliberate erasure, since at least the birth of second-wave feminism. Thus, while Hemmings is most concerned to recite Wittig back into the narrative of poststructuralism and queer theory with a view to “repositioning [...] feminist theory at the heart of postmodernism rather than as marginal or opposed to it” (2011: 185), my perspective takes a backwards turn: it seeks to bring “queer” Wittig into the spotlight of 1970s radical feminism. Yet, my goal remains similar to Hemmings’: my thesis argues that a lesbian recitation of the history of the MLF from the position of the erased figure of the lesbian who never was a woman troubles the traditional separation between materialist feminism (reducing lesbianism to culture) and queer theory (bringing sexuality back into feminist theory) insofar as it reveals that sexuality was there from the beginning – it was just that French materialist feminists refused to hear about it.

The MLF’s banished lesbian spectres are the starting point of the thesis. I have heeded the archive’s notifications of the “thwarting” of a “lesbian movement” whose “attempts [...] have never been cited in the history of the feminist movement”, of the “persecution” of Monique Wittig “as a scapegoat”, and of the “opposition” of “the feminist movement [...] to political lesbianism” as “ghostly matters” whose “sensate quality” has affected me as a “something-to-be-done” (Gordon 1997: 205): “when it appears to you, the ghost will inaugurate the necessity of doing something about it” (206). Yet, doing something about it does not only mean recognizing, engaging with and providing hospitality to lesbian difference in the history of the MLF, since it inevitably raises the question: why did an erasure occur? Why couldn’t French feminists abide the visibilization of lesbian difference? As such, it also entails telling a new story about feminism, heterosexuality and the French nation.

3. Feminism, Heterosexuality and the French Nation

Starting from the premise that the history of the MLF’s subject “women” is the history of a lesbian subjugation (among other possible histories), this thesis takes as a point of departure

Michel Foucault's conception of juridical systems of power as not only coercing but also regulating and producing the subjects they claim to represent (1970 [1966], 1972 [1969], 1991 [1975], 1980, 1984 [1976], 2000). This research is thus theoretically grounded in poststructuralist accounts of identities as effects of normative operations of power. In particular, I explore the regulatory operations of the MLF's subject "women" from the highly influential perspective developed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990; see also Brown 1995; Butler and Scott 1992; Cornell 1991; Riley 1988; Weed and Schor 1997). Addressing how gender operates as a regulatory fiction that produces heterosexual subjects, Butler argues that taking "women" as a grounding category for feminist politics necessarily works against emancipatory aims:

[T]he subjects regulated by [juridical systems of power] are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures. If this analysis is right, then the juridical formation of language and politics that represents women as "the subject" of feminism is itself a discursive formation and effect of a given version of representational politics. And the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation (1999 [1990]: 4).

As Butler explains, the category "women" is not a transparent formation, naturally limning the constituency it seeks to represent, but a performative signifier regulating its own boundaries along the normative relations between sex, gender and desire that naturalize heterosexuality; thus claiming to speak in the name of "women" foundationally (albeit unwittingly) excludes those subjects who fall outside the purview of these normative relations. The difficulty for feminist politics is hence that available identity categories on which to ground collective mobilizations are performative effects of specific formations of power whose political operations are invariably naturalized by way of those categories' own self-legitimizing representational claims:

The question of "the subject" is crucial for politics, and for feminist politics in particular, because juridical subjects are invariably produced through certain exclusionary practices that do not "show" once the juridical structure of politics has been established. In other words, the political construction of the subject proceeds with certain legitimating and exclusionary aims, and these political operations are

effectively concealed and naturalized by a political analysis that takes juridical structures as their foundation (1999 [1990]: 5).

Given these constraints, the method by which the “law’s own regulatory hegemony” (Butler 1999 [1990]: 5) and legitimating practices can be denaturalized is genealogical:

[G]enealogy investigates the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact the *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin (Butler 1999: xxix, emphases Butler’s).

Proceeding from these theoretical and methodological insights, this thesis is neither an empirical history of a seamless category “women” nor an empirical history of a seamless category “lesbians” in the context of 1970s French feminism. It does not seek to extract a coherent narrative that tells the progressive history of a constituency – whether “women” or “lesbians” – throughout the 1970s. Instead, it proposes a genealogy of the heteronormative and colonial operations of power by which the MLF juridical subject “women” was brought into being and self-legitimized as political and modern. In other words, it seeks to denaturalize the category “women” (and to a lesser extent “lesbian”) in whose name 1970s feminists spoke by exploring the ways in which this category was a discursive effect of national-colonial norms governing the production of gender, sexuality and race. In that regard, it conceives of lesbian exclusion as a regulatory effect of the identity category “women” and argues that the impossibility of a lesbian subject-position was the condition of possibility of a subject “women”. Thus the question is not “how did a lesbian political subject emerge from or in opposition to the women’s movement in the early 1980s?” but “how did the emergence of a subject ‘women’ contain in itself, the ‘minute’ it was ‘invoked’ (Butler 1992: 15), the impossibility of a lesbian identity?” and “how was a lesbian critical agency brought into being not as an origin in the plenitude of presence or as a continuation of the political ground laid by feminism and teleologically emerging later in the decade, but as the very effect of those self-legitimizing exclusionary practices?” From this genealogical perspective, the history of lesbian difference is not peripheral to the history of the MLF but becomes central insofar as it enables us to understand the “political construction and regulation of the [feminist] subject itself” (Butler 1992: 13). As Butler points out: “once it is understood that subjects are formed through exclusionary operations, it becomes politically necessary to trace the operations of that construction and erasure” (1992: 14; see also Scott

1988).

Since it applies theory to a particular historical moment, the critical outlook of the thesis is inseparable from the ways in which those normative operations were deployed, embodied and resisted in the political, social and cultural context of the French nation. Although scholarship on the heterosexualization of the nation in France is scant, two books have been particularly influential on the writing of this thesis. Political theorist Bruno Perreau's *Queer Theory: The French Response* (2016) provided precious insights into the ways in which the "straight mind" of the nation functions as a "political totem in France" (2016: 6) bound up with Republican assimilationist ideology. As Perreau explains, to the extent that "belonging exclusively to the Nation is posed as a condition of citizenship in France",

acknowledging a basic loyalty to a given community (whether ethnic, religious, cultural, or sexual), is viewed as a democracy-corrupting illness. [...] France is described as living under the constant threat of disintegration as a result of the effect of communitarianism (2016: 145).

He thus articulates the political and symbolic unintelligibility of homosexual subjects in France for the longstanding history of Republicanism (or abstract universalism), which conceives of allegiances to group memberships as intolerable betrayals of the abstract unity of the nation. The second important book is historian Camille Robcis' *The Law of Kinship: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in France* (2013), in which she provides a compelling political and intellectual history of the co-construction of the French national body and the heterosexual family as "the most universal and most abstractable mode of social representation, and the purest expression of the general will" (2013: 4).¹² As Robcis explains, French social policy and civil law since the nineteenth century have constructed the heterosexual family as "truly constitutive of the social in French political culture" (2016: 4, my translation). However, although they retrace fascinating histories, neither of these works interrogates the ways in which feminism in general, and 1970s feminism in particular, actively participated in the reproduction of the nation's heteronormative and racial foundations.

¹² I would like to thank Sylvie Tissot for having drawn this book to my attention.

On the other hand, a rich scholarship exists on the mutual dependency between feminist agency and Republicanism in France. Joan W. Scott famously argued in her groundbreaking *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (1996) that French feminist agency is an effect of French Republicanism's constitutive paradox, which harks back to the 1789 French Revolution: the paradox of asserting the universal human rights of individuals while considering sexual difference to fall outside the boundaries of universal individuality. As Scott explains, “[f]eminist agency is constituted by this paradox” (1996: 168). In that regard, French political theorists Laure Bereni and Eléonore Lépinard have convincingly shown how feminists who campaigned for parity in the 1990s justified the establishment in law of a quota of fifty per cent women in political representation by “reappropriating the political legacy of ‘republican universalism’” (2004: 84, my translation). Insofar as the assimilative unity of the French nation is based on the refusal to recognize differences, pro-parity feminists argued that women were not a minority or a group with particular interests but “half of the sovereign people, half of the human race” (Gaspard et al. 1992 in J. Scott 2004: 43), and it was on that basis that they ought to be integrated into the nation. Joan W. Scott has also persuasively demonstrated how feminist opposition to the public visibility of the Islamic headscarf in the new millennium built on the French Republic's history of assimilationism, colonialism and heterosexism (2007). However, amid this scholarship, no work has paid attention so far to the ways in which second-wave feminist agency was also a “symptom of [liberal individualism]’s constitutive contradictions” (Scott 1996: 18). More generally, none of the scholars working in the field of feminist critical history and feminist political theory in France has looked at the paradoxical nature of 1970s French feminist agency.

Thus, on the one hand, works that focus on the straight mind of the French nation, to the extent that they examine dominant discourses (whether institutional, political or intellectual), overlook how the pervasive heterosexual assumption has not only permeated but also been powerfully relayed by feminist radicalism. On the other hand, works that focus on feminist agency in the context of French paradoxical universalism, while only rarely engaging directly with the issue of heterosexuality, have also dismissed the decade of the 1970s. I would suggest that a reason for this blind spot has to do with the heroic vision of 1970s feminism that has been constructed over the years. Embodying the apogee of feminist revolutionism, located between the more consensual first-wave demands for political equality and the return to institutional claims with the parity campaign of the 1990s, 1970s feminism stands as the

glorious feminist era par excellence in French feminist memories. As such, it seems too pure, too successful, and perhaps too necessary in an era of overall gloom when collective utopias are absent. And yet, perhaps the most damaging effect of the heroicization of second-wave feminism is that it has constructed the fantasy of an MLF that was so triumphal that it was neither contradictory nor paradoxical in nature. This thesis seeks to destabilize the idealized construction of 1970s feminism as the crowning age of radicalism and utopian solidarity. I thus privilege scepticism, reluctance and unease about the MLF as productive tensions from which to rewrite the history of its repressive operations and retrieve its foreclosed subjectivities.

Following Scott's foundational deconstructive approach to the history of French feminism, I address 1970s feminist agency as "the effect of a historically defined process which forms subjects" (Scott 1996: 16). I thus argue that MLF women represented themselves as female individuals, that is to say as female reiterations of the French citizen unit based on universal abstract sameness. In other words, the MLF upheld the nation's assimilationist doctrine in the forging of its community of women, which was thereby envisioned as a community of abstract individuals all similar to each other and exclusively belonging to the MLF as "women": the eradication of differences (of allegiances to particular identities, and in particular to lesbianism) was the condition of possibility of this abstract community. Yet, the central argument of the thesis is that despite claiming that all women were the same to the extent that they relinquished particular affiliations, feminists sought to absorb the nation's "sexual contract" (Pateman 1988) through the production of a (hidden) feminist heterosexual contract: women's availability to the white and male heterosexual gaze was the (implicit) condition of the democratization of sexual difference's natural antagonism, which had prevented women from integrating into the nation since 1789. In other words, MLF discourses epistemically made women's political and symbolic integration in the nation conditional on lesbians' illegibility. As such, a foundational (new) paradox lies at the heart of 1970s French feminism: although claiming to represent all women, MLF women foundationally defined lesbians as outside the boundaries of female individuality – that is, as non-women. Seeking inclusion in a paradoxical political regime (abstract universalism) which was based on women's exclusion from universal individuality, 1970s feminists displaced onto lesbians the very intractable and horrifying essentialism which the French Republic had assigned to women's sexual difference, as this thesis will demonstrate. By shaping its subject according to the model of the nation's colonial selfhood (through assimilationist

emancipation), the MLF inevitably reproduced the “‘splitting’ of modernity” (Bhabha 2004 [1994]: 345) by which (heterosexual/universal) MLF women were framed as modern and emancipated, while (particular) lesbians were framed as pre-political and primitive: hence, racialization was a primary way of signifying lesbians’ unassimilability to the MLF and heterosexual hegemony. The understanding of lesbians’ exclusion from second-wave feminist rationality is inseparable from the history of French colonial universalism.

If, as Joan W. Scott argues, “[t]o the extent that feminism is constructed in paradoxical relationship to [the] singular conception of the individual it inevitably reproduces the terms of its own construction” (1996: 173–174), then feminism also inevitably produces new paradoxical agencies within the terms of its own paradoxes. Hence, the thesis argues that feminism’s crisis in representation – claiming to represent all women while foundationally positing lesbians as non-women – was the paradoxical condition of birth of a lesbian political subjectivity in 1970s France. If feminism was a “symptom of [liberal individualism]’s constitutive contradictions” (Scott 1996: 18), lesbianism in turn became, in the context of the MLF’s heterosexual contract, a symptom of feminism’s constitutive lie of assimilation. Against the relative disapprobation with which Wittig’s lesbian figure has been regarded in queer theory as too anachronistic, too essentialist or too idealist (Freeman 2010; Hemmings 2011; Henderson 2017; Hesford 2005, 2013; Huffer 2013), I hold onto her as having the radical potential to trouble the universalist, heterosexual and colonial genealogy of the French nation on which 1970s French feminism was established.

4. Lesbian Trouble

As Foucault famously argues, “[w]here there is power, there is resistance” (1984 [1976]: 95) – a resistance which is “coextensive with [power] and absolutely its contemporary” (1988a: 122). Thus, *Lesbian Trouble* does not only seek to unearth “agencies of repression” (Hesford 2005: 234) but also sheds light on lesbians’ stubborn refusals to be silenced by the MLF’s (heterosexual) female universalism. It is thus both a critical genealogy of French feminism’s heteronormative and colonial self-legitimizing practices and an archaeology of the ways in which a critical lesbian agency emerged from the epistemic violence of the MLF’s female universalism and “[came] into play in various strategies” (Foucault 1988a: 100). As Butler writes:

When some set of descriptions is offered to fill out the content of an identity, the result is inevitably fractious. Such inclusionary descriptions produce inadvertently new sites of contest and a host of resistances, disclaimers, and refusals to identify with the terms (2011 [1993]: 168).

Since “[i]dentifications are never fully and finally made” and as such are “subject to the volatile logic of iterability” (Butler 2011 [1993]: 68), I conceive of lesbians’ resistances to compulsory woman identifications in the MLF not as essentialist strategies but as reiterative and rearticulatory practices taking place within the terms of feminism’s discursive legitimacy. The thesis thus seeks to retrace those forgotten historical moments when lesbian difference, as an “excluded [domain]”, “return[ed] to haunt the ‘integrity’ and ‘unity’ of the feminist ‘we’” (Butler 1992: 14). As such, it asks: what were the changing discursive strategies through which lesbians grappled throughout the 1970s with the foundational paradox of their unassimilability into the category “women”? Taking Wittig’s epistemic rupture and radical lesbians’ political schism in 1980 as the *end point* of ten years of repression (and illegible resistance) rather than as the *beginning* of a new lesbian “problem-space” (D. Scott 2004: 4) casts trouble on the MLF history in two particular ways: it refutes both the narrative of lesbian separation from the feminist movement (the thesis of separatism) and the classic opposition between the MLF’s radical and differentialist currents.

According to MLF historian Audrey Lasserre, Wittig progressively moved on from the “feminine plural” (2014: 305, my translation) of *Les guérillères* (1969) towards a “communitarian [...] conception of lesbianism”, “leaving no doubt”, she writes, “regarding the ongoing separatist assertion” (322). For Lasserre, the “ideological turning point” of this evolution was Wittig’s departure in 1976 to the United States, “where she thenceforth taught in American academia” (304) and where her “communitarian” vision of lesbianism “originated” (322). By way of a teleological narrative essentializing Wittig’s lesbian politics in the American context, Lasserre conveniently conceals the French genealogy and silencing of Wittigian lesbian politics: she not only (re)buries the history of Wittig’s attempts to politicize lesbianism *in the MLF*, but she also eliminates from her narrative the fervent resistance that Wittig encountered in return. Lasserre’s heteronormative historicism performs a metaleptic inversion: while Wittig’s departure to the US, as I argue in the thesis, was the effect of her political unassimilability to French feminism, by stating that it was the cause of Wittig’s politicization of lesbian difference (which Lasserre reads as a separatism), Lasserre

precludes the possibility of an enquiry into the exclusionary effects of the MLF's female universalism.

The task of the thesis is thus to provide an archaeology of lesbians' resistance to the MLF's exclusionary female universalism, and to denaturalize such metaleptic inversions that make a ten-year history of hegemonic silencing disappear in a puff of smoke (condensed in the performative "turning point"). An archaeological perspective does not claim that Wittig linearly radicalized herself from the "plural feminine" to a "separatist assertion", or that radical lesbians seeking to be visible as lesbians (rather than as women) were promoting "secessionism" (Martel 1999: 119) or "doctrinal positions" (Picq 1993 in Pipon 2013: 183, my translation). Instead, it argues that it is the MLF's own heterosexual separatism which made the visibilization of lesbian difference readable only in terms of a separation. The history of 1970s lesbian agency is thus not the history of a progressive separation from feminism, but the history of lesbians' relentless attempts to open up a new *problem* in a discursive frame based on its foreclosure. As one of my interviewees noted of the 1980 conflict over radical lesbianism within the radical feminist current: "[i]t was quite curious... [...] It happened within a group which had had no previous disagreements" (my translation). I seek precisely to show how this antagonism over heterosexuality was in fact there all along, but was forcefully thwarted every time lesbians sought to problematize it, that is, to make it "discussable, criticizable, negotiable", in short "thinkable" (Fassin 2005 in Bantigny 2013: 34, my translation). In that regard, rereading MLF history from the standpoint of lesbians' insurgent agency interrupts the MLF's "homogeneous, empty time" (Benjamin 1968 in Butler 2008: 20) of liberation, and foregrounds instead temporal dislocation and "hidden rhythms" (Zerubavel 1985 in Freeman 2010: 4) such as interruption, delay, repetition, anachronism, suspension or shock (Freeman 2010; Halberstam 2005, 2011) as hallmarks of lesbian resistance. In that regard, I do not read the emergence of radical lesbianism in 1980 as a form of lesbian radicalization or separatism, but as the historical moment when lesbians succeeded, after a ten-year failure, in "putting into discourse" (Foucault 1984 [1976]: 12) the MLF's naturalized heterosexual norm.

Rereading the history of the MLF from the standpoint of lesbian difference also troubles the "strong, influential, and long-lasting system of dichotomies that structure feminist research in France" (Costello 2016: 97) between radical feminism and differentialism, constructivism and essentialism, materialism and psychoanalysis. Indeed, the political and theoretical antagonism

between feminist radicalism and differentialism has long been the backbone of MLF historiography (Fougeyrollas-Schwebel 2005), and of the history of French feminism more generally (Scott 1996). If hostilities between the MLF's radical branch – named the Féministes révolutionnaires (Revolutionary Feminists) – and its differentialist branch – named Psychanalyse et politique (Psychoanalysis and Politics), familiarly called Psychépo (or Psych et po) – started as early as 1971, the rift turned “into an absolute divide” (Costello 2016: 91) on 30 November 1979 when Psychépo trademarked the name “MLF – Mouvement de libération des femmes” and the MLF logo of a fist inside the female symbol, thereby preventing other groups from using them and asserting its own differentialist views as representative of the MLF as a whole. This coup de force provoked unprecedented outcry in the feminist movement.¹³ As MLF radical feminist Judith Ezekiel recalls:

Never has the French movement been so united as when it opposed Psych et po's legal registration of the logo and name “women's liberation movement” – it brought together some 55 groups from more than 15 different cities (Ezekiel 1995 in Moses 1998: 251).

However, I argue in the thesis that the lesbian figure can provide a new and unexpected standpoint from which to reconsider the consensus on the “irreconcilable opposition” (Costello 2016: 97) between the “féminisme de la différence” and materialist feminism in the history of the MLF. Indeed, a crucial trait common to both becomes obvious when they are analysed from the perspective of their common exclusion of lesbian difference: their shared female universalism. Defending the necessity of an autonomous and non-mixed women's front alongside a clear separation from far-left organizations, both tendencies privileged a singular and disembodied subject “women” – regardless of whether this category was to be entrenched (for Psychépo) or ultimately eliminated (for the Féministes révolutionnaires). Since, as I demonstrate in the thesis, the universalist discursive strategies by which both currents prohibited the visibilization of lesbian difference among their ranks were exactly the same, I have made the decision to analyse them together as a coherent set of discourses, rather than separately.¹⁴

¹³ On the history of this scandal, see Association Mouvement pour les Luttes Féministes (1981), Costello (2016), Delphy (1995), Garcia Guadilla (1981), Lasserre (2014), Moses (1998), Picq (1993, 2011) and Prochoix (2008).

¹⁴ Other scholars have also reconsidered the so-called incompatibility between radical and

While Hemmings argues that Wittig “seriously challenges [the] proper objects” of feminist theory by interrupting a feminist/queer teleology insofar as “she falls outside of the competition between queer and feminist perspectives” (2016: 95; see also Wiegman 2007, 2012), I argue that Wittig holds a similar troubling position in regard to the “proper objects” of 1970s French feminism to the extent that she was neither a differentialist nor entirely soluble in the radical feminist current (her lesbian critique was addressed to radical feminism’s incapacity to politicize heterosexuality). She thus “falls outside of the competition between [radical] and [differentialist] perspectives”. In fact, an ability to read Wittig as *neither* an essentialist *nor* fully a radical feminist – and hence the ability to think *beyond* this structuring schism – is, I would suggest, what has been lacking so far. That ability would enable us to flush out both the universalist/heterosexual compatibilities between materialist and differentialist feminism and the buried history of Wittig’s lesbian fissure *within* the MLF’s materialist current. Hence it is even more urgent to decentre the canonical radical/differentialist opposition in MLF historiography insofar as it is primarily responsible for the historical erasure of Wittig’s attempts to articulate a lesbian subject-position *within* the French materialist feminist current.

While a lot has been written denouncing Psychépo’s authoritarian practices in the MLF (Costello 2016, Delphy 1995, Moses 1998, Prochoix 2008), it is time to de-heroicize the radical feminists who made use of similar practices to eradicate Wittig’s lesbian politics from their own current. In particular, by presenting themselves as the victims of Psychépo’s co-optation of the MLF’s fame, for decades radical feminists have conveniently obscured the fact that they were in a hegemonic position in feminist academic and political institutions in France from the early 1980s until (at least) the early 2000s. The erasure of a lesbian current in the 1970s was the (forgotten) price of their sustained hegemony over French feminism. While the last forty years have been punctuated by historiographical controversies over Antoinette Fouque’s attempts to present herself as the unique founder of the MLF (Prochoix 2008), I would like to ask: what if the story to be rewritten was not so much Psychépo’s kidnap of the MLF’s legacy, but rather the *other* stories which this well-worn antagonism – and the victim position it confers on the radical feminists – effectively invisibilizes?

sexual-difference feminism. See for example Burke, Schor and Whitford (1994), Fougeyrollas-Schwebel (2005), Kraus (2005), Lépinard (2007a), Möser (2013) and Scott (1996).

Since the thesis looks at lesbians' recalcitrant fractures in the homogeneous temporality of women's liberation, it does not adopt a linear framework whereby each chapter would succeed the former in telling of the progressive emergence of a lesbian subjectivity. Instead, chronologies overlap across the three archival chapters, and the social/discursive logics I explore in each chapter are in no way restricted to the temporal markers of the specific chapters in which they appear. I have therefore chosen a dialectical framework in which the unresolved epistemic violence of the birth of the MLF is conceived as lingering through the decade by way of the animation of a lesbian critical agency that seeks to resolve it à contretemps in the mode of a time lag.

The “Theoretical Framework and Methods” chapter introduces the theoretical and methodological tools I have used to unearth the epistemic violence of feminism against lesbianism, which has been endlessly naturalized by what I dub the “heterosexual aphasia” of MLF historiography. Building on Foucault's notion of “subjugated knowledges”, I argue that the exclusion of lesbianism from the domain of feminism can be grasped first by reading dominant texts – the MLF archive – against the grain, and second by exhuming a prohibited lesbian archive that records banished knowledges. In my deconstructive reading of the MLF archive, I examine the “performative aspects of texts” (Sedgwick 1990: 3), that is, how the production of lesbian difference is always relationally established against an unnamed heterosexual difference. Thus, I do not consider the archive to be a repository of the truth of the past, but a site where subjects are informed and power exercised. I then explain how I proceeded to identify buried lesbian knowledges in the MLF's heteronormative regime of truth. This entailed following my instincts in order to see, in the dominant archive, what is supposed to not be there, and looking for knowledges *about* the MLF outside the MLF archive (mostly in gay and lesbian archives). It also entailed taking seriously texts that are supposed to be “crazy” or “paranoid”, in particular Monique Wittig's private archive. Finally, I explain how conducting interviews with twenty-four feminist and lesbian activists enabled me to deconstruct operations of power against lesbians who sought to be visible as lesbians in the feminist movement through the ways in which interviewees remembered this history, and to retrace the different stages of the politicization of lesbianism/heterosexuality by lesbian activists, which are unrecorded by the MLF archive.

The first archival chapter provides an epistemology of the MLF closet. It demonstrates that

heterosexuality was conceived, in the unconscious of feminist discourses, as the cornerstone of feminism's democratic promise: that of an ultimate reconciliation between men and women through (universalist) sexual mixedness, absorbing the insurmountable unassimilability of sexual difference in the nation. In the context of feminism's heterosexual democratic utopia, I show that the lesbian was always already framed as a pre-modern and tyrannical subject waging a sex war against society, in order to self-legitimize the rationality and modernity of (heterosexual) women. The chapter thus argues that the universalist subject "women" performed the function of a feminist closet that was meant to hide lesbian undemocratic primitiveness, as well as the MLF's foundational secret: to the extent that lesbians were excluded from the boundaries of the MLF's female individuality, assimilation was a lie. The chapter pays particular attention to the ways in which the MLF's heterosexual democracy was forged through a colonial conception of emancipation in which women could only be emancipated through their availability to the white and heterosexual male gaze. In that regard, it argues that the racialization of the lesbian was a primary mode of signifying relations of power between heterosexual and lesbian women. Finally, I read the action of the first MLF lesbian collective, the Gouines rouges, created in 1971, as grappling with the paradoxes of (impossible) assimilation by demanding inclusion in the MLF as lesbians in order to become women.

The second archival chapter focuses on what I call lesbian melancholic hauntings, which manifest the persisting presence of (pre-modern) lesbian-identified women in the (modern) space-and-time of woman-identified women. Clinging onto their lesbian difference, some lesbian feminist activists refused the MLF's compulsory assimilationism as "women" and remained melancholically attached to the MLF's lesbian losses. As such, they inaugurated an uncanny temporality in the progressive myth of women: that of the obsolete lesbian from *before* the women's movement who was supposed to have been successfully updated into a woman. Thus, in contrast with dominant MLF narratives about the joy of women's collective rebirth as similar women, this chapter brings into the spotlight the constitutive underside of successful feminist identifications and affective plenitude: lesbians' failure to become women, manifested in backwards feelings of sadness, depression, violation, loneliness, withdrawal, anger, resentment, escapism, bitterness or disappointment. Monique Wittig is a central character in this chapter, the failed MLF lesbian subject par excellence who tirelessly fought to expose – particularly through her attempt to create a Front lesbien international – the heterosexual lie sustaining the presumption of universality of the celebrated category

“women”. Her departure to the US in 1976 after her failure to establish a Front lesbien most vividly manifests the prohibition of a lesbian future for French feminism. This chapter is thus interested in lesbian failure rather than in feminist success. In that regard, it argues that Wittig’s phrase “lesbians are not women” was not so much a separation from feminism as a solution to lesbians’ ten-year failure to become women in the MLF. The chapter ends with the analysis of an additional technology of lesbian silencing in the MLF: the essentialization of lesbian difference as intrinsically American with a view to reinforcing the un-Frenchness of lesbian politics and the unpoliticalizability of heterosexuality in France.

The final archival chapter scrutinizes the deferred return of the lesbian repressed in the second half of the 1970s and early 1980s. It first analyses the ways in which the abandonment of melancholic attachments to feminism for the benefit of a new lesbian sovereign subject performed a tragic repetition of the very assimilationist structures of abjection that had ejected lesbian difference from the domain of feminism, thereby epistemically excluding lesbians from racial minorities from this new lesbian modernity. It then argues that the politicization of heterosexuality as a regime of power was made possible through the politicization of rape: the democratic utopia of heterosexuality in the MLF and its euphemization of men’s violence could not resist the problematization of gender relations from the standpoint of its ultimate negation of women’s lives. I demonstrate how the anti-rape campaign, by conceiving of violence against women as the reified heart of the social, legitimated a “sex war” against men that gave birth to the figure of the radical lesbian as feminism’s new emancipated subject. Through this new rhetoric, radical lesbians, I suggest, performed an inversion of the source of violence: while feminists conceived of lesbianism as intrinsically tyrannical (as opposed to heterosexual reconciliation), they pointed instead to the violence of feminism’s heterosexual norm. In that regard, I read radical lesbians’ belligerent semiology against men and heterosexuality not as a sign of lesbian madness or extremism (as MLF women and MLF historians argue), but rather as a “performative surprise” (Butler 1999: xxvi) that operated within the terms of the feminist discursive legitimacy by occupying, in the enunciative present of feminism’s (heterosexual) democratic order, the very pre-modern and belligerent lesbian temporality that had been produced to self-legitimize the modernity of (heterosexual) women. The chapter ends with the final and most enduring eradication of lesbian politics and theory from France (the history of which has never previously been written): the reshaping of the materialist feminist journal *Questions féministes* – in which Wittig had published “La pensée straight” and “On ne naît pas femme”, triggering the emergence of a movement of radical

lesbians in France – into *Nouvelles questions féministes* in 1981, at the cost of the elimination of the five lesbian-identified members of the editorial collective.

In the conclusion, I look at the haunting afterlife of this history (or more precisely, of its erasure) in the context of recent conservative controversies regarding the introduction of gender and queer theories in France, the alleged French singularity in matters of (hetero)sexuality, and the Islamic headscarf. Rereading these controversies from the standpoint of second-wave feminism's heteronormativity opens the stage, I argue, for an unexpected feminist (even revolutionary) genealogy of French conservatism.

At the end of her presentation at the first international conference on gay and lesbian studies held at the Centre Pompidou in June 1997, Monique Wittig declared:

We have to remember here that the FHAR [Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action, created in 1971] was started by women, which no one ever knows. [...] Nobody ever knows that it was started by women. At that time, women were very active in the FHAR, then they were completely overwhelmed by men, pretty quickly ... Right... But when they wanted to create lesbian groups... [...] when they left the FHAR... who wanted to prevent them from making these lesbian groups? Not gay men, homosexual men, but the feminists! [...] It's an *old story*, this astonishing thing... It still astonishes me too... (Wittig 1997, emphasis Wittig's, my translation).

As I have already warned you, the story you are about to read is not a happy one. It has been written through haunting affiliations: it is the lesbian underside of the glorious story of MLF women. It is the story of this old astonishment.

Chapter 1

Theoretical Framework and Methods:

The Plenitude of Absence

1. Heterosexual Aphasia

The lack of any book-length studies on 1970s French lesbian politics to date, as well as the precariousness of lesbian and queer studies in French academia more generally (see conclusion), I would argue are bound up with the unthinkable of heterosexuality as a “problem” in France. This is especially clear in the ways in which the existing scholarship on the MLF addresses homosexuality. Alongside an emphasis on homosexual liberation, MLF historiographical narratives pervasively portray MLF lesbians as conspicuous, dogmatic and self-important: “gladly consider[ing] themselves the only diehard [feminists], those who did not collude with the enemy” (Picq 1993: 187, my translation), lesbians, claims MLF historian Colette Pipon, “despised” (Pipon 2013: 175, my translation) and “judged” heterosexual women (179). As a result of their sense of superiority, Pipon alleges, lesbians exerted an “ideological pressure” on heterosexuals:

Since the beginning of the movement, heterosexuals, in particular married women, complained of the contempt of which they sometimes felt victim in regard to their life choices. [...] [They] refused to give in to the somewhat Manichaean ideological pressure to choose between [...] being a radical feminist and ceasing all relationships with men and [...] betraying the feminist cause by remaining dependent on a contract with a man (Pipon 2013: 180–181).

Pipon goes as far as to suggest that this supposed homosexual hegemony in the MLF imposed a “taboo” on heterosexuality:

[N]o [heterosexual woman] really dared address the issue [of relationships with men], for fear of being condemned as a traitor to the feminist cause by the most radical, especially by certain lesbians, who advocated breaking off all relations with men. [...] The taboo that seemed to surround this issue attested to the fact that it was a sensitive topic [...]. The situation made heterosexual women turn in on themselves, and issues of a private nature connected to relationships to men ceased to be objects of collective

thought (Pipon 2013: 181–183).

Although the political issues addressed by the MLF pertained exclusively to heterosexual women (abortion, contraception, domestic violence, sharing of household tasks and childcare responsibility, nurseries etc.), Pipon astonishingly contends that heterosexuality was repressed in the MLF.¹⁵ Speaking of an “implicit hierarchy of values in the movement [...] [a] scale of liberation which, starting with the married housewife, would rise by degrees to the liberated, single, childless and preferably homosexual woman” (1993: 188), Françoise Picq upholds the same narrative of victimized and repressed heterosexual women in the MLF:

To mention a relationship with a man was to risk contempt from those who had left such alienation behind: “You’re still at that point?” It became difficult to talk about issues in their complexity, to confess to tenderness at the same time as oppression (1993: 188, my translation).

Looking back on her experience in the MLF, renowned feminist activist and MLF pioneer Anne Zelensky draws on the same argumentation and even speaks of “a kind of homosexual terrorism in the movement” that “frightened” her:

You felt guilty if you were still in a relationship with a man. As in any group, there was a hierarchy of radicalness: living as a homosexual had a great deal of legitimacy (Zelensky interview in Martel 1999: 82).

Finally, talking about how, “[f]rom their radical heights, some homosexuals sized up other women’s engagement” (Picq 2011: 237), Picq immediately reassures her readership – undoubtedly terrified by the idea that tyrannical homosexual women wanted to force lesbianism upon heterosexual women – and writes that the latter “nevertheless had no intention of either being dishonest about their own desires or accepting the imposition of a

¹⁵ Colette Pipon’s book *Et on tuera tous les affreux: le féminisme au risque de la misandrie, 1970–1980* (To Hell with the Ugly: Feminism at the Risk of Misandry, 1970–1980), whose uncritical epistemological standpoint is in my view scandalously anti-lesbian, was published after winning the prestigious Prix Mnemosyne in 2012 for best French master’s dissertation in women’s and gender history. The fact that this work won the prize raises serious questions about the unthinkable of anti-lesbianism in French feminist research (at least in the field of history).

new norm” (2011: 236, my translation).

In all these narratives, the hegemony of the heterosexual norm fully disappears from view. The reason for this is that the narratives are told from a heterosexual epistemic standpoint that performs a homophobic inversion of the moment of repression: to the extent that their authors *cannot* conceive of heterosexuality as a normative regime, they read the unusual visibilization of homosexuality in the MLF as necessarily conspicuous, and as repressing the dominant sexuality through the imposition of new norms. In that regard, it must be said that descriptions of heterosexual women as having heroically resisted lesbians’ tyrannical pressures rely on dominant homophobic figurings of lesbians as extremist, castrating and men-hating (Hemmings 2011; Hesford 2005, 2013; Zimmerman 1997).

Addressing how colonial histories are “made unavailable, unusable, safely removed from the domain of current conceivable human relations” (Stoler 2011: 122) in French academia, postcolonial anthropologist Ann L. Stoler suggests that “we ask who and what are made into ‘problems’, how certain narratives are made ‘easy to think’, and what ‘common sense’ such formulations have fostered and continue to serve” (130). She dubs the French “occlusion of knowledge” about colonial histories “colonial aphasia”:

It is not a matter of ignorance or absence. Aphasia is a dismembering, a difficulty speaking, a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things. Aphasia in its many forms describes a difficulty retrieving both conceptual and lexical vocabularies and, most importantly, a difficulty comprehending what is spoken (125).

It seems to me that Stoler’s illuminating conceptualization of colonial aphasia could aptly be applied to the “occlusion of knowledge” about heterosexuality in MLF historiography, thus raising the question: why is lesbian dogmatism so much easier to think than heterosexual hegemony in the above narratives? Why do they figure lesbianism as a more salient problem than heterosexuality? Indeed, in the extracts above, heterosexuality is politically and cognitively unthinkable as a problem: thus “knowing” about heterosexual domination “is disabled” (153), “attention” to lesbians’ subjugation “is redirected” (153) towards heterosexual women’s repression by lesbians, the lesbian is “renamed” (153) as a homosexual or a woman, and “disregard” of the ways in which she was ceaselessly silenced “is revived

and sustained” (153). The authors of these narratives could be said to be suffering from heterosexual aphasia.

The myth of heterosexual women’s repression by lesbians in the MLF, which effaces the reality of lesbians’ exclusion, is an example of how aphasics “confabulat[e] [...] non-existent features” (Sacks 1987 in Stoler 2011: 153) as a consequence of their incapacity to generate a “vocabulary” that will associate “appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things” (Stoler 2011: 125) – that is to say, that will *speak* heterosexual hegemony. Responding to Monique Wittig’s intelligibilization of heterosexual power in “La pensée straight” (1980a) and “On ne naît pas femme” (1980b), one heterosexual MLF activist wrote in 1981: “I’m hetero? Those are your words. Personally, I do not recognize myself in any category” (Dhavernas 1981: 90, my translation). Dissociating the “hetero” word from the “hetero” thing, the author of these words is unable to utter the “hetero” word and associate herself with its meaning. Her heterosexual aphasia prevents her from “see[ing] the whole” (Sacks 1987 in Stoler 2011: 153), and therefore she cannot recognize herself in the category. Instead, unable to see that some sexualities are more oppressed than others, she sees “only details” (Sacks 1987 in Stoler 2011: 153): “all sexualities are different”, she continues, “[...] there are as many sexualities as individuals” (Dhavernas 1981: 92). What is lost in all these examples is access to and knowledge about heterosexuality as a social, political and cognitive reality: this is, as Eve K. Sedgwick puts it, the “epistemological privilege of unknowing” (1990: 5).

Yet if, as Stoler explains, knowing and not knowing at the same time “is not a passive condition” but “an achieved state” (2011: 141), retrieving lost language or lost knowledge means unravelling the active operations by which that state is achieved. How can we speak the unspeakable, think the unthinkable? What are the theoretical and methodological tools that can enable us to re-see “the whole” in the production of “women”, that is, to render effective (rather than to repeat, as MLF historiography does) the strategies by which heterosexuality could be neither known nor spoken in the MLF, and thence to make lesbians’ counter-insurgencies legible anew?

2. Foucauldian Genealogy and the Archival Turn in the Humanities

Insofar as the task of genealogy, as defined by Michel Foucault reformulating Nietzsche, is to “[disturb] what was previously considered immobile; [...] [fragment] what was thought

unified; [...] [show] the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself" (1977 [1971]: 147), it lends itself rather naturally to non-foundationalist research that seeks to expose unchallenged heterosexual and colonial traces in feminist discourse. In his classic essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy and History", Foucault explains the aim of the genealogical method of historical research:

"Effective" history differs from traditional history in being without constants. Nothing in man – not even his body – is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men. The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled. Necessarily, we must dismiss those tendencies that encourage the consoling play of recognitions. Knowledge, even under the banner of history, does not depend on "rediscovery", and it emphatically excludes the "rediscovery of ourselves". History becomes "effective" to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being – as it divides our emotions, dramatizes our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself (1977 [1971]: 153-154).

For Foucault, the purpose of historical research should not be to retrace coherent narratives of events in which present identities or concepts (such as "women") can be recovered in the past – "the consoling play of recognitions" – since language itself is subject to changes of meaning over time and the search for continuities renaturalizes the operations of power intrinsic to historical representation. Instead, genealogy unsettles linearities between the past and the present with a view to deconstructing the ineluctability and givenness of the present: it "commit[s] itself to [the] dissipation" of "the roots of our identity" (Foucault 1977 [1971]: 162). Retracing "the details and accidents that accompany every beginning" (144) rather than origins, genealogy brings to light "moments of consolidation [that] come with the naturalization of a new logic" (Barlow 2004: 9) while revealing at the same time the exclusions, erasures and burials out of which that new logic as a cultural and historical production emerged.

The exclusions, erasures and burials out of which dominant epistemic orders arise are what Foucault dubs "subjugated knowledges" (2003 [1997]: 7). Subjugated knowledges, as he explains, relate to two interrelated domains: the domain of official and institutional knowledges that bury alternative knowledges *within* their own terms, and the domain of

banished knowledges that are external to the official institutions of knowledge production:

When I say “subjugated knowledges”, I mean two things. On the one hand, I am referring to historical contents that have been buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systemizations. [...] Second, [...] [w]hen I say “subjugated knowledges” I am also referring to a whole series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naive knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity (2003 [1997]: 7).

These are the two kinds of subjugated knowledges that I seek to unearth in *Lesbian Trouble*. In order to do so, I have chosen two historiographical methods: the first type of subjugated knowledges demands that I read the (dominant and official) MLF archive against the grain in order to reveal how the exclusion of lesbian difference as the negative of “women” was produced *within* its own discursive legitimacy; the second requires that I identify lesbian knowledges that sought to problematize heterosexuality and which were not only disqualified but also supposed to have never existed. Situated in the lineage of Foucault’s deconstruction of dominant knowledges and discursive regularities as effects of power (1970 [1966], 1972 [1969], 1977 [1971], 1980, 1984 [1976], 1988b, 2000), this research conceives of discourses as the very site of power relationships, and as such, discourses *are* the object of this research.

In her parable recounting her tragic experience in the MLF, entitled *Paris-la-politique* (Politics in Paris) and published in 1985, Wittig left a precious testimony in which she explicitly tells us that something was violently buried in the 1970s:

Woe betide those who do not howl with the wolves, they find themselves hunted down, chased away, they are charged with every evil, accused of tyranny and so on and so forth. As soon as I see one of those unfortunates, I shout to her from afar: take care to hide your thoughts. Above all, don’t say a word. I tell her: beware, they will attack you savagely while saying that it is you who are killing them. They will wring your neck with a sob in their throats. And the tears that roll down their cheeks will testify to the maximum that they are the victim and you are the torturer. Then they will shove you into a grave full of shit while pretending it is a bath of rose water, they will drown you in it, stifle you, make you suffocate. Finally they will shove you deep into

the ground, they will make you disappear in it and, still not satisfied, they will plant in the soil which covers you and which they will tramp down with their shoes a sign bearing the words: nobody here (Wittig 1985: 24, my translation).

In this thesis, I dig the sign out of the soil in which it is planted, uncover the grave full of shit that lies beneath it, exhume the feminist/heteronormative violence of the persecution of lesbian-identified lesbians and, letting the ghost of Monique Wittig breathe fresh air again, I demonstrate that there was indeed somebody there.

Thanks to Foucault and Derrida's legacy of rethinking the archive as a site where power is exercised and knowledges are legitimized, rather than as a repository for resources that "preserves" or "safeguards" the past (Foucault 1972 [1969]: 129; Derrida 1996), humanities and social sciences since the mid-1990s have taken what has come to be called an "archival turn" (Eichhorn 2013). The archival turn, as American cultural theorist Kate Eichhorn notes, is not so much about history as about "engag[ing] with some of the legacies, epistemes, and traumas pressing down on the present" (2013: 5). Scholars such as Antoinette Burton (2001, 2006), Elizabeth Grosz (2002), Clare Hemmings (2011, 2018), Gayatri C. Spivak (1988, 1993, 1999), Jennifer Terry (1994, 1999), Eve K. Sedgwick (1990), Joan W. Scott (1991, 1996, 2001) and Ann L. Stoler (2002, 2013, 2016), all located in different disciplinary fields, have variously warned against some of the aporias of recuperative history: to the extent that recuperative history relies on a desire to retrace a fuller picture of the past which can never be reached, it necessarily runs the risk of invisibilizing and reinforcing the terms of its construction. Further, as Hemmings explains, the pull towards "plugging the gaps" (Hemmings 2011: 16) is sustained by a prioritization of gaps which is "always motivated by the position one occupies or wishes to occupy in the present" (13). Therein, seeking to "[get] the story straight" (White 1978 in Hemmings 2005: 118) also conceals the political and epistemological position one occupies in the process of writing: "[i]n a feminist context, which stories predominate or are precluded or marginalized is always a question of power and authority" (Hemmings 2005: 118). As Hemmings carefully notes, telling more histories should not be theorized as the only way to tackle the issue of omission:

Holding in mind multiple histories that remain un- or under-represented in the present should not determine the mode of one's response to that representation and does not automatically point to corrective redress as the most appropriate means to address the

problem of omission (2011: 16).

Moving away from the ideal of historical recovery, queer, feminist and postcolonial theorists have rethought the links between archive and knowledge. Ann Cvetkovich, for example, has theorized the archive as a space in which to engage with the everyday life of trauma (2003); Anjali Arondekar has written about how sexuality's traces in the colonial archive are informed by the desire for access (2009); and Hemmings engages with the archive as an affectively saturated space productive of political desires and ambivalences (2018). Following these gestures, this thesis is *not* a corrective history of 1970s French feminism from a lesbian perspective. It conceives of the archive as a site where regimes of knowledge are produced, and as such it provides a genealogy of the MLF's heteronormative and colonial epistemology with a view to understanding how the historiographical narratives mentioned above have become the "truth" or "common sense" of the MLF. It does not seek to retrieve the social, political and sexual history of feminist "women" or "lesbians" in the 1970s, but to unmask the "details and accidents" (Foucault 1977 [1971]: 144) by which lesbianism was originally excluded from the category "women" and lesbians' problematization of heterosexuality as a regime of power banished from the feminist order of things. In other words, instead of "bring[ing] the lesbian subject out of the closet of feminist history" (Case 1988–1989: 57), as Sue-Ellen Case urges, I investigate the *closet* itself.

This move away from the recuperative towards the epistemological might reflect, as Eichhorn suggests, a move away from "a desire to understand the past" towards a desire to "[defamiliarize] the very assumed order of things" (Eichhorn 2013: 7) in the present. In that sense, the archival turn "may be understood as a realization of what Wendy Brown describes as 'genealogical politics'" (Eichhorn 2013: 7). Genealogy's exposure of "the power of the terms by which we live" (Brown 2001 in Eichhorn 2013: 7), according to Wendy Brown, is a powerful political tool to the extent that it demonstrates the contingency of the politics of the present and the power relations that constitute it, and thereby opens up new perspectives to imagine the future otherwise. In Hemmings' felicitous phrase, it is about "how we might tell stories differently rather than telling different stories" (2011: 16) in order to make the present amenable to transformation and alternative imaginaries.

In that regard, although my unease with contemporary French feminism (which drives the genealogical pull of the thesis) certainly stemmed from my discomfort with the

heteronormative assumptions of the MLF historiography, it did not derive from a personal or political investment in contemporary French feminism's heteronormativity (I have rarely encountered homophobia as a feminist activist in France). It derived from another kind of discomfort: the one I felt when I realized that so many former MLF women supported the legal prohibition of the Islamic headscarf in the new millennium, which amounted in particular to the exclusion from state schools of Muslim girls who wore the hijab (Delphy 2015a, 2015b; Jasser 2006; Roux et al. 2006; Scott 2007; Touati 2006). So many times I had discussions with friends, wondering: how? How could women who were at the cutting edge of radicalism forty years ago have become so reactionary? We were stunned and shocked – because we loved the history of the MLF, we loved what they had done, and we wanted to keep loving them: they had inspired us so much. And yet, we could not recognize ourselves in them any more. I think this is exactly where my misgivings towards the heroic vision of the MLF I discussed in the introduction came from: I wanted to cling onto the fantasy of the glorious MLF as an object of love, but in the early 2010s this simply became impossible for me when so many former MLF activists took up public stances (using their experience in the MLF as legitimizing strategies) in support of French state-sponsored racism.

While their trajectory at first seemed utterly inexplicable to me, I started to wonder about the historical meanings of radicalism. What did it mean to be a radical in 1970? What does it mean to be a radical today? If subjects are formed through power, as Foucault has taught us, aren't our utopias effects of power as well? If so, to what extent? Where is the boundary between radicalism and (unintended) complicity with forms of domination? Instead of thinking about the political trajectories of MLF women in terms of a turn from radicalism to conservatism, I therefore started to wonder: what if the terms within which their radicalism was defined in the 1970s were always already conservative? What if their contemporary aversion to Islam and religious Muslim women was not radically opposed to but actually descended from the lineage of 1970s revolutionary feminism? In other words, what if their trajectory was about continuity rather than discontinuity?

The idea of continuity rather than discontinuity struck me when I read Anne Zelensky and Annie Sugier's joint autobiography recounting their experiences in the MLF, *Histoires du M.L.F.* (MLF Histories), published in 1977 (de Pisan and Tristan 1977). A pioneering MLF woman and a close friend of Simone de Beauvoir in the 1970s, in the last ten years Anne Zelensky (alongside Annie Sugier) has taken up overtly Islamophobic positions and supported

far-right groupuscules (Dryef 2010; Sugier 2010; Zelensky 2010, 2011). I was surprised to notice that none of the historians who reference *Histoires du M.L.F.* positively as a precious archival resource on MLF history (Bard 2004; Lasserre 2014; Pipon 2013) has paid attention to the overt racism and colonial violence of the book. In the first chapter, Zelensky describes her youth in Morocco and the Ivory Coast through pervasive colonial and “savage” tropes: addressing her “isolated childhood in a corner of the bush” (de Pisan and Tristan 1977: 16, my translation), she talks about her fears of “finding [herself] alone in this African night populated by scary cries and noises” (17), and recounts how she climbed “trees with the young son of the Black cook” (16). In her autobiographical narrative (the second part of the book), Annie Sugier speaks about a meeting with leftist activists in the 1970s during which “big Blacks made birdlike gestures in the air so that we stopped talking” (163) and comments on how “Blacks seem to get heated quite easily” (162). She further describes a Black man accused of rape in the following terms: “[t]he rapist’s neck appeared to double in size, with his eyes bulging he seemed ready to jump on us” (162). Indeed, it became increasingly obvious to me after reading Zelensky and Sugier’s book that their opposition to the Muslim headscarf and Muslims in general was not contradictory but in line with the colonial framing of their 1970s discourses. It seems like a rupture to most commentators for the simple reason that its colonial dimension has never been highlighted before by researchers who have focused exclusively on the text’s feminist valence. In other words, racism had already informed their feminism: the only difference was that it had remained hitherto unseen.¹⁶

So, in a sense, this research was driven by a political imperative inspired by Brown’s notion of “genealogical politics”: in the light of the overt co-optation, in the last twenty years, of feminist and LGBTQI struggles by neoliberal, far-right and nationalist agendas to support the modernity of the West (Butler 2008; Fassin 2010a, 2012; Puar 2007) – endorsed by many MLF women in France – genealogies must be urgently redirected towards *our own communities and our own histories*. These developments do not come out of nowhere (I do not really believe in “turning points” or sudden “radicalizations”): they have a discursive history, and we need to be accountable for it if we want to resist them. In a sense, perhaps, this work of genealogy was a work of mourning for my own “wounded attachments” (Brown 1993) to contemporary French feminism in order to understand what had gone wrong. The

¹⁶ I explore the colonial regime within which the MLF’s subjectivity was established and how it informed the modalities of lesbian subordination in the first archival chapter. On the racial aphasia of the MLF, see Vergès (2017).

irony is that although it all started with my unease about former MLF women's support for anti-Muslim laws in the new millennium, it was this very unease in the present that in turn made me hospitable to lesbians' (and in particular Wittig's) anger, encountered in the archive, against those (mostly the same ones) who they felt had utterly betrayed them in the 1970s in their refusal to recognize the violence of the heterosexual institution. In this impromptu collision between past and present angers, I understood that the issue of heterosexual domination and the issue of racial domination were not separate (the first being problematized in the 1970s, the second in the 2000s), but were mutually constituted and mutually constitutive of the long history of French feminism.

3. Reading Dominant Knowledges

The problem with MLF historiographical narratives that present heterosexual women as repressed by lesbians' conspicuousness is that they rely on what Joan W. Scott has famously called "the evidence of experience" (1991): they take experience (as it is manifested in the archive) as transparent – "the origin of knowledge" (1991: 777). As such, they leave aside "how subjects are constituted as different in the first place" (777). In other words, MLF historiographical narratives that describe how heterosexuals were repressed in the movement by dogmatic and self-important lesbians not only leave unchallenged what I will argue are the homophobic underpinnings that constructed those experiences as the truth of the MLF, but they also dismiss the ways in which those experiences were effects of the discursive construction of heterosexual difference. Therefore, by taking meaning as self-evident, they preclude "critical examination of the workings of the [heterosexual] ideological system itself" (778) and thus reproduce its terms.

Indeed, what MLF historians fail to interrogate is the implicit *heterosexual difference* that their narratives of lesbian hegemony in the MLF produce at the same time. If lesbians can be conceived as self-important, dogmatic or tyrannical, it is because they are by definition posited against the invisible norm of the *moderate* heterosexual woman: the excessive lesbian is thus, in Derridean terms, the (noisy) constitutive outside on which the figure of the moderate heterosexual woman can be established without needing to be named. In other words, these authors *produce* the very (dominant) heterosexual difference whose existence they deny in their narratives through the simultaneous construction of lesbian difference (as tyrannical). Their discussion of lesbians' repressive attitudes in the MLF always already

implies the naturalization of a silent heterosexual norm as its condition of possibility. Grounded in poststructuralist conceptualizations of identities and deconstructive historiography, *Lesbian Trouble* thus explores the “historical processes that, through [feminist] discourse, position[ed] subjects” (Scott 1991: 779). In that regard, I do not conceive of these heterosexual experiences of repression in the MLF as evidence of a true history, but rather as revealing the standpoint from which knowledge was produced and positions of power secured in the feminist movement. As such, the critical starting point of the thesis consists in interrogating *why* these experiences appear more prominently in the MLF archive than experiences of lesbian exclusion – and what purposes this dominance serves.¹⁷

In speaking of lesbian difference I thus refer neither to a natural or fixed identity whose essential meaning was repressed in the MLF nor to an inherent agency freely deployed against this repression in the process of forming an autonomous lesbian movement. This research does not seek to replace the thesis of the repression of heterosexuals with the thesis of the repression of lesbians, insofar as this would repeat the terms of the dominant narratives I am critiquing by failing to “ask how certain categorizations work, what enactments they are performing and what relations they are creating” (Sedgwick 1990: 27). Instead, in speaking of lesbian difference I refer to historical discursive processes that constitute and establish delegitimized subjects – “lesbians” – through the relational constitution and establishment of legitimate subjects – (heterosexual) “women”. Sedgwick made the premises of deconstructive reading very clear in her introduction to *Epistemology of the Closet*:

[C]ategories presented in a culture as symmetrical binary oppositions – heterosexual/homosexual, in this case – actually subsist in a more unsettled and dynamic tacit relation according to which, first, term B is not symmetrical with but subordinated to term A; but, second, the ontologically valorized term A actually depends for its meaning on the simultaneous subsumption and exclusion of term B; hence, third, the question of priority between the supposed central and the supposed marginal category of each dyad is irresolvably unstable, an instability caused by the

¹⁷ In addition to the aforementioned authors on the aporias of recuperative history, on deconstructive reading practices and deconstructive historiographical work in feminist, queer and postcolonial studies, see also Barlow (2004), Bhabha (1994), Braidotti (1991), Brown (2001), Butler and Scott (1992), de Lauretis (1988), Halberstam (1998), Scott (1986, 1988, 1991, 1996) and Spivak (1987, 1989).

fact that term B is constituted as at once internal and external to term A (Sedgwick 1990: 9–10).

In other words, there was no lesbian difference without heterosexual difference in the MLF, and it is this epistemology that sustained the production of the categories “women” (term A) and “lesbians” (term B): the latter was produced as a constitutive outside “both internal and marginal to the [feminist] culture” (Sedgwick 1990: 56) through the very gesture that “ontologically valorized” the former (10). Hence lesbian difference, in this thesis, is understood in a relational framework vis-à-vis the production of heterosexual difference: “each has for the other” a “constitutive force” (Scott 1991: 778). This epistemic organization of the force field of feminism is what I read as the condition of possibility for the MLF’s subject “women” to emerge in representation. I thus write about the discursive operations by which the MLF’s heterosexual force field was produced and sustained through the foreclosure of lesbian difference (mostly in the first archival chapter), and I address (mostly in the second and third archival chapters) how lesbian agency is located *within* these conditions of production as a rearticulatory and subversive practice.

Deconstructing the “inner workings or logics” (Scott 1991: 779) of “operations of difference” (792) that sustain the ideological hegemony of heterosexuality in feminist discourses, this project necessitated reading the MLF archive against the grain with a view to uprooting its naturalized regime of truth. In Sedgwick’s words, it required

attend[ing] to performative aspects of texts, and to what are often blandly called their “reader relations”, as sites of definition creation, violence, and rupture in relation to particular readers, particular institutional circumstances (Sedgwick 1990: 3).

Following Sedgwick, I started from the premise that the relative absence of lesbian-identified lesbians in the MLF archive – despite heterosexual narratives of lesbian hegemony – meant neither that the lesbian was merely a different subject from women (thus potentially located in a different archive), nor that the lesbian did not yet exist as a political subject, nor that she was always already included in the category “women” (and thus on the side of presence rather than absence in the economy of feminist discourses).¹⁸ Instead, I conceive of the absence of

¹⁸ For example, in her article on the history of French lesbian politics, Christine Bard writes

lesbian-identified lesbians as a “performative [aspect]” of the archive. Silences are not the consequence of unintended amnesia: they *are* disabling. As such, I conceived of silences and gaps as always already noisy to the extent that their implicit givenness structured the feminist order of things. In that regard I followed lesbian historian Martha Vicinus’ contention that “lesbianism can be everywhere without being mentioned” (1994 in Morgan 2006: 221; see also Castle 1993). As Foucault puts it:

There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses (Foucault 1984 [1976]: 27).

Deconstructing the category “women” meant looking for the lesbian in the “positive unconscious” (Foucault 1970 [1966]: xi) of the MLF’s discursive legitimacy – or its “political unconscious”, to use Fredric Jameson’s alternative terminology (1982). It meant reading discourses as organized through and around an implicit yet structuring “order of things” (Foucault 1970 [1966]), and thus asking the following questions: what (unstated) standpoints are dominant in the MLF archive? What unnamed differences are taken for granted? What is known and unknown? What is always explicit and always implicit? What are the intelligible subjects, and what are their conditions of legibility? In other words, what subject-positions were MLF women foreclosing at the same time as they collectively identified with the category “women”?

Further, to understand the discursive strategies by which lesbian difference was foreclosed in the texts, I read the archive as an effect of dominant Republican discursive practices. In that regard, I questioned whether the conditions of legibility of French citizens in the context of France’s abstract universalist ideology were reiterated in the feminist archive: was the MLF’s insistence on sameness a repetition of the French assimilationist doctrine? If so, did the spectre of lesbian difference structure the category “women” in the same way that the spectre of differences structures the abstract sense of belonging to the French nation? Were the

that “use of the word ‘lesbian’” to describe MLF lesbian pioneers is “anachronistic”, since they did not identify as such but as “women” (2004: 114).

strategies of abjection deployed against lesbian difference in the MLF the same as those which have been deployed against the visibilization of minorities in the long history of the French universalist Republic – in particular, racialization and accusations of ghettoization/separatism? Seeking to answer these questions, the thesis aims to “fundamentally decentre and expose” “the whole sexual system” on which the MLF’s subject “women” was founded, and thus to “[disqualify] the autonomy of what was deemed spontaneously immanent” (Beaver 1981 in Sedgwick 1990: 10).

Endeavouring to reveal the implicit ordering of 1970s feminist discourses and to locate the production of lesbian difference within dominant texts, the first step of the research thus consisted in examining the MLF archive. By MLF archive I mean knowledge about the MLF produced by the MLF’s legitimate subject – woman-identified women – and legitimated as “knowledge about the MLF” by official institutions. This stage of the research took place in three institutional and public libraries: the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF, National Library of France) in Paris; the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand (Marguerite Durand Library), a library specializing in women’s, gender and feminist history and run by the municipality of Paris; and La Contemporaine (The Contemporary) in Nanterre, an archive centre focusing on the twentieth century (particularly social movements, minorities, migrations, international relations and armed conflicts) and run by a consortium of universities. This stage consisted in reading all the available discourses produced by MLF women.

At the BNF and the Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand I read all the available MLF newspapers, magazines and journals produced by feminist women’s groups in various French cities between 1970 and 1982 (from all feminist currents, whether radical, differentialist or far left). This included forty-two different publications, some of them weekly, others monthly, and others of variable frequency. I have not included in my study francophone journals from Belgium, Switzerland or Quebec, since I am considering feminist discourses and identities in their relation to the ideological, political and metacultural apparatus of the French nation-state. In addition to MLF newspapers, magazine and journals, I examined articles written by MLF women and published in far-left newspapers and journals such as *Tout!* (Everything!), the newspaper of the Maoist-anarchist group *Vive la révolution* (Long Live the Revolution); *Libération* (Liberation), an (originally) Maoist daily founded in 1973; and *Les temps modernes* (Modern Times), a political, literary and philosophical journal created in 1945 by

Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre, in which MLF radical women published regular pieces in a section entitled “Les chroniques du sexisme ordinaire” (Chronicles of Ordinary Sexism) from 1973 to 1984.

I also included book-length MLF publications in my research. Such publications included in particular the emblematic issue “Libération des femmes – année zéro” (Women’s Liberation – Year Zero), edited by MLF women in the autumn of 1970 and published in the far-left journal *Partisans* (Partisans). The issue is made up of translations of US radical feminist texts and a series of articles written by MLF women addressing issues such as rape, relations between the feminist movement and the far left, abortion, prison, and women’s sexuality. A special issue of *Les temps modernes* entitled “Les femmes s’entêtent” (Women Persist) and published in April–May 1974, made up of over thirty texts written by MLF women, was also an important resource.

The MLF archive also includes MLF ephemera (tracts, leaflets, manifestos and draft manifestos, song lyrics, minutes from meetings, drawings, internal notes etc.) which I found in private archives donated by MLF women to the Marguerite Durand Library in Paris and La Contemporaine in Nanterre. In particular, I looked through Marie-Jo Bonnet’s and Anne Zelensky’s archives at the Marguerite Durand Library, and Liliane Kandel’s and Françoise Picq’s archives at La Contemporaine – all four women having been core MLF participants. Their archives together include most of the MLF ephemera from the early years. Anne Zelensky’s archive was also particularly useful since it included the archive of Féminin-Masculin-Avenir (FMA, Feminine-Masculine-Future), a feminist group created in 1967 from which, among other elements, the MLF stemmed. Finally, Suzette Robichon, a far-left feminist and pioneering lesbian activist in the 1970s, gave me access to her private archive when I went to her home to conduct an interview. This included leaflets and press clippings on 1970s far-left, feminist and homosexual politics.

I added secondary resources comprising memoirs and histories of the MLF written by former MLF activists in the years following the demise of the movement. Personal memoirs include Anne Zelensky and Annie Sugier’s *Histoires du M.L.F.*, published in 1977 with a preface by Simone de Beauvoir (de Pisan and Tristan 1977); Cathy Bernheim’s *Perturbation ma soeur* (Perturbation My Sister), published in 1983, and *L’amour presque parfait* (An Almost Perfect Love), published in 1991; and a series of books and articles written by Marie-Jo Bonnet

(1995, 1997, 1998, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2014, 2018). Histories of the MLF written by former activists include *Douze ans de femmes au quotidien, douze ans de luttes féministes en France* (1970–1981) (Twelve Years of Women Day After Day, Twelve Years of Feminist Struggles in France), published in 1981 (La Griffonne 1981); *Chroniques d'une passion: le mouvement de libération des femmes à Lyon* (Chronicles of a Passion: The Women's Liberation Movement in Lyon), published by the Centre lyonnais d'études féministes (CLEF, Lyon Centre for Feminist Studies) in 1989; *Génération MLF* (MLF Generation), published in 2008 by Antoinette Fouque's publishing house Des femmes (Some Women); and Françoise Picq's *Libération des femmes: quarante ans de mouvement* (Women's Liberation: Forty Years of Movement, 2011), originally published in a slightly different version in 1993. A few academic articles written by MLF women must be added to the list of historiographical narratives on the MLF, such as Christine Delphy's "Les origines du Mouvement de libération des femmes en France" (The Origins of the Women's Liberation Movement in France, 1991) and Jacqueline Feldman's "De FMA au MLF" (From FMA to the MLF, 2009), both recounting the birth of the MLF. Although I have almost exclusively used discourses from the MLF years in the thesis, I refer at times to these secondary sources to exemplify 1970s discursive rationalities to the extent that the logics that sustain them remain the same.¹⁹ These secondary sources were mostly useful for further understanding the dominant episteme of the MLF (which continued long after the end of the movement) and the ways in which MLF women wanted to be remembered. It must be noted that in writing histories, memoirs and anthologies (Bernheim et al. 2009; Deudon 2003; Flamant 2007) about the MLF, radical feminists also reinforced the "truthfulness" of *their* history, and hence their position of political and epistemic authority. In other words, the "winners" in MLF radical feminist history – those who silenced Wittig's lesbian fissure in the 1970s – are those who wrote MLF history.

¹⁹ Antoinette Fouque and her differentialist group Psychépo are a particular case. Since Fouque in the first years of the movement promoted orality as a properly feminine practice, as opposed to media-covered and self-edited publications, very few archival traces remain of her and her group in the early 1970s. However, her positions progressively changed, and she published a series of differentialist magazines with her publishing house Des femmes from 1975 onwards (*Le quotidien des femmes* – Women's Daily – in 1975; *Des femmes en mouvements* – Women in Movement – in 1977; *Des femmes en mouvements hebdo* – Women in Movement Weekly – in 1979; and *Des femmes en mouvements Midi-Pyrénées* – Women in Movement Weekly Midi-Pyrénées – in 1982). She also gave a few interviews in the early and late 1980s. Since it does not seem that the general principles underpinning Fouque and Psychépo's thinking changed over time, I have used some of these belated archival traces in the first archival chapter on the discursive foundations of the MLF.

Reading against the grain of the MLF archive, I was looking for discursive continuities in the production of the subject “women”. Conversely, identifying banished knowledges in the archive, whether dominant or disqualified, meant looking for discursive discontinuities and insurgencies: this was the second stage of the research.

4. Reading Banished Knowledges

Demonstrating that “[w]hat is found at the historical beginning of things is not the inviolable identity of their origin; it is the dissension of other things” (1977 [1971]: 142), Foucault’s genealogical method of historical enquiry also has the power to reveal “other things to us” that make “untimely incisions [...] into received narratives” (Stoler 2011: 144). Those other things are disqualified knowledges, practices and agencies excluded from the dominant epistemic ordering of things. When we unearth them, they appear as alternative and unfamiliar social, political and historical realities. In this section, I explain how I proceeded to identify 1970s lesbian subjugated knowledges in the era of women’s sameness.

Fugitive Archives

When I asked Liliane Kandel, a sociologist who joined the MLF’s radical current in early 1971, if she knew anything about the Front lesbien international, she said she could not remember anything, but she promptly left the living room of her apartment where we were standing, spent a few minutes somewhere else, and came back with four audiocassettes which she gently passed on to me. She had recorded seven hours of discussions held during a weekend away organized by MLF radical feminists in Verderonnes, in the region of Compiègne (north-west of Paris), in September 1974. She said: “we might have talked about it at this meeting”. This happened in May 2016: by that point, I had already been looking for material proof of the existence of the Front lesbien international for several months, but all of my attempts had failed. It would be an understatement to say that I was overjoyed with Kandel’s audiocassettes. Listening to these cassettes, despite all the difficulties (at times the sound was muffled and the voices barely comprehensible, to say nothing of the task of finding a functioning audiocassette player), gave me the fascinating feeling of travelling back in time and encountering in their original time-and-space all those lives that had been haunting me (notwithstanding my own warnings above about the evidence of experience). I was most

moved when the feminists left the room where they had been chatting at the end of their meeting – leaving the cassette recorder (and me) alone – and moved to a different room, where I could hear them in the far distance blissfully singing the MLF anthem to the sound of piano and laughter.

On the audiocassettes the feminists addressed many issues, such as Psychépo's growing popularity, their own lack of money, and the problem of the co-optation of feminist struggles by state institutions. But that was not what I was looking for. Since Liliane Kandel had told me they might have discussed the Front lesbien international at that meeting, I was expecting to have direct access to Monique Wittig explaining why she wanted to create that group, and why and how feminists had opposed her. Yet I soon realized that Monique Wittig was not at that meeting in Verderonnes. Once again, I found absence instead of presence in the archive. However, as I have explained above, absences can be in fact be more illuminating than what is clearly spoken and given. It was after hours of patient listening that I found something as important as it was fleeting:

– I say that we must oppose them...

– No, but wait, when you say there are girls who met separately and who came along to impose [their views], I don't agree because one has the right to... [...] Monique Wittig, for a long time she's had this desire to make this autonomous [lesbian] group. She's been trying to talk about it to loads of girls. So far she hasn't succeeded in gathering people around her... [...]

– Obviously they feel out of place among the feminists... (Anon. 1974a, my translation).

Was that the reason why Wittig was missing from the meeting? Because she “[felt] out of place among the feminists”? If so, what is the story of this absence and this out-of-placeness? Did Wittig and other lesbian-identified women feel out of place because some feminists thought they had to “oppose them”? This incredibly short statement – the only one that addressed lesbianism in the whole audio archive – conjured up what I had been unsuccessfully looking for and which had disappeared from the MLF archive as well as from the MLF historiography: the existence of an active lesbian agency in the mid-1970s. It confirmed what the radical lesbian archive from the early 1980s had indicated to me: not only that something had been expunged and erased from the MLF, but also that there had been a

debate on lesbianism in which, as the extract attests, some opposed while others supported lesbian-identified lesbians. This short extract was, in a sense, the first sign telling me that I had been right to trust the radical lesbian ghost. And it was a relief!

There are many questions that this statement raises: how could Wittig's agency appear *so* evident, *so* conspicuous, *so* glaringly unmissable in the eyes of her feminist friends in 1974 ("for a long time she's had this desire [...]. She's been trying to talk about it to loads of girls") and yet completely disappear from MLF histories, archives and memories? Where did this agency go? Why were so many of my interviewees unable to remember anything about it during our interviews? Where and how could I find more traces of this agency? And most importantly, why did Wittig not "[succeed] in gathering people around her"? This last part struck me, since it binds lesbian agency to failure. In other words, I was not looking for something which had existed and had retrospectively been eliminated from collective memory: I was looking for something which had never existed, and it was that very failure to exist which became the object of my quest.

This brief statement, emerging out of seven hours of recorded talks kept privately in the apartment of a former MLF activist, is part of what I call "fugitive archives". Fugitive archives are archives which have escaped the (in this case MLF's) epistemic order of things. They tell us what the official MLF archive does not want us to know or does not let us know: they are what the MLF archive has not succeeded in fully containing. In short, they have escaped its authority. Fugitive archives can either be located *in* the MLF archive or they can be external to it. The former include, for example, the aforementioned audiocassettes, or readers' letters (*courrier des lectrices*) sections in the feminist press (to which I return below): although located in the MLF archive, they still require particular research methods to be identified and are not as given as dominant knowledges. The latter include archives which are *not* part of the MLF archive – they are mostly found in lesbian and mixed homosexual archives – but which articulate a discourse *on* the MLF from an eccentric subject-position. These lesbian discourses provide critical perspectives on the MLF from the position of not being (or not exclusively being) in the MLF, or from the position of having left the MLF.

Fugitive archives are knowledges from the margins that defamiliarize the givenness of the subject "women" of feminist politics. They are made of "the ensemble of cultural imaginings, affective experiences, animated objects, marginal voices, narrative densities, and eccentric

traces of power's presence" (Gordon 1997: 25), and as such they provide access to "the trace or echo in the present of something lost or repressed" (Hesford 2005: 230). In a sense, fugitive archives are what Foucault called "heterotopias": they are sites that "shatter or tangle common names" and "stop words in their tracks". In disassociating the "women" word from the "women" thing, they disperse meaning and dissolve "the field of identity" (Foucault 1994 in Stoler 2011: 154). Thus, they decentre what has become the 1970s feminist common sense and display "the trace[s] of a potentially different reality" (Hesford 2005: 229). Borrowing Avery Gordon's astute formulation, I would say that fugitive archives are "marginal discourse[s], the story of how the real story has emerged", which "consistently [shadow] and [threaten] to subvert the very authority that establishes [feminist] disciplinary order" (Gordon 1997: 26). Fugitive archives, in a sense, are haunting archives, or rather the ghost's archive: "hegemony, Derrida writes, still organizes the repression and thus the confirmation of a haunting. Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony" (1994: 37). As such, haunting archives are archives that point at lost or failed futurities as well as unresolved violence. Haunting, Gordon explains,

[is] precisely the domain of turmoil and trouble, that moment (of however long duration) when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings cannot put away, when something else, something different from before, seems like it must be done. It is this sociopolitical-psychological state to which haunting [refers] (1997: xvi).

Haunting can lead you to the ghost of Wittig's forgotten stubborn agency, the ghost of her exile to the US, the ghost of her absence from the Compiègne meeting, or the ghost of the non-existence of the Front lesbien international. Fugitive archives thus conjure up the appearances of ghosts, of the marginalized, the banished and the trivialized, by telling us that "what's been suppressed or concealed is very much alive and present, messing or interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression" (Gordon 2011: 2).

What then is the method that will lead you to ghostly archives? First and foremost, it requires looking for ghosts. "Looking for ghosts" is a methodology mapped out by American feminist theorist Victoria Hesford in her quest for the abjected figure of the "feminist-as-lesbian" in

the recent feminist past (2005).²⁰ As Hesford explains, it starts from the assumption that the lesbian is a figure that haunts feminist memories because “her signification exceeds our rational, schematic and orderly accounts of the movement – she operates beyond, or outside, the ‘official’ histories of the second wave movement”. Looking for ghosts thus requires “hav[ing] a haunted relationship to the past” (Hesford 2005: 234), being unsatisfied or seriously sceptical about dominant storytellings: it will thus lead you “to engage with what has been resisted, feared, or actively forgotten about that past” (234). Identifying haunting archives and reckoning with their ghosts is driven by a desire for reparation and respect:

It is about putting life back in where only a vague memory or a bare trace was visible to those who bothered to look. It is sometimes about writing ghost stories, stories that [...] strive to understand the conditions under which a memory was produced in the first place, toward a countermemory, for the future (Gordon 1997: 22).

It thus implies reading the archive in a particular way, having “a different way of seeing, one that is less mechanical, more willing to be surprised, to link imagination and critique” (Gordon 1997: 24). Hemmings makes a similar case when she explains that “mak[ing] visible different threads of meaning” and “[i]ntervening in dominant history to change our understanding of the past” requires “the development of a sixth sense beyond eyes and ears for grasping the gaps” (2018: 21). Echoing Hemmings’ notion of a “sixth sense beyond eyes and ears”, postcolonial theorist Ranjana Khanna refers to “an open-handedness, a reading for ambiguity, and an alertness to not only the spirit of the subaltern (a ‘consciousness’ as such) but also the phantoms that haunt the subaltern (perhaps made up of the exclusions that have shaped this spectral existence)” (2003: 247). Developing a “sixth sense” or an “alertness to the spirit of the subaltern” builds on the important premise that “invisible things are not necessarily not-there” (Morrisson 1989 in Gordon 1997: 17): it thus demands that one be attentive to traces, to what is “barely there” (Gordon 1997: 26), to the unnoticeable and the

²⁰ Hesford borrows her methodology of “looking for ghosts” from Gordon’s methodology of “following the ghosts” (1997: 22). As Hesford notes, the difference lies in a desire to show the political work that has made certain social realities disappear: “To look for the ghosts (of the feminist past), rather than to follow them, suggests the need to argue for their existence as a form of historical memory – something which [...] might be resisted by many feminists. [...] My argument here is that in order to make manifest the presence of feminism historically, culturally, and socially, we have to confront the ways it has been made to disappear – even when, and perhaps especially when, feminists have participated in the disappearing” (2005: 245–246).

unimportant. “It is a case of the difference it makes to start with the marginal, with what we normally exclude or banish, or, more commonly, with what we never even notice” (Gordon 1997: 24–25). Haunting, as Gordon explains, is thus not about not-thereness but about learning how to see what has been blocked from view, about “mak[ing] contact with what is without doubt often painful, difficult and unsettling” (23). It is not about absence but about discernment, because once you know where to find ghosts, they become omnipresent.

Around the same time as Liliane Kandel passed the audiocassettes to me, I came to realize that what I was looking for in the MLF archive was not exactly where I thought it was. I started my research thinking that lesbian knowledges would appear rather transparently in the MLF press – as articles written by lesbian activists, for example. But there was none, and looking for lesbian knowledges in the MLF press quickly came to feel like a waste of time. However, I realized after a while that I was simply not looking in the right place: there was in fact a marginal space *in* the MLF press which turned out to be full of ghosts. This space had been right there all along, but at the same time so hidden from view that I had barely paid attention to it: it was the readers’ letters sections of the MLF press. I quickly became aware that the readers’ letters section was a haunting space par excellence: it manifested the voices of the absent (who were mostly unhappy about something), and it was itself as marginal and easily circumvented in feminist magazines as ghosts can be. The readers’ letters section was the space found by the lesbian ghost to express her “out-of-placeness” in the feminist movement, to use the expression conjured up in Kandel’s audiocassette; it was where she demanded that her political issues be taken into consideration, and where she sent out calls to other ghosts like her, with a view to breaking the isolation which the MLF’s sisterhood had not broken for her. The readers’ letters section was, in a sense, the space where the MLF’s lesbian ghost and her backwards feelings had found refuge in the MLF archive – “a home for the unhomely and unbeautiful” (Khanna 2003: 268).

I also increasingly realized that fugitive archives were much more likely to be found in what people had *not* given to libraries than in what they had. This is mostly, I would suggest, because (fugitive) lesbians who did not successfully recognize themselves in the MLF’s subject “women” and who did not experience a sense of passionate belonging to the movement might not be endowed with the sense of feminist self-legitimacy possessed by the women who gave their archives to libraries. They might also not be at full peace with the MLF’s history – and might hence feel more ambivalent about its memorialization. Examples

of illuminating private archives included Louise Turcotte's private video and audio recordings of Monique Wittig: in particular, a video interview with Wittig from 1975, and a few extracts from Wittig's conference presentation at the Centre Pompidou in June 1997. Louise Turcotte is a radical lesbian activist from Quebec, who met Wittig in the MLF in 1973 and remained one of her closest friends after returning to Canada in 1975. She also wrote the preface to the collection of Wittig's essays published in the United States in 1992 under the title *The Straight Mind*. Fugitive archives identified in people's private collections also included Martine Laroche's incredible collection of photographs. Martine Laroche, who in the early 1980s was a prominent radical lesbian activist in Paris, was also one of Monique Wittig's closest friends, having met her in the MLF in the mid-1970s. I have reproduced some of Martine Laroche's photographs in the thesis, but I will give you a little tour beforehand, because her viewpoint is indeed a fugitive one:

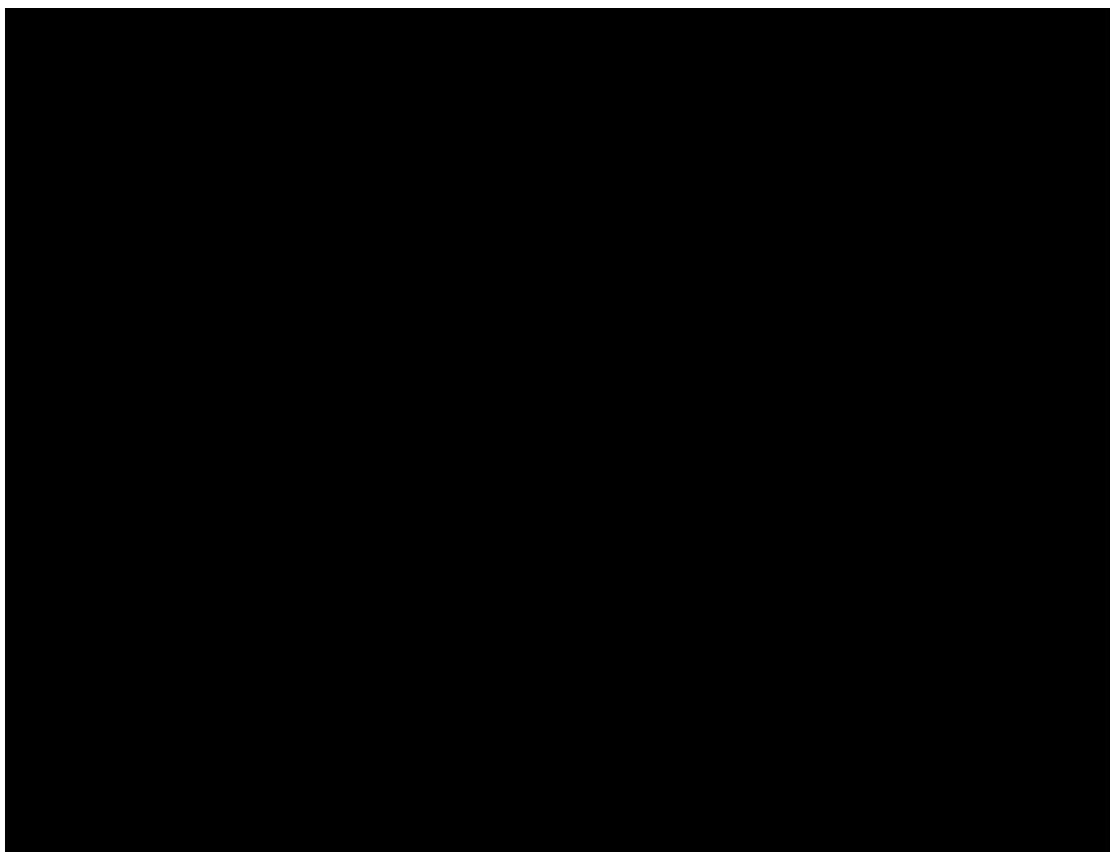


Figure 1. Monique Wittig kneeling in front of issues of the MLF's first newspaper, *Le torchon brûlé*. Paris, between 1972 and 1975. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1972a1975.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

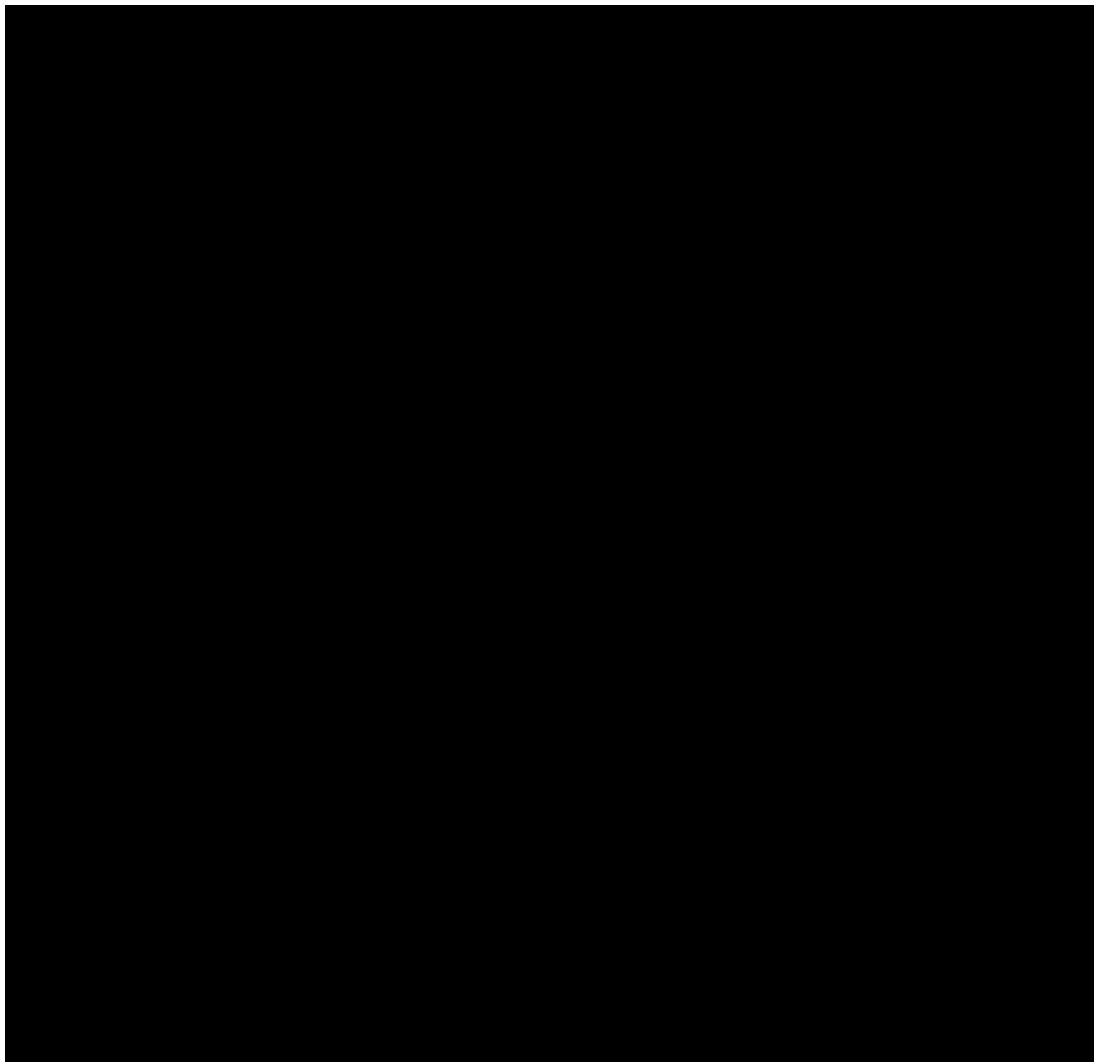


Figure 2. MLF activist holding a placard reading “when women love each other, men don’t reap” (play on words with the expression “love each other”, which sounds like “sow” in French). Paris, between 1972 and 1975. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1972a1975.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

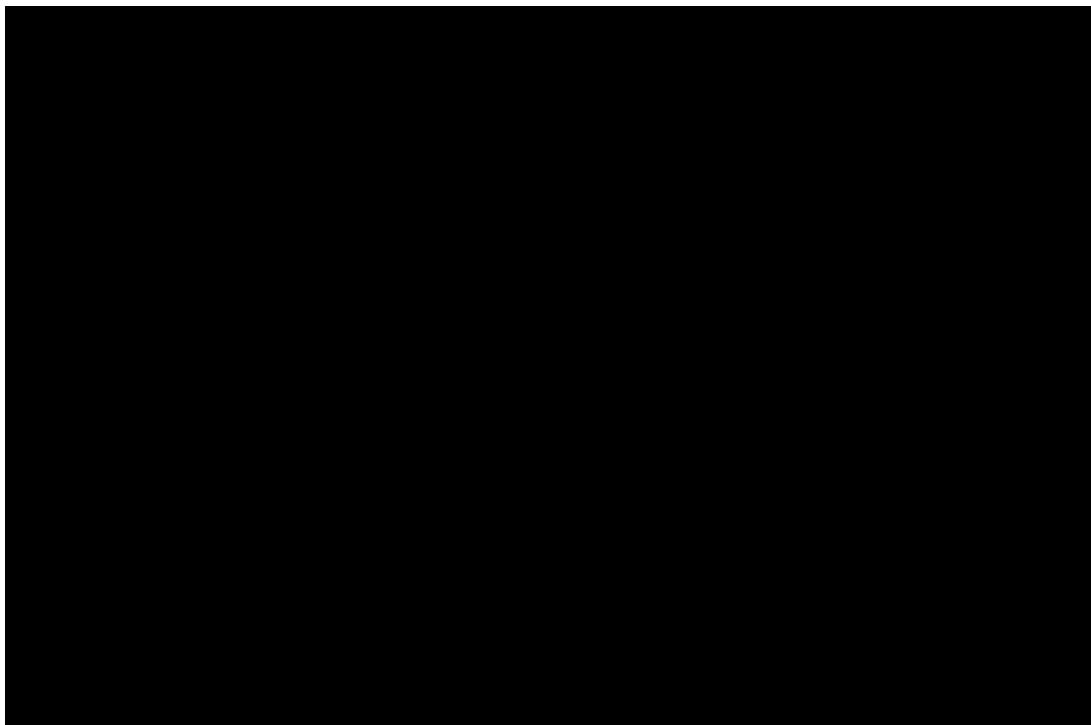


Figure 3. “Dix heures contre le viol” (Ten Hours Against Rape), organized by the MLF at the Mutualité hall. Paris, 26 June 1976. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1976.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

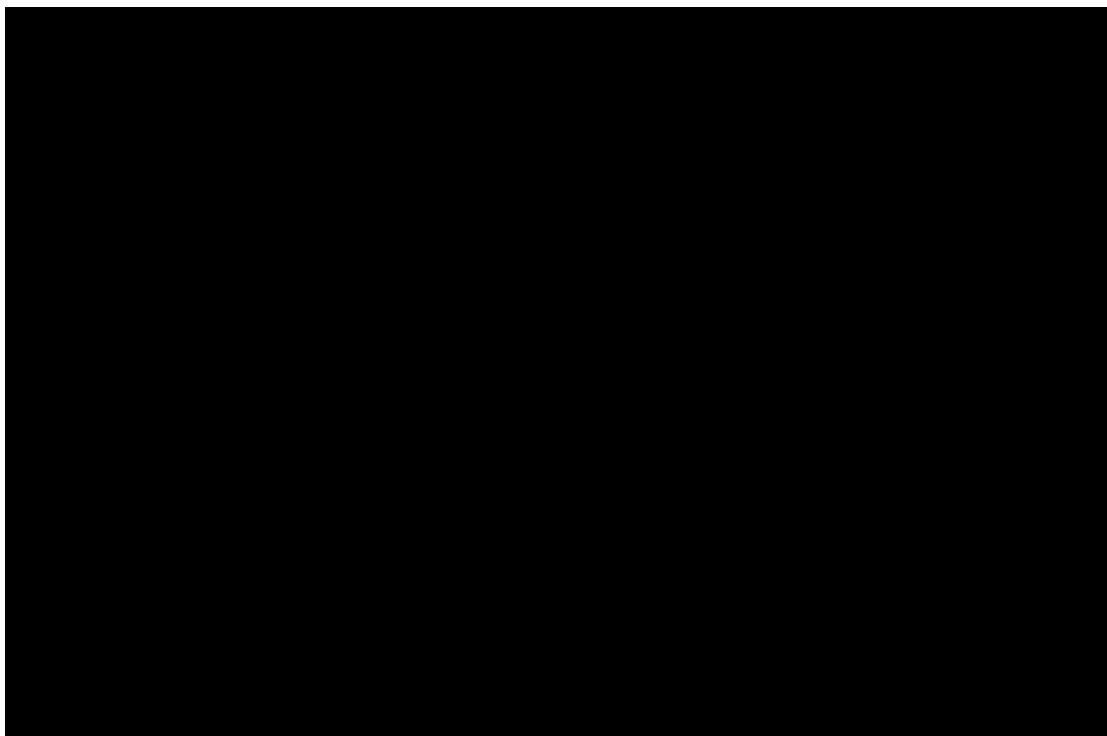


Figure 4. “Dix heures contre le viol” (Ten Hours Against Rape), organized by the MLF at the Mutualité hall. Paris, 26 June 1976. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1976.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

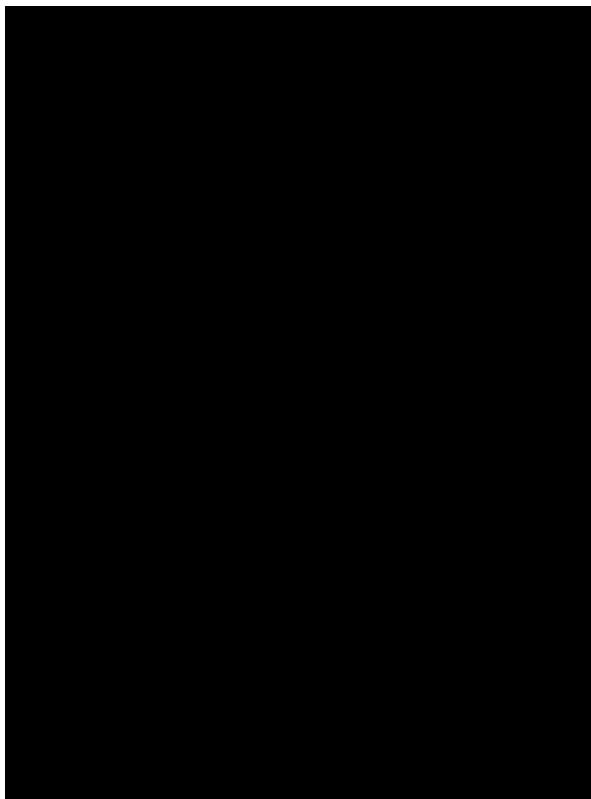


Figure 5. Activist with a placard reading “lesbian cheat-male” at the 8 March 1977 feminist march. Paris, 5 March 1977. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1977.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

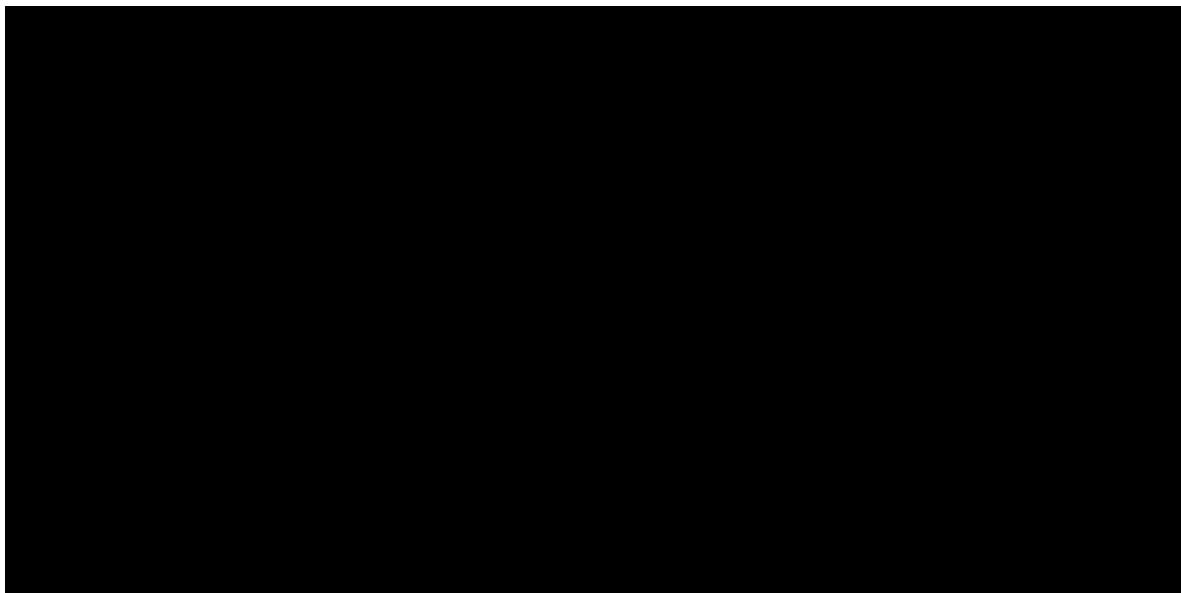


Figure 6. 8 March 1977 feminist march. Paris, 5 March 1977. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1977.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

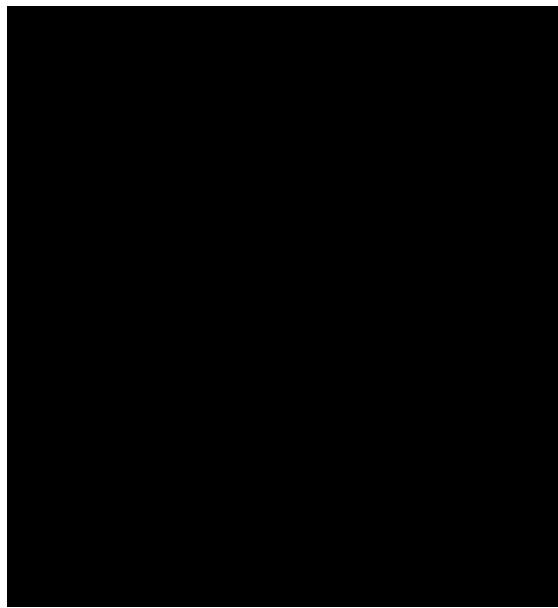


Figure 7. Activist holding a placard reading “spring will be sweet with the dykes” (a play on the word “goudou” (dyke), which sounds like “sweet taste” in French) at the 8 March feminist march. Paris, 5 March 1977. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1977.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.



Figure 8. May Day demonstration. Homosexual man holding a placard reading “I am homosexual. Do I look like a monster?” Paris, 1 May 1977. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1977.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

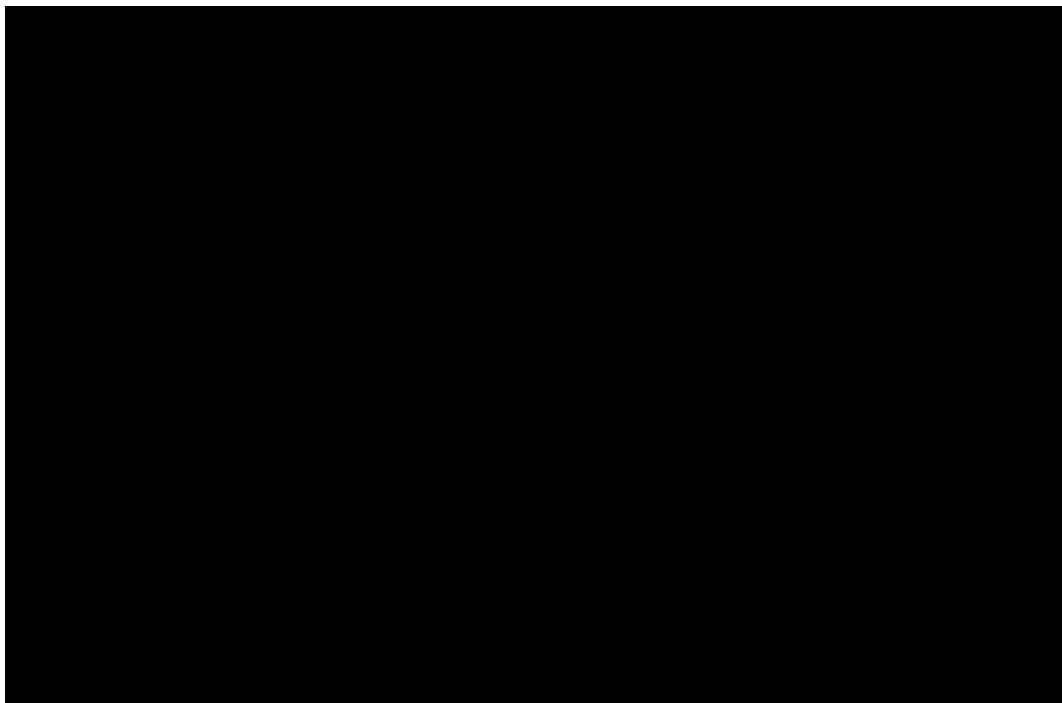


Figure 9. First autonomous homosexual demonstration (i.e. first Gay Pride), organized by the MLF and the Groupes de libération homosexuels (GLH, Homosexual Liberation Groups). Paris, 25 June 1977. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1977.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

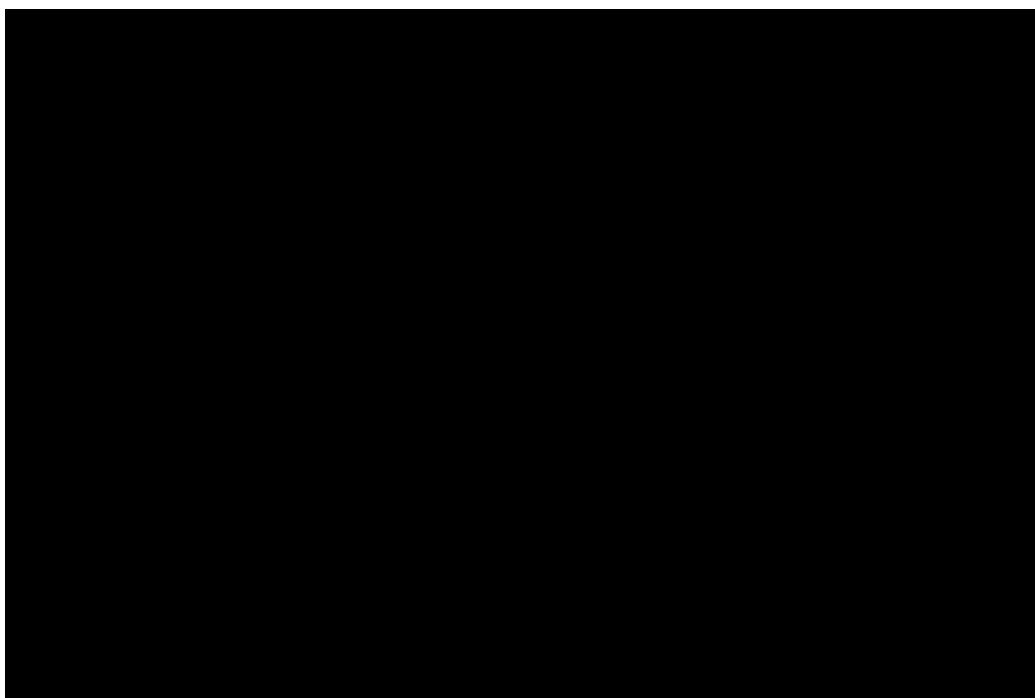


Figure 10. GLH block at the first autonomous homosexual demonstration. Paris, 25 June 1977. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1977.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

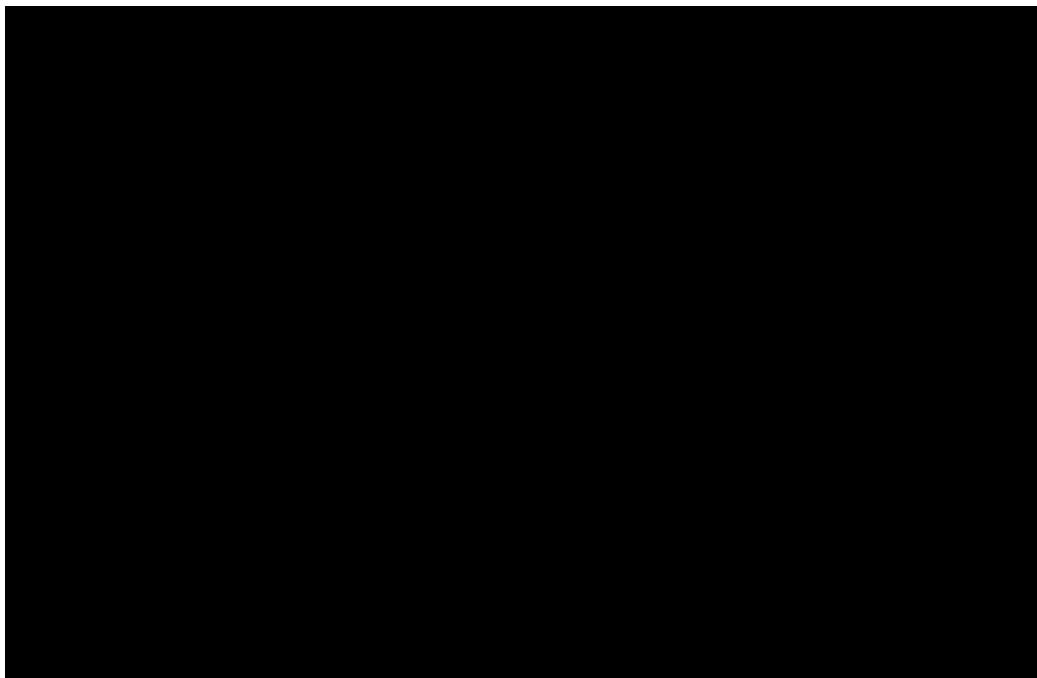


Figure 11. Night-time demonstration against rape. On the banner: “raped women”. Paris, October 1977. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1977.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

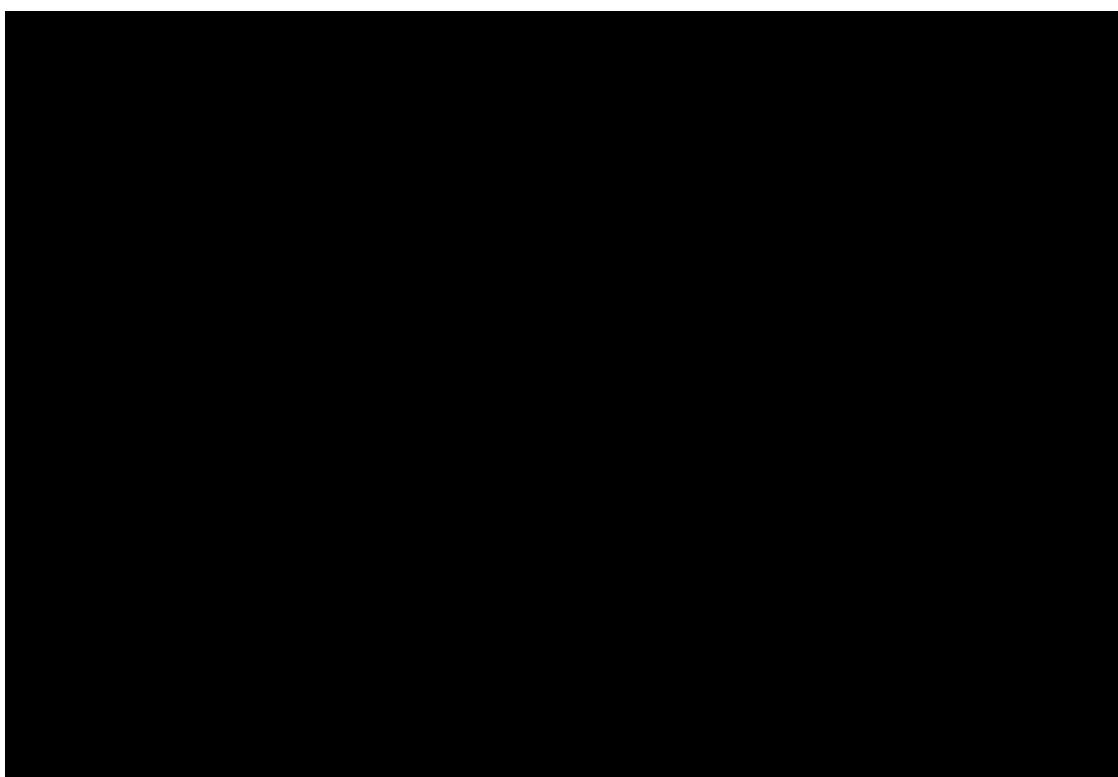


Figure 12. Second Gay Pride march. On the banner: “anti-macho lesbians/queers” (i.e. gay men calling themselves “lesbian queers”). Paris, 23 June 1978. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1978.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

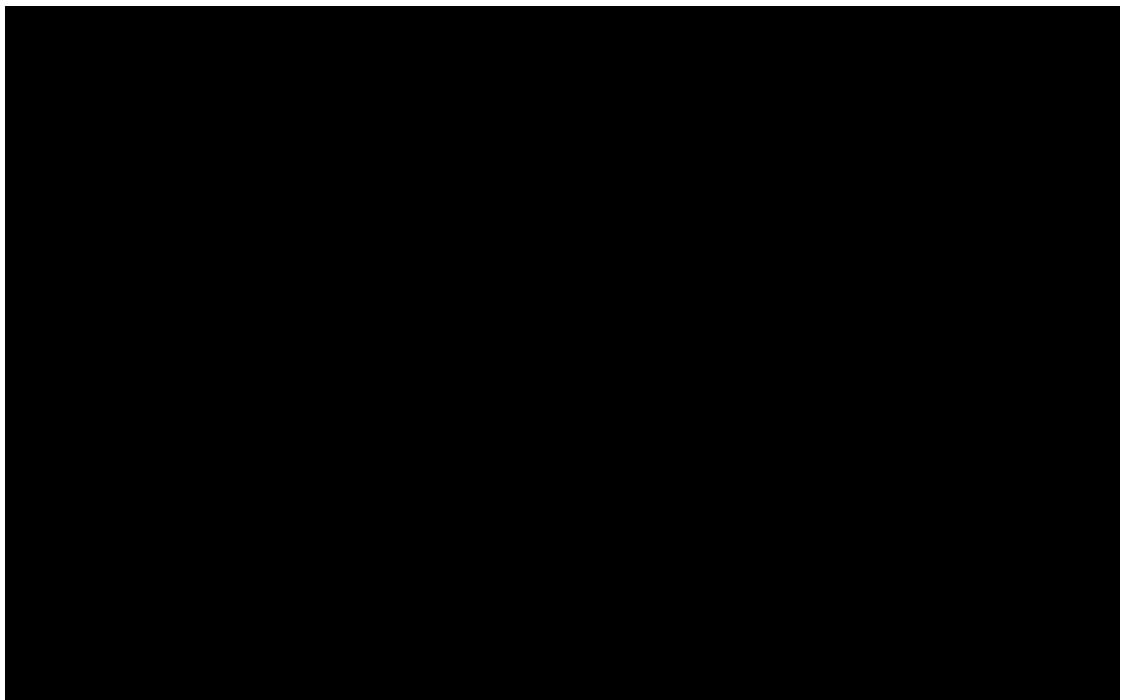


Figure 13. Second Gay Pride march. Paris, 23 June 1978. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1978.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

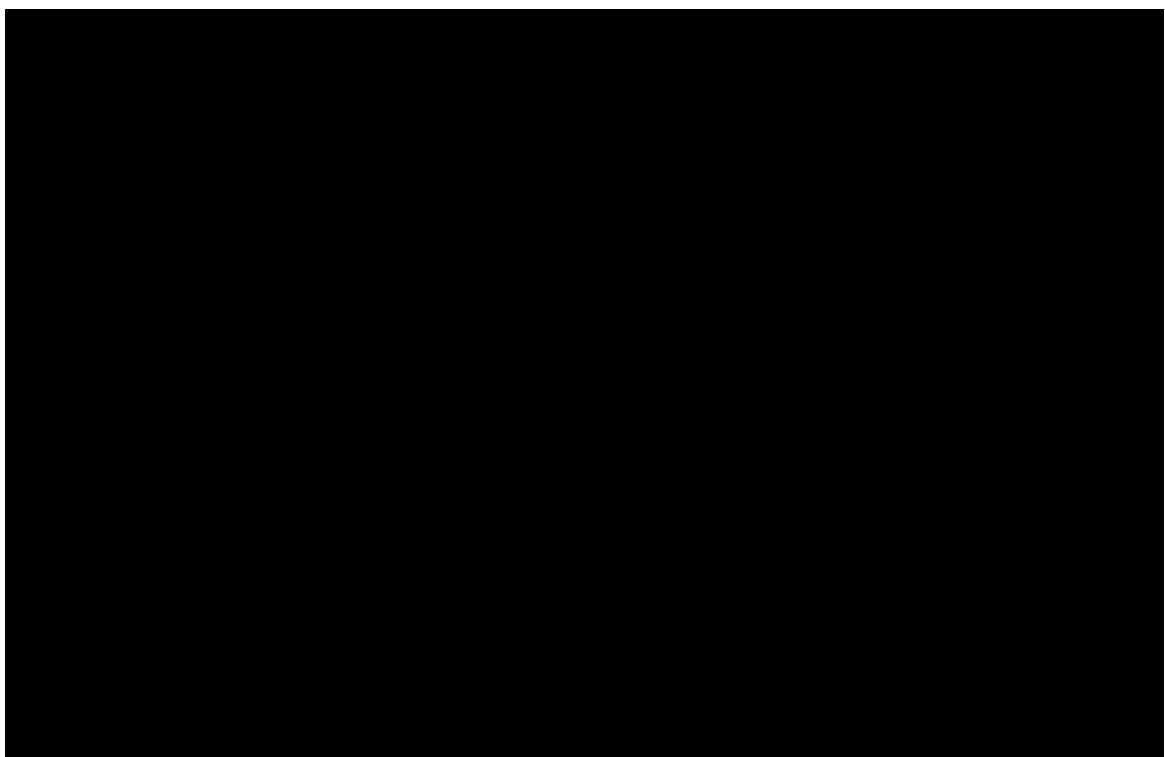


Figure 14. Gay Pride march. On the banner: “new energy, homosexual energy”. Paris, 23 June 1979. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1979.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

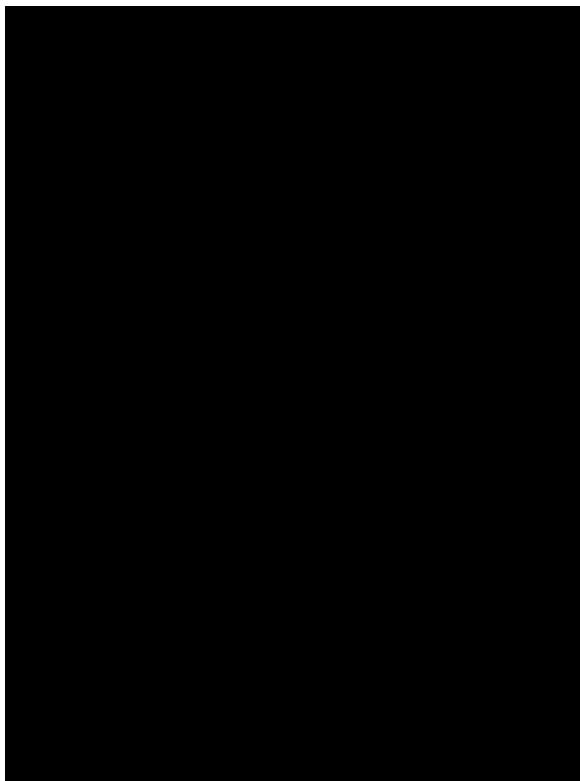


Figure 15. Monique Wittig. Berkeley, California, 1979. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1979.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

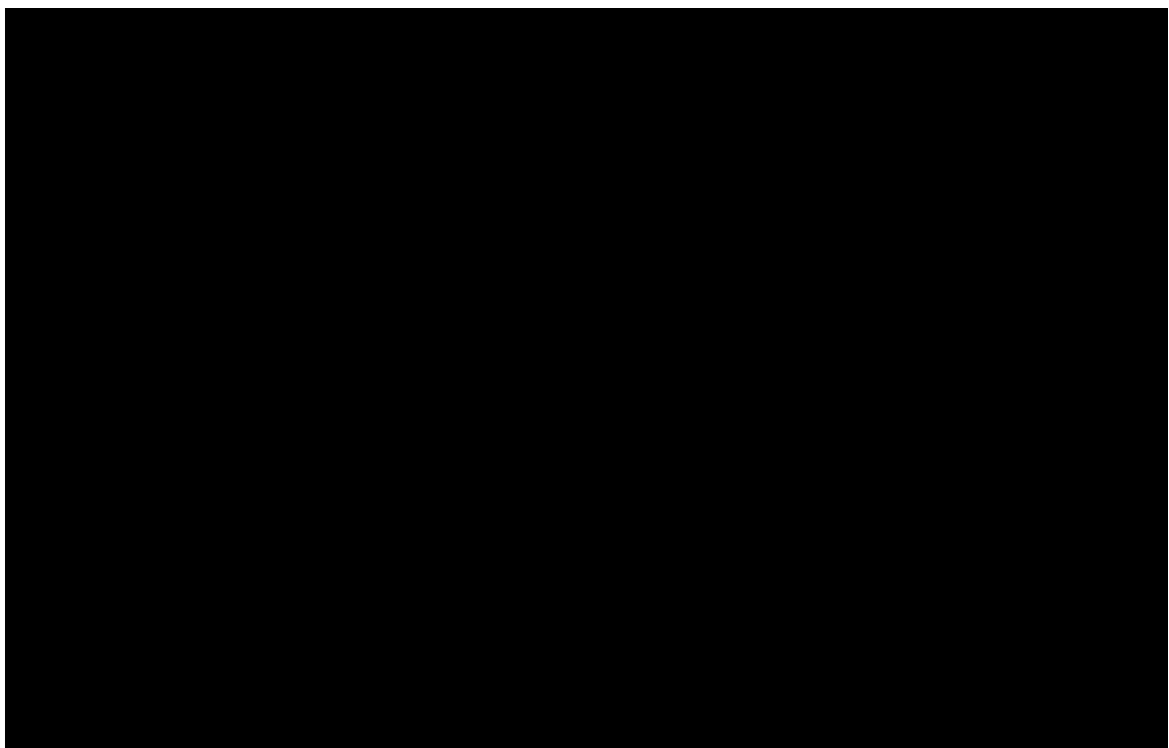


Figure 16. 8 March 1980 feminist march. Paris, 7 March 1980. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source <http://caminare.free.fr/1980.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

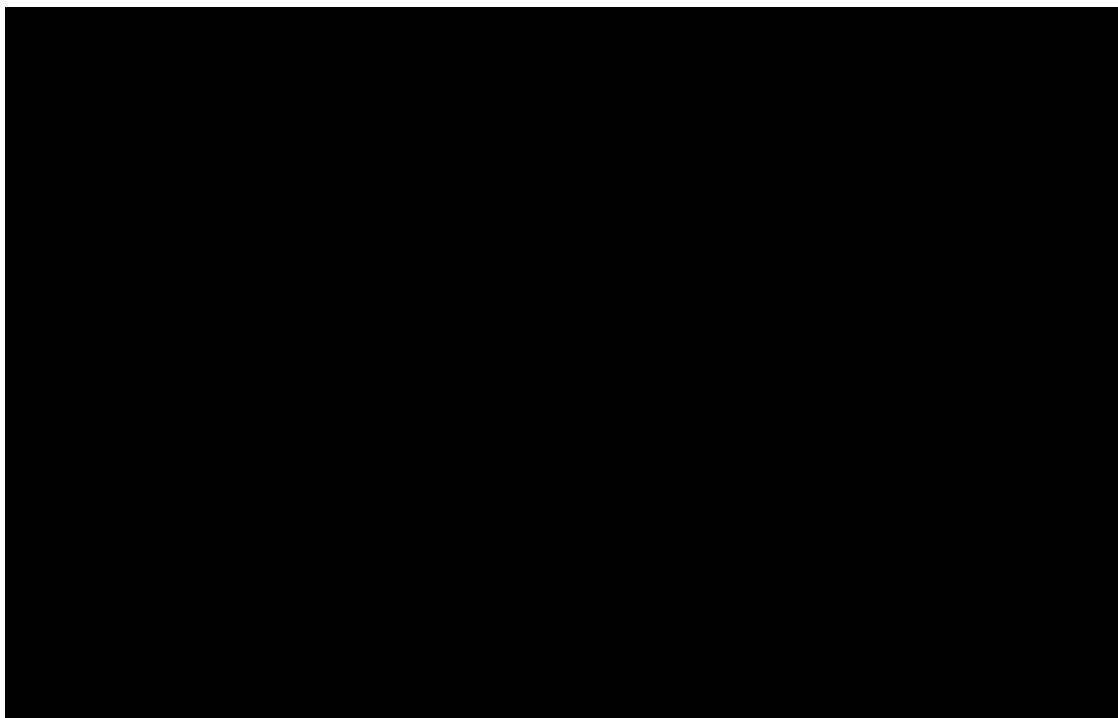


Figure 17. 8 March 1980 feminist march. Paris, 7 March 1980. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1980.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

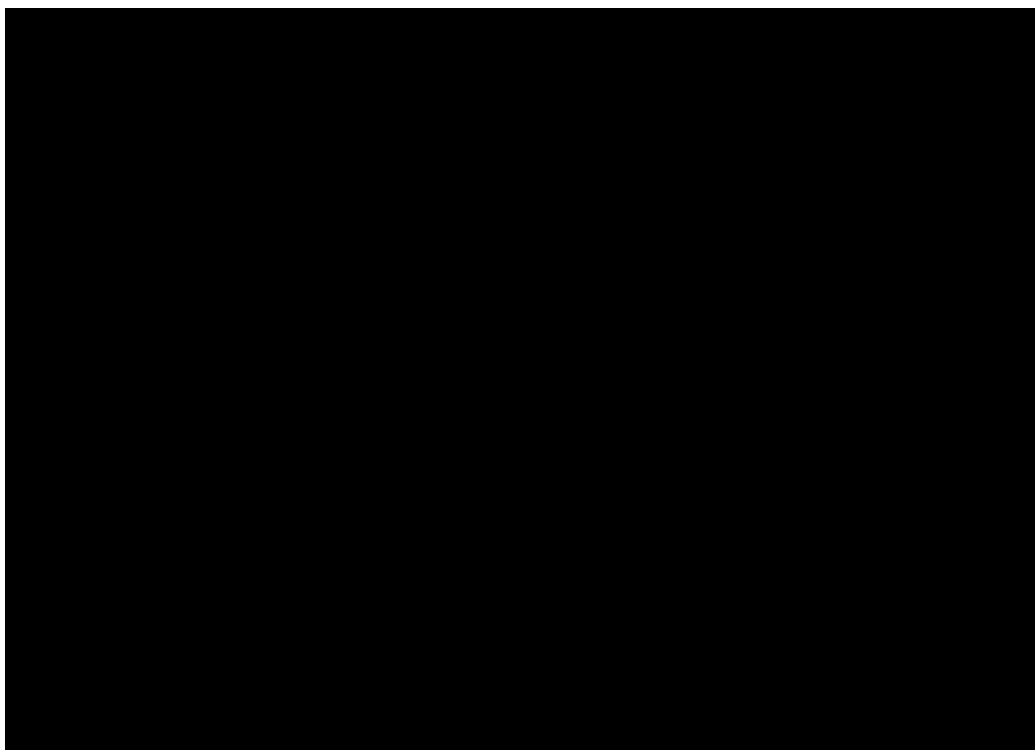


Figure 18. 8 March 1980 feminist march. The placard in the middle of the photograph reads: "I am a lesbian to the tip of my nose". Paris, 7 March 1980. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1980.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

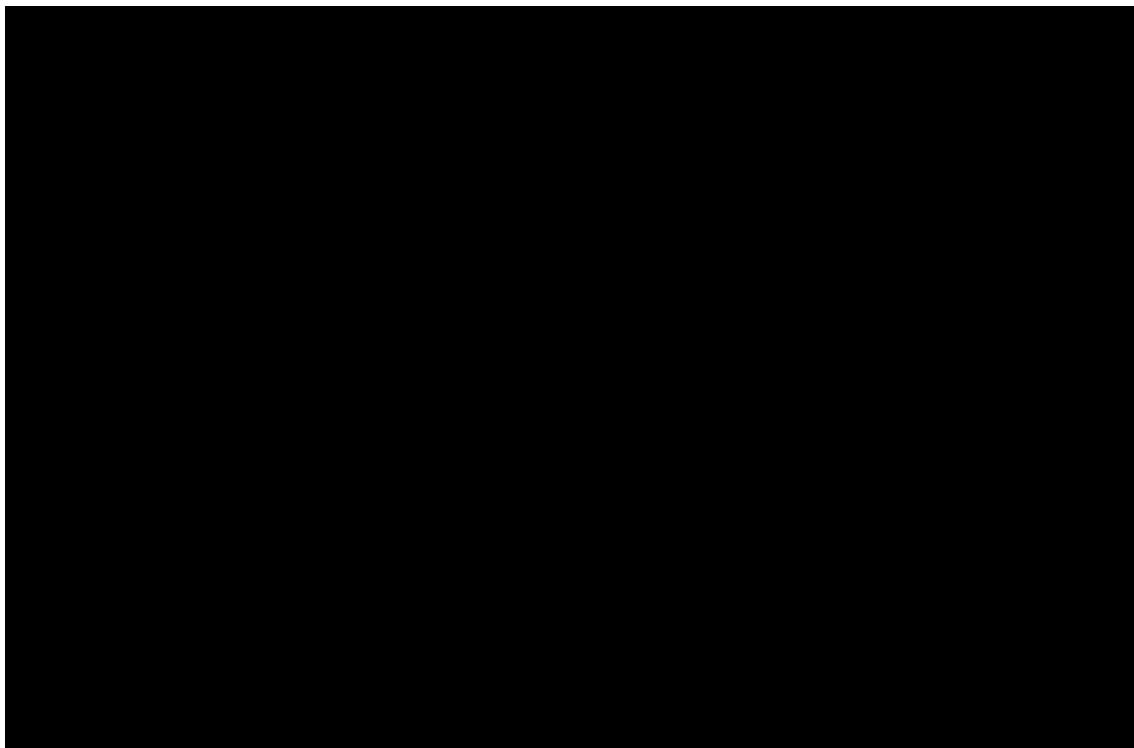


Figure 19. 8 March 1980 feminist march. Paris, 7 March 1980. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1980.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

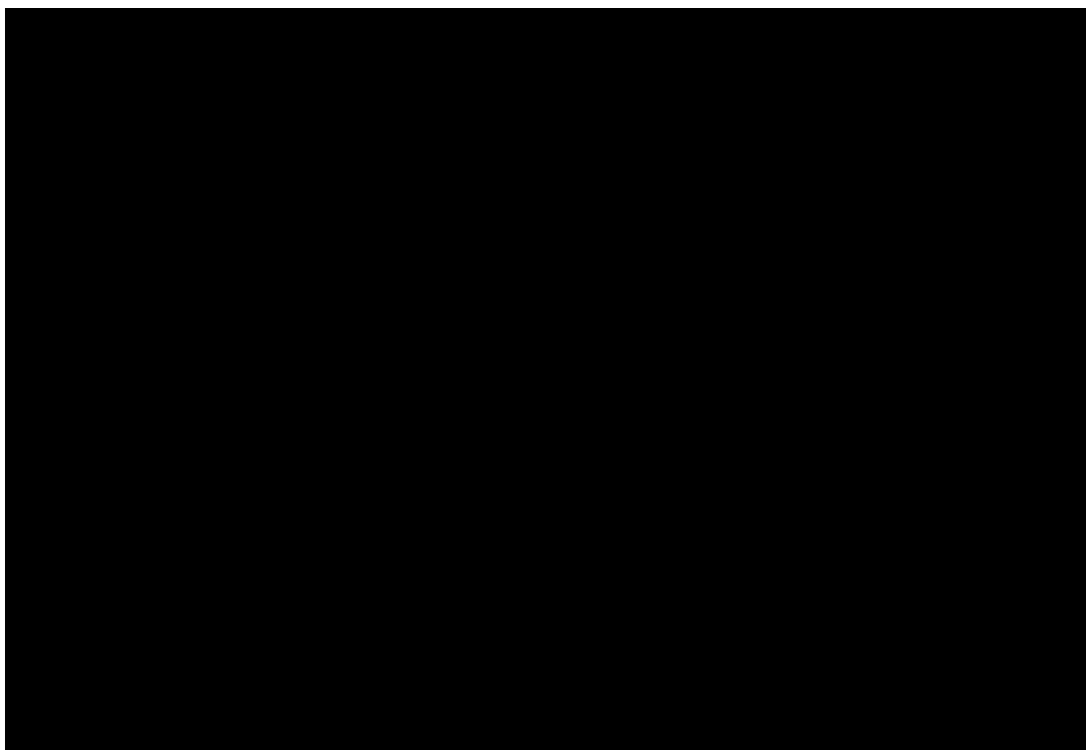


Figure 20. 8 March 1980 feminist march. The banner reads: “lesbians – our radical consciousness is the abolition of patriarchy”. Paris, 7 March 1980. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1980.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

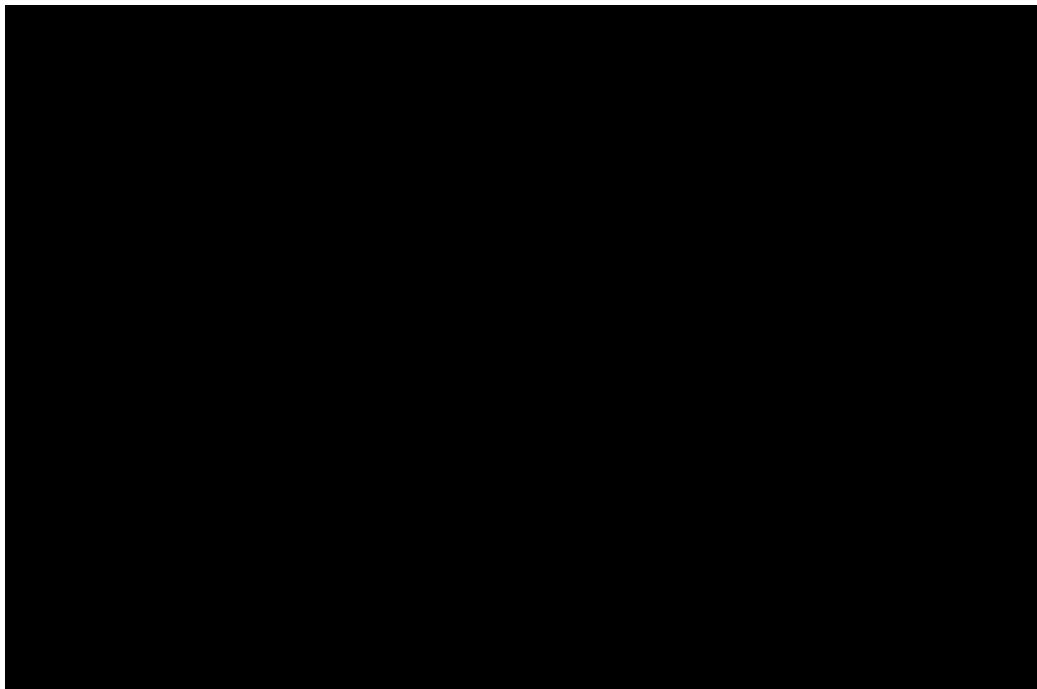


Figure 21. 8 March 1981 feminist march. The banner reads: “heterosexuality is to patriarchy as the wheel is to the bicycle”. Paris, 7 March 1981. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1981.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

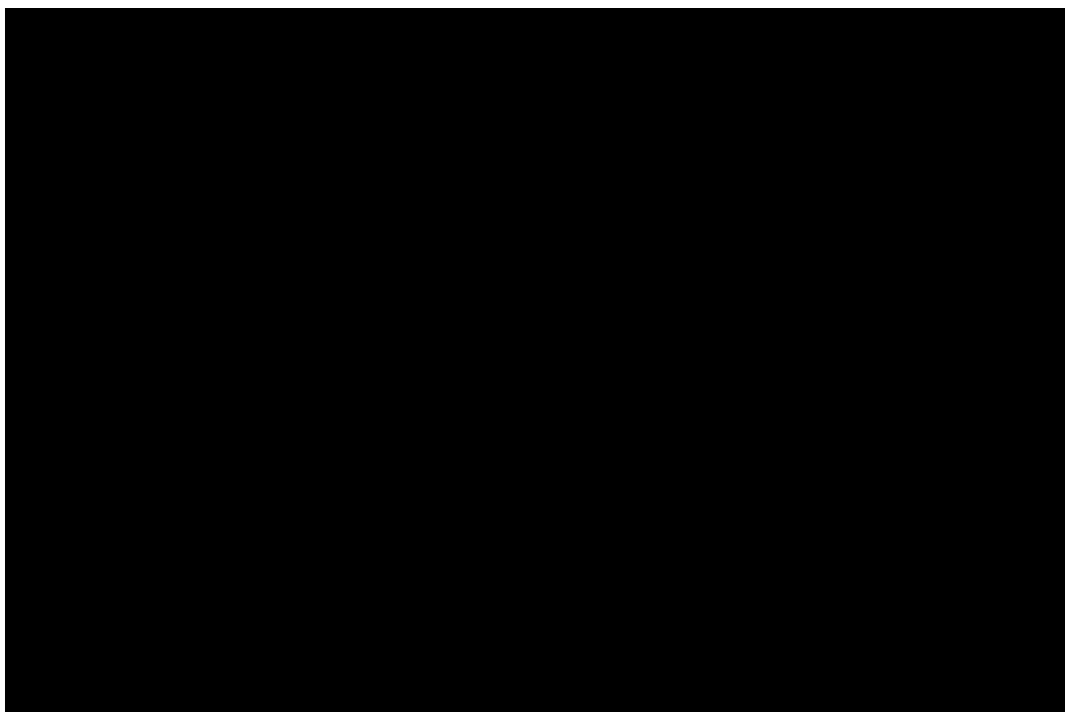


Figure 22. Homosexual march led by a lesbian contingent. The banner reads: “lesbianism is political: Lesbians’ National Coordination”. Paris, 18 June 1983. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1983.htm>. Last accessed: 4 July 2018.

The reason I wanted to introduce you to Martine Laroche's visual archive is that her political route (which you can trace in the pictures) is the route I have followed in the thesis. Martine Laroche is not a woman, she is a lesbian. And it is as such that she progressed through the 1970s: as a lesbian-identified lesbian, rather than as a woman-identified lesbian. Except for a few pictures taken between 1972 and 1975, her archive really starts in 1976: she "missed" the heroic founding years of the MLF and became an activist when many of the MLF pioneers were progressively withdrawing from the movement. In other words, Laroche's trajectory introduces us to an alternative temporality lagging behind the official chronological markers of the MLF. Unlike famous MLF pioneers such as Cathy Bernheim, Christine Delphy, Catherine Deudon, Liliane Kandel, Emmanuèle de Lesseps or Anne Zelensky (who all opposed Wittig's lesbian politics and epistemology within the MLF's materialist current), she is not recognized in France as a "proper" MLF activist: she did not participate in the MLF's most memorable actions in the early 1970s, she does not appear in MLF historiographical narratives whatsoever, she has not been interviewed so far by MLF historians (who privilege the feminists mentioned above), she has not written her memoirs, she did not give her archive to an institution, and she was not asked to participate in filmmaker Carole Roussopoulos' classic documentary on the MLF released in 1999, *Debout! Une histoire du mouvement de libération des femmes (1970–1980)* (Up! A History of the Women's Liberation Movement) (in which many of the abovementioned "proper" MLF activists appear).

Martine Laroche was a feminist in the 1970s, but her trajectory is out of step. It is a lesbian trajectory that provides a decentred standpoint on the MLF's "official" history: she photographed lesbian banners and lesbian collectives at MLF protests (the history of which does not appear in MLF historiography), she participated in homosexual demonstrations with gay men (unlike MLF women who promoted non-mixedness), she participated in an anti-rape grassroots collective which held various vigilante protests in the late 1970s (in which many lesbians participated, and which is also rarely referenced in MLF historiography), and in the early 1980s she was a prominent radical lesbian activist, co-creating a radical lesbian magazine named *Espaces* (Spaces) in 1982. These aspects of her activist trajectory are absent from commoner visual representations of the MLF.²¹ In particular, her rich collection of photographs documenting early-1980s radical lesbian activism is the only visual archive of

²¹ See in particular Catherine Deudon's *Un mouvement à soi: images du mouvement des femmes 1970–2001* (A Movement of One's Own : Images of the Women's Movement 1970–2001, 2003).

this history I came across. Looking through Martine Laroche's photographs, I felt as if a whole new MLF story was unfolding before my eyes: one in which lesbianism as an anti-normative sexuality rather than a commonality among women was put at the centre. Her archive is a lesbian archive. Her trajectory does not fit into the MLF's order of things – the politics and epistemology of women – and hence she cannot be included in the MLF's official memory. In contrast to Catherine Deudon's photographs, which are most frequently used to illustrate the MLF's history (2003), Laroche's photographs have never been published to date: I discovered them when I went to her home to interview her. Notably, while dominant visual representations of the MLF depict Beauvoir as a central character, Laroche's collection shows Monique Wittig instead as a key figure. Further, a glaring absence can be identified in Laroche's pictures: that of the MLF's abortion campaign (its first and most important campaign) – the first years "missing" from her collection.

In short, Laroche's visual archive offers an alternative political, epistemological and theoretical genealogy of the MLF – the genealogy I have clung to and sought to retrace in the thesis. In *Lesbian Trouble*, I turn away from the standpoint of the MLF's famous activists (woman-identified women) – the standpoint from which MLF historiography is ceaselessly written – and focus instead on invisible activists such as Martine Laroche – those who did not make it into the MLF archive and did not produce legitimated MLF knowledges. I make room for lesbians who do not fit into the MLF's official history (that of "women"), not to replace it with another story – as I have previously stated – but to decentre the MLF's dominant epistemology and exhume the subjugated knowledges that were foreclosed from feminist discursive legitimacy (I thus read them *in relation to* the MLF's order of things).

The last space in which I was able to identify lesbian critical knowledges about feminism was provided by lesbian and mixed homosexual publications from the mid-1970s to the late 1980s. Unlike the feminist publications mentioned above, I found many of these publications at the Paris lesbian archive (Archives recherches cultures lesbiennes (ARCL), Lesbian Research Culture Archives). Parisian radical lesbians founded the lesbian archive in 1983. Hosted for many years at the home of Claudie Lesselier (one of its founders), it is now located in the basement of the Paris Maison des femmes (Women's Centre) in the twelfth arrondissement. The lesbian archive has always refused to be institutionalized or part of a larger collection, and has been run by volunteers since its creation. It includes a rich collection of 1970s and 1980s gay, lesbian and feminist publications (books, zines, journals,

newspapers etc.), ephemera thematically organized in various boxes, photographs from protests, objects such as banners and placards, archives of lesbian collectives and projects, and private donations. I spent a considerable amount of time looking through the archive of the grassroots anti-rape collective *Collectif femmes contre le viol* (Women's Collective Against Rape), created in 1977, whose history has never been examined to date (either in scholarship on the history of the politicization of rape or in MLF scholarship): as I explain in the thesis, the history of anti-rape radicalism is crucial for understanding the birth of radical lesbianism.

I thus examined the entire lesbian press from the mid-1970s to 1990, mostly at the Paris lesbian archive. This included twenty-one journals, either weekly, monthly or with alternative frequencies. In addition, in 1982 the Quebec radical lesbian journal *Amazones d'hier, lesbiennes d'aujourd'hui* (Amazons of Yesterday, Lesbians of Today) published a special issue on "Heterofeminism and radical lesbianism", in which major texts from the French controversy, never published elsewhere, were reproduced. In 1987, the biannual journal issued by the Paris lesbian archive, *Archive, recherches et cultures lesbiennes*, published a rich special issue on "Lesbian Movements in France" from 1970 to 1980, which includes rare archival material (mostly activist texts and newspapers articles) retracing the genesis of lesbian activism. Finally, radical lesbian activist Marion Page's republication in 2010 of theoretical contributions and transcripts of discussions from two radical lesbian meetings held in Paris in November 1981 and June 1982 provided me with precious access to radical lesbian discourses, particularly in their renarrativization of the history of the MLF addressed in the introduction.

I also examined mixed homosexual journals from the 1970s and early 1980s. In particular, a section from the first issue of the magazine *Masques* (Masks) on "Lesbians and the women's movement", in which former lesbian feminist activists comment on their bitter experience in the MLF, was especially useful for retracing lesbians' backwards structure of feeling in relation to feminism in the second archival chapter. The summer 1981 issue of *Masques* also contains a rich section charting the history of lesbian activism in the 1970s. Mixed homosexual publications were particularly interesting insofar as many lesbian contributors published pieces in which they explained the reasons why they had chosen to campaign with men during the decade of feminist non-mixedness, and which were thus often very critical towards the MLF.

In order for you to find ghosts, they must haunt you in the first place; you must *know* that they exist before you get any evidence, because it is this belief that will lead you to them:

The ghost makes itself known to us through haunting and pulls us affectively into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience as a recognition. Haunting recognition is a special way of knowing what has happened or is happening (Gordon 1997: 63).

Experiencing haunting as a recognition, looking for the ghosts of lost histories, and trusting them when you find them, is what it takes to identify fugitive archives.

Paranoiac Archives

Across the twelve interviews I conducted with MLF friends of Monique Wittig, the word “paranoiac” was used twenty times to describe her. Almost all the radical feminists I interviewed described Wittig’s trajectory not only as one of radicalization from universal sisterhood to lesbian separatism (such as Audrey Lasserre in her literary history of the MLF, for example), but also as one of increasing psychiatric disorder leading from (rational) feminism to (lesbian) paranoia. According to one of my interviewees, Wittig’s paranoiac tendencies started to show in *The Lesbian Body*, a poetic novel on lesbian passion and sexuality, published in 1973:

I found this book very hardcore. [...] Suddenly, when I reread *The Lesbian Body*, I understood her tragedy, in fact! Girls make Wittig into a heroine but they do not want to see her tragedy. It is very tragic... Her problem with the fall of Icarus, the violence, the body is dismembered! It is terrible... We have in this book the beginning of her paranoiac problems... (my translation)

After *The Lesbian Body*, Wittig’s departure to the US in 1976 is the second step her former MLF friends invoke to exemplify her paranoiac trajectory. As another MLF radical feminist I interviewed told me: “in the United States she went into this kind of paranoiac thing” (my translation). In a similar vein, when I asked if Monique Wittig had left France because of resistance to her lesbian vision for feminism, another radical feminist responded:

There is this whole myth surrounding her departure... Chased away by a band of hysterical heteros... Yes, but I don't think so. I heard those stories. I said to myself, "But this is a bit... It's a rumour she has created and which has spread". But I think that Monique, she was becoming more and more, really, caught up in her... It might be related to her romantic creativity. I think she had a tendency to tell herself stories too and then to end up believing them (my translation).

Conveniently, accusing Wittig of propagating rumours and making up stories erases the archaeology of the political antagonism that prompted her to leave, as well as the violence radical feminists exerted against her.

Finally, it was her theorization of lesbians as non-women in 1980 which confirmed Wittig's paranoia for almost all of the MLF radical feminists I interviewed: "it was talking crap, in a paranoiac mode, her kind of discourse 'One is not a woman', things like that... For me, it's talking crap" (my translation). Another said: "what better proof of paranoia? *Of course* lesbians are women!" (speaker's emphasis, my translation). In her recently published feminist memoirs, Marie-Jo Bonnet, a lesbian radical feminist who was friends with Monique Wittig in the 1970s, contrasts the "generous" and "creative" Monique Wittig of the beginning of the movement with the "rigid" and "paranoiac" Monique Wittig of "The Straight Mind" in a chapter entitled "Destroying Woman", According to Monique Wittig":

The Monique I loved in the movement, attentive to "new girls", generous, creative, speaking a poetic language so different from the Marxist waffle which characterized a large number of ex-far leftists, with her quirky gaze, her kindness, her solidarity with women, had faded away, making way for a rigid theorist with barely hidden signs of paranoia (2018: 381, my translation).

When they speak about increasing paranoia, I argue, MLF women are in fact referring to Wittig's lesbianization and progressive disidentification with women. Indeed, the steps invoked to describe her (alleged) paranoiac development are landmarks in Wittig's lesbian politics and theory: the publication of *The Lesbian Body* in 1973, her departure to the US (often associated with lesbianism in the French feminist imaginary, as I explain in the second archival chapter) and her theorizing of lesbians as non-women in 1980. Although historian

Audrey Lasserre does not refer to paranoia in her literary history of the MLF, it is also Wittig's lesbianization, I suggest, that underpins her reading of Wittig's trajectory from the "feminine plural" (2014: 305) (good feminist Wittig) at the beginning of the MLF to a "separatist assertion" (2014: 322) (bad lesbian Wittig), a trajectory also characterized in Lasserre's analysis by the publication of *The Lesbian Body*, Wittig's departure to the US and the writing of "The Straight Mind". Importantly, the language of paranoia refers to Wittig's masculinization as much as to lesbianization. The early Wittig – the feminist Wittig, who co-created the MLF and was still a woman – is characterized by traditionally feminine attributes: she was "generous", "creative", "attentive" to women, "poetic" and "kind", she embraced the "feminine plural". The late Wittig – lesbian Wittig – is instead characterized by masculine attributes: she was a "rigid theorist" who sought to "destroy women" and made a "separatist assertion". Wittig's lesbianization is anxiously read in terms of masculinization and thus paranoia. Wittig's turn from rationality to paranoia is in fact a turn from feminism to lesbianism, from femininity to masculinity. For MLF women, and some forty years after the eradication of Wittig's lesbian vision for French feminism, being a (masculinized) lesbian and not a (heteronormative) woman (still) amounts to being paranoiac, crazy, irrational – unsymbolizable within their feminist discursive order. I explore at length in the thesis how the hystericalization of the lesbian not only made impossible any critique of the heterosexual regime that sustained the (false) universality of the MLF's subject "women", but was itself also an effect of the heteronormative regulation of the category "women". My focus in this section is thus on what it means to take seriously archives that are supposed to be "paranoiac": Wittig's private archives.

The language of madness was long ago identified by Foucault as a primary mode in which power is exerted through the disqualification of alternative knowledges that resist the dominant epistemic order of things (1971 [1961]). In the thesis, I have decided to *take Wittig seriously* and to stand by her side. I therefore do not consider her archive crazy or paranoiac, but I explore why it can only be framed – even forty years later – in such terms by her former feminist friends. In other words, I choose to listen to what the mad lesbian has to say. This starts from the assumption that the mad lesbian's archive is not paranoiac but was *made* illegible in the epistemic heteronormative order of the MLF, and that its loss "proceeds [...] from the remnants of queer pasts that persist as historically unapprehendable" (Lewis 2014: 28).

After Monique Wittig's death in 2003 at the age of sixty-seven, her archive was given to the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. Since it turned out to be impossible for me to go to New Haven during the course of my PhD, Louise Turcotte had the generosity to scan for me the full collection of Wittig's private letters surrounding the emergence of radical lesbianism in France. In the wake of the publication of Wittig's "La pensée straight" and "On ne naît pas femme" in February and May 1980, and at the same time as a movement of radical lesbians was emerging in Paris, a schism opened in the editorial collective of the materialist feminist journal *Questions féministes* (Feminist Issues), in which Wittig's two pieces were published. The schism pitted the members of the editorial collective who supported Wittig's lesbian theory (she was herself a member of the editorial collective) – Noëlle Bisserset, Colette Guillaumin, Nicole-Claude Mathieu and Monique Plaza – against those who rejected it as anti-feminist – Christine Delphy, Claude Hennequin and Emmanuèle de Lesseps (supported by Simone de Beauvoir, the director of publications). The theoretical disagreement ended in the disintegration of the editorial collective and the closure of the journal in October 1980. When Delphy and de Lesseps announced in February 1981 the creation of a new journal with the almost unchanged title *Nouvelles questions féministes* (New Feminist Issues), Wittig, Bisserset, Mathieu, Guillaumin and Plaza took them to court on the grounds that they were appropriating a collective endeavour for their own benefit while erasing lesbian theory from materialist feminism. This conflict, which left indelible trauma in the memories of many French lesbians, is crucial for understanding the eradication of lesbian theory from French feminism.

However, to date this history has never been studied from a lesbian perspective: the very few historians who briefly include it in their research on the MLF have consistently taken the side of the radical feminists who opposed Wittig and political lesbians (Lasserre 2014; Martel 1999; Picq 1993, 2011; Pipon 2013). So I was stunned to discover Wittig's letters: they provided the unknown "other" side of the story – the one that had been banished and ridiculed as "paranoiac", and which I decided to believe. It is worth noting that these letters have never been studied before, and this thesis is the first research project to incorporate them. Wittig's archive contains private letters she sent to or received from lesbians who supported her on the *Questions féministes* editorial collective, and letters she sent to or received from feminists who opposed her on the editorial collective (such as Christine Delphy and Emmanuèle de Lesseps). I was especially overjoyed to find in Wittig's archive a letter she sent to Simone de Beauvoir in the midst of the conflict in February 1981. In my view this letter materializes the

first and last encounter between two traditions of knowledge: radical feminist theory and lesbian theory. I was also thrilled to find a few letters Wittig sent to the American lesbian feminist poet and theorist Adrienne Rich, who was a close friend of hers, in which she commented on the French situation. Those letters are instructive not only in revealing the lesbian side of the conflict, but also because in them Wittig constantly renarrativizes the whole history of the MLF from her own perspective: the perspective of the exiled and ostracized subject who is regarded as “crazy”.

In stark contrast to legitimate MLF narratives that relentlessly tell stories about feminist happiness, solidarity and sisterhood, Wittig’s archive is a traumatic archive filled with feelings of radical anger, betrayal, injustice, loneliness, depression, sadness and bitterness. As she says in a letter to Adrienne Rich:

Although I was one of the main elements that started the women’s liberation movement in France, I may say that except for a few elected moments these seven years (1968/1975) have been like being in hell (Wittig n. d. [circa 1981b]: 1).

Wittig’s narrative – the narrative of a lesbian in the decade of women’s sameness – is read as paranoiac because it turns the traditional triumphalist history of the MLF’s political and affective success (pertaining to women who successfully identified as women) into a dark history of injuries and losses. Walter Benjamin uses the concept of “profane illumination” to capture the surrealists’ attitude towards Parisian everyday life: it is an innovative creative method (exemplified through urban flânerie) that seeks to disorientate, distort and estrange the rational world by revealing “the energies of intoxication for the revolution” and “bring[ing] [...] to the point of explosion [...] the immense forces of ‘atmosphere’ concealed in” everyday things (Benjamin 1978 in Gordon 1997: 204). Commenting upon Benjamin’s concept, Gordon defines the profane illumination as a “discerning moment”:

Proximate and vibrant, the profane illumination captures just that experience of the ghostly matter. Profane illumination is a kind of conjuring that “initiates” (Benjamin 1978: 192) because it is telling us something important we had not known; because it is leading us somewhere, or elsewhere (1997: 205).

While historians working on the MLF never bothered looking into Wittig’s letters – which

they would probably consider too paranoiac, too crazy, too lesbian – they produced, for me, a “profane illumination”: they displayed a whole new story about the MLF which fully estranged the official storytelling (extracted from the MLF archive and taken to be the “truth”). They radically interrupted well-worn narratives of liberation, sisterhood and love (in the context of which Wittig’s archive could only be read as paranoiac) and pointed to the unchallenged assumptions that condition them. As such, Wittig’s archive was, for me, the source of a new knowledge about 1970s French feminism which put me on the path of a lesbian journey through hell instead of women’s jubilant liberation. In many ways, Wittig’s archive turned out to be the “*missing*” archive that elucidated everything and confirmed all of my intuitions – the archive I had been looking for all along when all I encountered were absences and losses – and I can never thank Louise Turcotte enough for sending me those letters in the last year of my research. The irony is that while Wittig’s archive would certainly be taken as paranoiac by radical feminists – the rubbish archive of a disturbed person who supposedly needed psychiatric help – it produced exactly the opposite effect on me: it confirmed that my instinct – perhaps my “sixth [lesbian] sense beyond eyes and ears” (Hemmings 2018: 21) – that a haunting had taken place was *not* paranoiac. Of course it is not easy to keep trusting your instinct when twelve people who knew Wittig personally tell you that she was simply paranoiac and that you should not look too much into her thinking and politics! Of course it is not easy when everything, everywhere, from interviews to the MLF scholarship to the MLF archive, tells you that you are paranoiac yourself and that you should get away from this “talking crap”.

In particular, I was quite traumatized by a lecture I gave at a French university in 2016 in which I addressed the heterosexual and colonial aphasia of the MLF. The entire presentation was interrupted by aggressive comments from two former MLF women standing in the audience (who were tenure-track university professors), and at the end of the talk, without letting anyone ask questions, they furiously accused me of making up stories. They did everything they could to delegitimize my speech from their position of authority as historical witnesses and university professors. I have to say I almost gave up at that point, thinking they were probably right and that, although not gifted like Wittig with “romantic creativity”, I had also been telling myself stories. However, I understand today that at that moment I was probably the upsetting re-embodiment of an old and forgotten paranoiac lesbian ghost that they thought had been eradicated long ago. Although I never gave any more presentations in France after that, the positive element of this experience might be that it helped me

understand the violence Wittig underwent in the 1970s and her departure abroad.

I have told you all this to give you an idea of what it feels like to finally encounter the ghost who tells you after such a painful experience, so many self-doubts, that you were *not* making up stories, and that the violence you underwent was *political*. Perhaps Wittig's archive gave me the reassurance American lesbians gave her in the 1970s. Wittig's archive did not just make sense to me, it made everything else meaningful: why feminists kept calling Wittig paranoiac, why she left France, why I was so intuitively sceptical of (official) MLF narratives, and why I had persisted in my scepticism. Reading through her archive, I felt the relief of a long-awaited familiarity rather than the fear of paranoiac alterity. I encountered the lesbian-ghost-in-chief because I was looking for her and I knew she existed. In a paradoxical feat, perhaps, finding Wittig's archive of epic failure in the MLF was the greatest success of my four-year quest for the untraceable lesbian ghost.

It is from the standpoint of Wittig's seven-year journey through hell, rather than from the standpoint of MLF women's radical joy, that I rewrite the history of the MLF, arguing that Wittig's lesbian unhappiness and exile were the condition of possibility of MLF women's (heterocentric) happiness and feminist plenitude. This thesis is thus interested in lesbian failure and in Wittig's backwards "archive of feelings" (Cvetkovich 2003), rather than in more traditional accounts of feminist success. American literary critic Heather Love's *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007) was especially inspiring for understanding Wittig's affective and political trajectory in the MLF as illustrative of the "tradition of backwardness in queer representation and experience" (2007: 146). In that regard, since Wittig's archive is a resistant archive of feelings and knowledges which do not fit into proper MLF subjectivities, affects and historical narratives, it provides a properly queer (and not just lesbian) history of the MLF. Yet, if I have followed Love's theorization of backwardness as "both [...] a queer historical structure of feeling and [...] a model for queer historiography" (146), I also differ from her insofar as she focuses on queer backwardness in relation to early modernism: in the thesis, I identify a lesbian structure of backwards feelings *in relation to feminism and its subject "women"*. If clinging to "ruined identities and to histories of injury" (Love 2007: 30) is crucial to "forge a politics that keeps faith with those who drew back and those whose names were forgotten" (71), I suggest opening our historical consciousness to *feminist* figures like Wittig, who drew back because of their unassimilability to the present and futurity feminism was offering them. Monique Wittig's archive gives the

unpleasant feeling of bearing witness to a (feminist) history of (anti-lesbian) violence that was never acknowledged, never recognized and thus never repaired. In that regard, I make a case for the recognition of losses and traumas perpetrated *by* feminism and *within* feminism against those who could not fit, in place of nostalgic celebration, as a way of reckoning with the violence of feminism's own certainties, the violence of identities and the violence of revolutionary righteousness: the violence, in short, of knowing in advance who the subject of feminism is. In many ways, this thesis was written with a view to doing justice to Monique Wittig's long journey through hell.

4. Oral Interviews: Reading Dominant and Banished Knowledges

To conduct this research, I carried out twenty-four interviews with 1970s and 1980s feminist and lesbian activists. As I previously noted, this project is not about the history of lesbian communities in 1970s France, but about the epistemology of the French feminist closet. Thus, interviews were not conducted with a view to elucidating "reliable representations of the past" (Boyd 2008: 178–179), but instead to retrieve effects of power. Thus, interviews had two goals: getting access to dominant epistemes through the ways in which people reconstructed the past, and learning about alternative stories of the MLF from the standpoint of lesbian subjugated knowledges.

I interviewed roughly as many lesbian feminists who refused to politically identify as lesbians in the 1970s and 1980s as lesbian activists who strived to politicize lesbianism in those two decades (although I made sense of this distinction once the fieldwork was over). Since the schism within the MLF's radical current between feminism and political lesbianism did not oppose heterosexual feminists to lesbian feminists, but instead opposed lesbians and heterosexual women who wanted to exclusively identify as "women" to lesbians who wanted to be visible as "lesbians", I mostly interviewed lesbian women. Thus, among the twenty-four people I interviewed, eleven were lesbian activists who had sought to politicize lesbianism, either in the MLF's radical current in the 1970s (alongside Monique Wittig), or outside the MLF in autonomously organized lesbian collectives (often in connection with mixed homosexual groups), or in radical lesbian collectives in the early 1980s. The thirteen other interviewees (eleven lesbians, one heterosexual woman and one bisexual woman) were woman-identified MLF radical feminists who had opposed Wittig's epistemological rupture in 1980. Most of them had been born between the early 1940s and early 1950s and were

active in feminist groups and/or far-left organizations from 1970 onwards. Only two of my interviewees, born later, began participating in lesbian political activism in the late 1970s and early 1980s. To my knowledge, there were no lesbians of colour in the MLF radical and differentialist currents, or in the first lesbian groups (from 1975 to 1981), and therefore my sample is exclusively white (four of them referred to Jewish origins). As I discuss in the thesis, the whiteness of the 1970s feminist and lesbian pioneers and their lack of reflexivity on racial oppression are crucial for understanding the strategies of abjection with which they policed the boundaries of their political subjects (whether “women” or “lesbians”). Finally, almost all of them were of middle-class or upper-class origin (only two were from working-class backgrounds). They all went to university and have (or had, before retirement) middle-class, upper-middle-class or upper-class jobs as civil servants, university professors, schoolteachers, librarians, consultants, designers, psychologists, journalists or psychiatrists. “Famous” MLF figures (mostly woman-identified lesbians) were easy to identify: I knew who they were from the MLF archive, memoirs, documentaries on the MLF, and the MLF scholarship. Identifying lesbian activists (lesbian-identified lesbians) was a little more difficult insofar as they are not included in the MLF common knowledge: I identified the first ones in 1970s gay and lesbian archives (I also already knew some of them through personal networks), and then identified more of them during interviews. Since this project is not about providing a comprehensive representation of 1970s lesbian history but about discursive rationalities, I did most of the interviews in Paris. However, I went to Le Croisic (near Nantes) to interview a former Parisian MLF activist who lived there, and I did four interviews with women who participated in the women’s movement in Toulouse in order to check whether or not the terms in which knowledges were framed changed from one city to another. Historical meanings of identifications turned out to be articulated in the exact same ways for women who had campaigned in the MLF in Paris and for women who had campaigned in the MLF in Toulouse. For that reason, I did no further interviews outside Paris after those four in Toulouse. Interviews lasted around two to three-and-a-half hours each and mostly took place in the interviewees’ homes (sometimes in cafes), and they were all semi-structured.

I gathered two types of knowledges from the interviews: dominant and subjugated knowledges. First, I analysed my interviewees’ narratives not as reliable and objective representations of MLF history, but as texts or discourses that gave me access to dominant rationalities. In that sense, I used interview data for discursive analyses (Howarth 2000; LeGreco and Tracy 2009), following the ways in which social scientists such as Sanna Talja

have analysed interviews “at a macrosociologic level, as social texts” (1999: 460). Interviews were thus conceived as discursive events “in which social subjects retrospectively construct narratives in particular ways” (Howarth 2000: 140) and in which available frameworks are applied to a particular context with a view to making sense of it from a specific (often unacknowledged) location. In that sense, I took what they said as “open to interpretation, and their disclosures [...] as part of a larger process of reiteration, where identities are constantly reconstructed around very limited sets of meanings” (Boyd 2008: 180). From this perspective, the aim of interviews was not to extract a “truly accurate version of the participants’ action and belief” (Talja 1999: 464) but to see them as part of a knowledge formation forging social reality.

If reading against the grain gives access to the exclusionary assumptions of dominant ways of thinking, it does not explain how dominant discursive practices were materially deployed to prevent lesbians from creating lesbian groups, insofar as those controversies are nowhere recorded in the MLF archive (the first controversy which left archival traces is the one surrounding the emergence of radical lesbianism in 1980, which I consider the end of the story rather than the beginning). To reconstitute these buried controversies, I could not ask interviewees, for example, “why did you resist the creation of the Front lesbien international?” because they did not think they had resisted it (and neither did I when I was conducting the interviews). Instead, I asked for their own personal versions of MLF history and let them speak as much as they wanted: “can you tell me the history of the Gouines rouges?” “Can you tell me what happened in 1980 when radical lesbianism emerged in Paris?” “Can you tell me the history of the *Nouvelles questions féministes* lawsuit?” My questions were not oriented towards gathering empirical material, because their narrative reconstructions were themselves the objects of my investigation: it was *through* the ways they recounted histories that I could ultimately identify operations of power. It was through the ways they figured and remembered Wittig’s attitude as violent, for example, or interpreted the Gouines rouges’ meetings as exclusionary and infuriating, that I could identify unacknowledged hegemonic positions.

To the extent that I am interested in historically constituted discursive rationalities rather than in individuals’ positions, I decided to anonymize interviewees whose discursive practices I deconstruct as operations of power. As Hemmings explains: “[t]aking the authors out of the citation frame is [...] a way of focusing attention on repetition instead of individuality, and on

how collective repetition actively works to obscure the politics of its own production and reproduction" (2011: 22; see also Hughes 2004; Spivak 1999). I am not seeking to determine whether individuals I interviewed were right or wrong, good or bad, but to identify "narrative strands" as "collective knowledge production" (Hemmings 2011: 22) that produces and positions subjects differently within the force field of feminism. I also do not wish to point the finger at individuals, since I do not mean to overshadow the important actions and work they accomplished as feminists.

The second type of knowledge that I could extract by conducting interviews was the buried lesbian perspective on the official history of 1970s French feminism: the alternative genealogy that we can follow in Martine Laroche's photographs reproduced above, for instance. I do not reproduce this history in the thesis as an alternative lesbian narrative to dominant (feminist) ones, but instead I tried to understand how these lesbian activists' alternative trajectories could enable me to retrace the archaeology of the "putting into discourse" (Foucault 1984 [1976]: 12) of lesbianism, or more precisely, of a relation of power between lesbianism and heterosexuality within feminism. For example, I noted that three of the four radical lesbians I interviewed had participated in grassroots anti-rape collectives which promoted direct action and vigilantism against rapists. However, I retrace neither the history of lesbian participation in anti-rape activism nor the history of these collectives, but rather I seek to understand how the politicization of rape might have contributed to the politicization of heterosexuality in the context of French feminism. I also learnt during interviews that lesbians who had created one of the first lesbian groups, the Groupe lesbiennes de Paris (Lesbians from Paris Group) in 1978, came from far-left activism rather than radical feminism, and so I sought to understand how far-left activism had made it easier for French lesbians to politicize their lesbian identities than radical feminism had done. Finally, oral interviews were indispensable for gaining access to private archives. In cases where I feel it is important to name the interviewees I quote (in order to understand those alternative activist genealogies or to give them some credit), I have named them in brackets.

To finish this section on oral interviews, I would like to address the fact that the reason I felt drawn to doing interviews in the first place was because the project originally aimed to reconstitute an empirical history of lesbian activism in France in the 1970s and 1980s: I wanted to meet these activists and tell their stories. Although the project changed in the meantime – and along with it the ways in which I use oral interviews – it seems important to

me to acknowledge that this original pull to find a historical truth and retrieve a sense of transhistorical identity in the past was its driving force. If the thesis has ended up as a project that is critical towards identities and historical representation, it must I think be recognized that I would never have reached this point had I not felt the pull towards the very objects I ended up critiquing. In that regard, I do not think at all that oral history or attachments to identities should be abandoned (or denied) in order to do work in queer theory. In fact, I think that my visceral attachments to the objects queer theory critiques, rather than being antithetical to doing queer theory, were the very conditions that led me there. Perhaps, in these ambivalent investments, I have unwittingly developed a properly lesbian-queer reading position: one that thinks through and takes advantage of the contradictions between lesbian identity and queer critique, rather than trying to solve it. As Hemmings observes, “[f]eminist theory is filled with passion and with passionate attachments” (2011: 23; see also Sedgwick 2003), and it would be a mistake (if not a lie by omission) not to acknowledge the affective investments in identity politics and history that have informed my work in order to perhaps appear queerer than the queerest.

Chapter 2

The MLF Glass Closet: Abstract Feminism and Hysterical Lesbian Difference (1970–1973)

1. Women's Sameness and Lesbian Assimilation

The history of the MLF has often been boiled down to the history of – and opposition between – its two main currents: the materialist (or radical) feminists, represented by the group Féministes révolutionnaires (Revolutionary Feminists), and the differentialist women, represented by the group Psychoanalyse et politique (Psychoanalysis and Politics, also called Psychépo).²²

Rooted in Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist constructionism and in the Marxian conception of social categories as products of economic exploitation, the Féministes révolutionnaires grounded sex inequalities in domestic and sexual labour, thereby defining "women" (against orthodox Marxism) as a social class produced through antagonistic relations of power called "patriarchy". Much inspired by US radical feminism and the struggle for civil rights (Echols 1989), their materialist framework was first articulated in Monique Wittig, Gille Wittig, Marcia Rothenburg and Margaret Stephenson's manifesto "Fight for Woman's Liberation"²³ (Wittig et al. 2005 [1970]), and Christine Delphy's hallmark 1970 "The Main Enemy", published in a special double issue of the far-left journal *Partisans* entitled "Women's Liberation – Year Zero" and edited by MLF women (Dupont [Delphy] 1970).

²² A third and much less studied branch of the MLF called Lutte de classes (Class Struggle) emerged in 1971 (although it gained momentum mid-decade). Politically affiliated with far-left organizations, political parties and trade unions (mostly Trotskyist and Communist), the Lutte de classes feminists, unlike the Féministes révolutionnaires or Psychépo, refused to privilege women's struggle over the anti-capitalist struggle or to separate themselves from far-left organizations. Advocating what they called "double activism" (double militancy), they campaigned with men in far-left structures, and in non-mixed women's groups within those structures. I return to this tendency in more depth in the last archival chapter. In my view, this current has been marginalized from MLF historiographical narratives because it did not speak univocally in the name of second-wave feminism's proper subject, "women".

²³ The manifesto was published in the far-left newspaper *L'idiot international* under the title "Fight for Woman's Liberation", but had been submitted to the editor with the title "For a Women's Liberation Movement". Although it was signed collectively, Monique Wittig wrote the full manifesto (Shaktini 2005: 15).

If for the Féministes révolutionnaires the coherence of the political subject “women” was underwritten by a shared economic and political oppression rather than by a pre-social identity, for Psychépo it was the opposite: the goal of a women’s movement was “to make a subject woman emerge” (Fouque 2008: 13) by fostering and valorizing feminine qualities bound to women’s reproductive power. Psychépo’s positions were grounded in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, and the group was especially close to Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray.²⁴ According to Psychépo, the phallogocentric economy could be subverted through the expression of the feminine as a figure of symbolic difference anchored in the pre-Oedipal, which Irigaray later called a “speaking (as) woman” (1985 [1977]: 135). Unlike the Féministes révolutionnaires, who proudly called themselves “feminists” in order to insist on the political nature of their collective identification with the category “women”, Psychépo, led by the charismatic Antoinette Fouque (then a doctoral student under the supervision of Roland Barthes), firmly refused the appellation “feminist”. For them, feminism sought to integrate and assimilate women into the phallogocentric order, and it was thus seen as “one of the last pillars of patriarchy [, its] last historically known metaphor” (Fouque 2007: 104, my translation; Spivak 1981; Vinken 1995). While the Féministes révolutionnaires privileged spectacular and subversive happenings and demonstrations, Psychépo favoured a collective and intimate long-term endeavour, a “taking up of one’s speech, of one’s consciousness, of one’s body, [an] analysis of our contradictions and of the unconscious” (Anon. 1972 in Bernheim et al. 2009: 157, my translation), whereby orality and introspection prevailed over writing and political action in the outside world.²⁵

Yet, although MLF historian Audrey Lasserre contends that the “opposition” and “confrontation” between these two groups “structure the history of the decade” (2014: 95, my translation), I suggest instead that the insistence on the theoretical and political rift between the Féministes révolutionnaires and Psychépo in MLF historiographical narratives has had the effect of concealing a crucial common trait between materialist feminists and differentialist

²⁴ In 1970 and 1971, Antoinette Fouque and other women from Psychépo taught a seminar on psychoanalysis at Paris 8 University at the invitation of Luce Irigaray. Irigaray and Psychépo violently split in late 1974. Hélène Cixous remained closely affiliated with Psychépo throughout the decade. Julia Kristeva, although close to Fouque, never identified with the MLF. For a detailed account of the relationships among Psychépo, Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva, see Costello (2016: 98–106).

²⁵ On the history of Psychépo, see Costello (2016), Fouque (2008), Garcia Guadilla (1981), Lasserre (2014), Moses (1998), Pavard (2005), Picq (1993, 2011), Robcis (2013) and Tristan and de Pisan (1977).

women: their shared female universalism. Hence I argue that, despite their strong anti-nationalist and anti-institutional stances, they both invariably enacted a “mythologized restatement of the principles of 1789” (J. Scott 2004: 33) from the perspective of the nation’s missing female people, symbolically crafting a female subject on the political model of the French citizen.

The MLF’s Female Individual

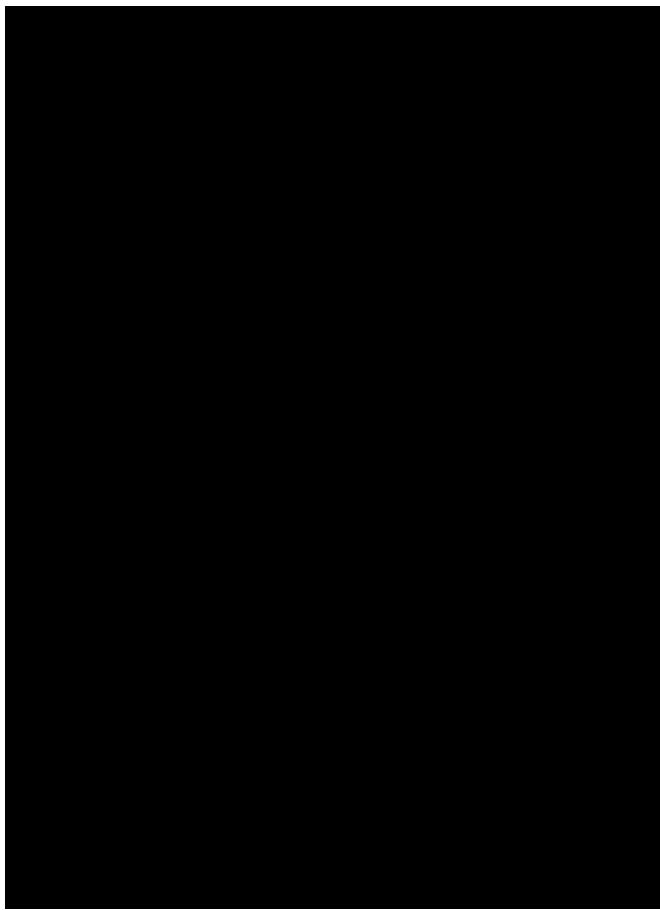


Figure 23. Front cover of *Le torchon brûle*, issue 0 (insert, L'idiot liberté, 1, December 1970).

“1 billion ½” inscribed in the bottom left-hand corner of a page covered with a multitude of colour-shaded faces, uniformly outlined and recognizable as “women”: this is the cover of issue “zero” of the MLF’s first newspaper, *Le torchon brûle* (see Figure 23).²⁶ Given that the

²⁶ The expression “le torchon brûle” has several meanings: it literally means both “the tea towel is burning” and “the rag is burning”, and it is also an idiomatic expression meaning that a heated situation is hotting up. Articles from all MLF currents were published in *Le torchon brûle*. On the history of *Le torchon brûle*, see Bonnet (2018), Kandel (1979, 1980), Laroche and Larrouy (2009), Lasserre (2014), Lhomond (1978) and Picq (1993, 2011).

world population was estimated at three billion people in 1970, the message was clear: women constitute a whole made up of similar units whose coherence is achieved as half of humanity. This representation of women as forming an abstract and universal community is directly informed by the French assimilationist model of citizenship, known as abstract universalism:

[E]quality is achieved, in French political theory, by making one's social, religious, ethnic, and other origins irrelevant in the public sphere; it is as an abstract individual that one becomes a French citizen. Universalism – the oneness, the sameness of all individuals – is taken to be the antithesis of communalism (Scott 2007: 11).

The abstract individual on whom political rights were bestowed at the time of the 1789 French Revolution, when this model of citizenship was devised, was founded on a paradox, famously articulated by Joan W. Scott in *Only Paradoxes to Offer*: that of “equat[ing] individuality with masculinity” (Scott 1996: 5).²⁷ As Scott clearly summarizes in a later article, women were excluded from abstract individuality on the grounds that sexual difference was deemed too natural, too “irreducible” to be amenable for integration in the undifferentiated national community:

The difference of sex was not considered to be susceptible to abstraction; it was irreducible, symbolic of a fundamental division or antagonism that could not be reconciled with the notion of an indivisible nation. [...S]exual difference stood for difference itself [...]. Not just any difference, but one so primary, so rooted in nature, so visible that it could not be subsumed by abstraction (J. Scott 2004: 35).

Thus, at the roots of French abstract universalism there lies a fundamental paradox: the individual prototype that claimed to be universal was regulated along political lines which ruled women out (along with slaves and wage earners). Conceived as lacking autonomy and the capacity to reason (the conditions for being an individual), women were unassimilable to individuality and therefore unable to represent themselves. When slaves and wage earners

²⁷ On the exclusions of French universalism, see also Bereni (2015), Bereni and Lépinard (2004), Fassin and Fassin (2006), Fraisse (1994 [1989]), Guénif-Souilamas (2006), Laborde (2008), Larcher (2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2018), Lépinard (2007b), Perreau and Scott (2017), Schor (1995, 2001), Scott (2004, 2005, 2007) and Sénac (2017).

were enfranchised in 1848, women remained unassimilable to the nation: the universalism of sexual difference prevailed over the universalism of the French Republic's abstract individual. This founding exclusion from universalism, according to Joan W. Scott, was the paradoxical condition of the birth of feminism in France (1996).

It is to the paradox of women's exclusion from the individualist standard of the citizen, I argue, that the cover of issue "zero" of *Le torchon brûle* directly responds. To comply with the constraints of French abstract universalism, which granted rights and equality to individuals as undifferentiated abstract beings rather than as members of groups, 1970s feminists strove for women's equality not in the name of a particular group (among others) with particular interests (which would have been seen as betraying the unity of the nation), but as *another* – hence, female – abstract individual, thereby *sexing* the (masculine) French abstract individual as its forgotten "other" half. It was therefore by way of a *female reiteration* of the abstract nature of the French Republic's individual that MLF activists sought to figure "women": as abstract beings all similar to one another. Correspondingly, the colour-shading of half of the faces on the cover of issue "zero" of *Le torchon brûle*, indicating variations of skin colour, does not alter the faces' uniform pattern: women of colour are not represented as members of a racial group but are assimilated in the name of a universal femaleness which they share with 1.5 billion other female human beings. The Coordination des femmes noires (Coordination of Black Women) – which was created in 1976 and was the only Black women's group in the 1970s – organized a Black Women's Day on 29 November 1977 to insist on the "triple oppression" of women from "the colonies [and] the neocolonies" as "women, as a class, as a race" (Coordination des femmes noires n. d. in Schieweck 2011: 14, my translation); one participant recalled afterwards that white feminists attending the event "were eager to keep repeating, all afternoon, 'white and black men, they're the same... All women suffer the same oppression'" (Anon. 1977–1978: 41, my translation).

This process of abstracting women's differences into a singular female individual is further exemplified in the following quote from the same issue "zero" of *Le torchon brûle*:

Let's each of us, today, now, be a whole individual: no longer fragments, no longer women's essence (femininity) [...]: let them meet blocks only. I came to create a block with you. I came here to turn myself into a stone (Anon. 1970: 19, my translation).

The conception of the French nation as “one and indivisible”, harking back to the 1793 French Constitution, is echoed in the conception of the MLF as forming a “whole individual”, metaphorized through the image of a block of stone whose “fragments” – arguably referring to women’s differences – are envisioned as undermining its unity. Similarly, in a text from *Partisans*’ special issue on the MLF, a group of anonymous activists elaborate a “strategy for struggle” introduced with the following instructions: “Let’s start any analysis, any action, from ‘us’, since we suffer the same oppression. Don’t let us be divided; we will liberate ourselves all together or not at all” (Quelques militantes 1970: 144, my translation). No other traits – social, economic, racial, religious or sexual – mattered apart from their shared femaleness. Modelled on the French nation, MLF women were a collectivity made of “commensurable and interchangeable units” (J. Scott 2004: 34). As such, feminists in the 1970s responded to the paradoxes of abstract universalism in the very language of abstract universalism. As American feminist theorist Naomi Schor remarks: “it is one of the foundational paradoxes of post-Revolutionary France that those left out of the universalist compact readily enlisted the very principles of the Declaration [of the Rights of Man] to press their own claims” (2001: 47).²⁸

²⁸ Although women were granted the vote in 1944, the issue of their inclusion in the nation was not resolved. Inequalities between men and women persisted, and political representation remained overwhelmingly male: the irreducibility of women’s sexual difference remained an obstacle to full equality with men (Scott 1996: 161–175; Scott 2005). Although 1970s feminists did not address the issue of women’s political representation – especially because their revolutionary stances were resolutely anti-institutional – I argue that it was nevertheless on the basis of the French abstract conception of political subjectivity that they imagined themselves. Hence, I also contend that the symbolic representation of women as “half of the sovereign people, half of the human race” (Gaspard et al. 1992: 166) is not specific to the feminist campaign in favour of parity (parité) of political representation from 1992 onwards, or of the consolidation of Republican ideology in the 1990s, as scholars have argued (Lépinard 2007a, 2007b; Scott 2004, 2005). Both 1970s revolutionary discourses and 1990s pro-parity discourses were framed within the terms of abstract universalism, although less explicitly so in the 1970s. Interestingly, in the same way that radical feminists and differentialist women, despite their theoretical incompatibilities, converged in light of their shared promotion of a female sovereign individual in the 1970s, feminists from both theoretical backgrounds supported parity in the 1990s despite starting from antithetical premises: some defended parity in the sense of affirmative action (Gaspard et al. 1992), while others did so in the name of a sexual complementarity founded in nature (Agacinski 1998). The parity campaign was arguably the most unified feminist struggle of the 1990s. On parity, see Bereni (2015), Bereni and Lépinard (2003, 2004), Lépinard (2007a, 2007b, 2013), Schor (2001), Scott (2004, 2005) and Sénac (2008, 2015, 2017).

However, the device of an abstract individual standing for a plural constituency is itself fraught with paradoxes. As Scott argues, an irreducible contradiction lies at the heart of the liberal notion of the abstract individual insofar as it is both singular and plural, defining at once the “endless variety” (Scott 1996: 6) of human beings and a prototypical human being. This tension between the plural and the singular is conveyed particularly well in the following excerpt from *Le torchon brûle*:

We want all to women say: we [...] We want to be single, divorced, remarried, pregnant, to have had abortions or be homosexual, without it being a professional handicap or a social defect. [...] For all these reasons we have come together in a women’s liberation movement. There are 27 million of us. We represent, united, a force capable of radically changing our situation (Anon. 1971a: 6, my translation).

In this quote, the movement from plurality to singular abstraction is discursively produced through the insistence on the irreducible plurality of women in the first half of the quote (“We want to be single, divorced, remarried, pregnant, to have had abortions or be homosexual”) followed by the unification and fusion of this plurality into a “united [...] force” made up of “27 million” women – half of France’s population. In between the insistence on the internal variety of the constituency of women and the fusion of this multitude into a unified subject appears the reference to the women’s liberation movement where this multiplicity of women has “come together”. It is thus *in* and *through* the women’s liberation movement that the dialectical transformation from plurality to singularity was thought to operate and the tension between plurality and singularity resolved. In a 1996 interview, Marie-Jo Bonnet, a core member of the Féministes révolutionnaires, defined “this ‘we, women’” as a “crucible of identity [creuset identitaire] in which all of our former identities as wives, mothers, heterosexuals or homosexuals melted” (in Mulheisen 1996: 43, my translation). The use of the term “crucible” (creuset) is highly significant insofar as it has primarily been used in France since the nineteenth century to refer to the “Republican crucible” (creuset républicain), a metaphor exemplifying the French assimilationist mission carried out by institutions such as schools or the army, where “differences [are] contained and transformed into Frenchness” (Scott 2007: 99). Thus, the MLF was a *feminist* crucible performing for women the role that the nation performs for its citizens: it not only promoted assimilation, but it was also the metapolitical site where differences between women “melted” (to use Bonnet’s word), dialectically transforming the endless diversity of women into equally similar subjects ready

to be (symbolically) incorporated into the nation. Hence, on the model of the French nation and its Enlightenment principles, the MLF was an active technology of assimilation that eradicated differences among women, and its feminist community of women was a female repetition of the national community.²⁹

The assimilative function of the MLF in regard to women's differences was especially effected, I argue, through performative feelings of ecstatic joy, which produced the myth of women's (recovered) unity. The rediscovery of women's sameness through the workings of the MLF's crucible created the fiction of a prehistoric (as in pre-MLF) state of dispersion that legitimized and naturalized in the present the coherence of the abstract community of women. As the MLF anthem, written in January 1971 by both radical and differentialist women, declaims:

Each alone in our misfortune, women
Ignorant of each other
They have divided us, women
And separated us from our sisters [...]
Let us know our strength, women
Let's discover our thousands! (Anon. 1971 in Fouque 2008: 456, my translation).

The MLF is seen as uniting women after a dark age of division. Commenting on her participation in a women's strike in Troyes in 1971, one female worker linked the ending of differences among women to feelings of radical joy: "[t]here are no longer any differences between us [...] and I think that's marvellous" (Anon. 1971 in Bernheim et al. 2009: 118, my translation). In this context, laying claim to one's own difference would have been read not only as a sinful fragmentation of the MLF's abstract unity, but also as a backwards gesture interrupting these feelings of "radical happiness" (Segal 2017) and bringing back into the united present a state of abjected dispersion, which had itself been mythically created to sustain the self-legitimizing claims of women's sameness.

²⁹ Similarly, we could argue that anonymous collective signatures such as "A group of women", "some women" or "MLF Everywhere!", which appeared in all early MLF publications, not only expressed an anarchist refusal of leadership and a feminist refusal of patriarchal patronyms (Bernheim 2010 [1983]: 133–134), but were also the textual means by which the transformation from the plural to the singular operated.

On 26 August 1970, ten women laid a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris in honour of the one who is “more unknown than the unknown soldier: his wife”, thereby publicly launching what the media the following day called “the woman’s liberation movement” in echo of the American movement (see Figure 24).³⁰ More than half of those ten women were lesbian. However, in the MLF, the lesbian word was unspoken: “[i]n France lesbians never really appeared as such, and yet the MLF was almost entirely led by lesbians. That’s the paradox”, remarks one MLF lesbian activist (Fauret in Arnal 1981: 36, my translation). Liliane Kandel, a core participant in the Féministes révolutionnaires, explains why: “[i]t would never have occurred to anyone to introduce herself in a meeting by saying: As a homosexual, I... You couldn’t say that. We were all women” (interview in Bard 2004: 114, my translation).

³⁰ The protest took place on 26 August 1970 as a mark of solidarity with the first nationwide demonstration and strike by American feminists in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of women’s suffrage in the US. The participants in the action were Cathy Bernheim, Monique Bourroux, Julie Dassin, Christine Delphy, Emmanuèle de Lesseps, Christiane Rochefort, Janine Sert, Margaret Stephenson (Namascar Shaktini), Monique Wittig and Anne Zelensky (Deudon 2003: 5; Shaktini 2005: 4). As Françoise Vergès rightly notes, the choice of the Arc de Triomphe – a monument commissioned by Napoleon I in 1806, inaugurated in 1836 by King Louis Philippe and dedicated to “the armies of the Revolution and the Empire” – is illustrative of the “cartography of Republican coloniality” (2017: 170) and of the national myths in which the MLF inscribed itself: “their gesture traced [...] the space of their struggles – Metropolitan France and the Nation – and a temporality – national history” (2017: 195, my translation). Brief archival footage of the Arc de Triomphe action (showing the activists’ arrests by the police) is available on the website of the Institut national de l’audiovisuel (National Audiovisual Institute) at: <http://fresques.ina.fr/elles-centrepompidou/fiche-media/ArtFem00101/depot-d-une-gerbe-a-la-femme-du-soldat-inconnu.html> (last accessed: 15 April 2018). For a fuller account of the protest, see Bard (2010), Bernheim (2010 [1983]), Delphy (1991), Flamant (2007), Lasserre (2014: 66–74) and Picq (2011: 19–20). Fouque did not participate in this action because she considered public and media-covered actions antithetical to her vision of the feminine symbolic revolution.

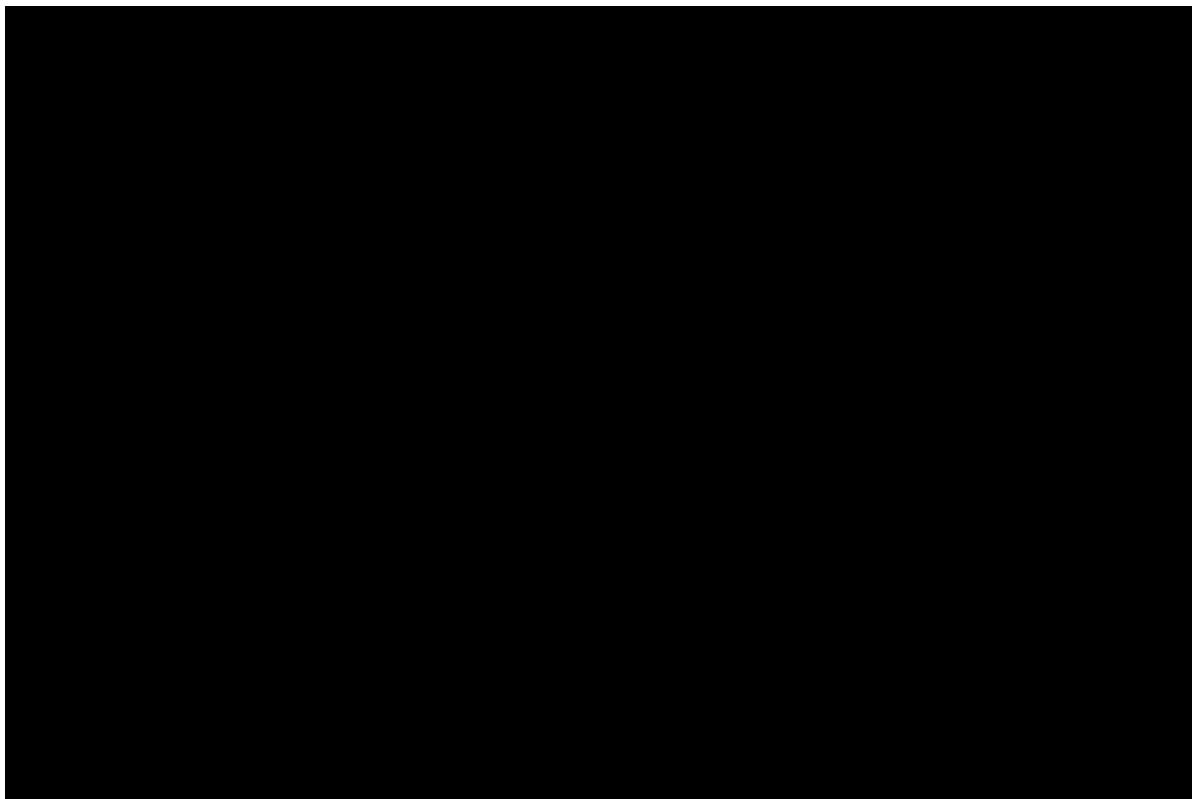


Figure 24. Feminist demonstration at the Arc de Triomphe. Police officers attempt to stop the demonstrators. Carrying the wreath at the front is Christine Delphy. Carrying the banner to the right is Monique Wittig. Paris, 26 August 1970. Photographer: AFP.

Indeed, as I have explained above, assimilative inclusion in the MLF was rested on one's exclusive affiliation to "women". Thus, just as Frenchness cannot abide affiliations to particular groups (which are seen as dividing the abstract unity of the nation), lesbians could only be represented in the MLF to the extent that they relinquished their lesbian "particularity" and exclusively identified as "women". For Cathy Bernheim (writing under the pseudonym Catherine Crachat), a pioneering member of the Féministes révolutionnaires and later of the first lesbian MLF collective the Gouines rouges, a lesbian is "a woman marked 'lesbian'" (Crachat 1975: 1833, my translation): lesbianism is conceived, within her liberal/humanist framework, as "'stigmata', a 'tag' that one wears" (Butler 1994: 24), under which lies a benign female person-unit who *is*, prior to power and the acquisition of attributes.

Thus, Beauvoir's figuration of *two* female homosexual subjects in the chapter "The Lesbian" in *The Second Sex* – one who lives her homosexuality as a love for sameness in "lucidity, generosity, and freedom" (1997 [1949]: 444), the other one who, "play[ing] [...] at being a man" (443), is "imprisoned in [the character] of the lesbian" and lives in "bad faith, laziness,

and falsity” (444) – became tantamount in the MLF to a distinction between the lesbian who identified as a woman *only* and the lesbian who, pleading allegiance to her lesbian particularity, was seen as betraying the MLF’s generality by introducing backwards differences among women. One of the pioneers of Féministes révolutionnaires accurately conveyed this distinctly French conception of lesbians’ emancipation *as women* and *from* their lesbian particularity through the MLF’s universality in the interview I conducted with her:

I think that the extraordinary power of the MLF has been to break down identities [...] and in particular, to release girls who were lesbian in the movement, who were categorized, even self-categorized, stigmatized, relegated as lesbians to specific places, who had the experience of lesbian nightclubs... All of a sudden, to *release* them from that... Precisely, to rid them of their lesbian identity so as to make them into women in movement... (speaker’s emphasis, my translation).

In contrast to free “women in movement” emancipated through the MLF’s universalism, lesbians who cling to their lesbian “particularity” (who identify as lesbians) are conceived as imprisoned in the pre-political and segregated space of their difference: “lesbian nightclubs” (“nightclub” translates as “box” in French: “boîte”). The Republican distinction between free abstract individuality and backwards differences (or particularities) was thus reproduced in the MLF through the distinction between independent and unmarked “women in movement” and retrograde lesbians alienated by their gesture of community attachment.

Lesbians’ “release” from the “stigmatized” and “relegated” space of their difference – to use the interviewee’s vocabulary – into the enlightened and indivisible MLF is consistently signified through the national-colonial language of a journey from darkness to light. In that regard, the backwards space of lesbian difference is always signified through the racialized trope of the “ghetto”, most often with reference to lesbian nightclubs (“boxes” – “boîtes”). The following testimony from Psychépo’s newspaper *Des femmes en mouvements hebdo* (Women in Movement Weekly) is a case in point:

From a ghettorized (sic), capitalized, integrated between-women of the “nightclubs”, where it was still a matter of living only by night, confined, I was perceptibly moving into daylight in a political between-women where my particular and collective story as

a woman was ceaselessly inscribed positively and tenderly, in bodies and words (Dany 1980: 11, my translation).

In a similar vein, a contributor to *F Magazine*, a liberal feminist magazine created in 1978, contrasts the “happiness of being together, among women” in the women’s movement, where “we were not ‘homo’ or ‘hetero’, we were women”, with “the homosexual ghetto, hidden places, places ‘for us’” (Anon. in Perrein 1979: 52–53, my translation). The Féministes révolutionnaires, Psychépo and liberal feminists alike articulated their discourses on the same rationality, based on national-colonial Enlightenment principles: lesbians’ emancipation from the lesbian “ghetto” and through the women’s movement rested on their political transmutation from (particular) lesbians into (universal) women.

For the lesbian radical feminist Catherine Deudon, the “[lesbian] nightclub *in the old days, before the movement*, was one of the few places for homosexual [...] socializing” (Deudon 1981: 83, my emphasis and my translation). Using the exact same terms, a contributor to the differentialist magazine *Des femmes en mouvement hebdo* writes that “lesbianism” was that into which “many homosexual women were forced *before the movement*” (Anon. 1980a: 22, my emphasis and my translation). Addressing the consubstantial relations between Western modernity and colonial rule, Judith Butler describes progress narratives as a technique of modernity: “hegemonic conceptions of progress define themselves over and against a pre-modern temporality that they produce for the purposes of their own self-legitimation” (2008: 1).³¹ Indeed, the new space-and-time of the MLF – that of “women” – legitimized itself as “modern” through the production of a pre-modern and pre-feminist lesbian temporality (“in the old days, before the movement”) in which the lesbian was foundationally posed as anachronistic to the women’s movement. In this context, the sign “lesbian” became a repellent relic sutured backwards to a shameful past that had allegedly been superseded by lesbians’ new affiliation to (universal/modern) “women”. The out-of-joint reactivation of the obsolete sign “lesbian” in the glorious time of “women” must have sounded like the backwards (and scary) voice of the living dead speaking in a bygone language, albeit one only

³¹ On progress narratives as a self-legitimizing technique of modernity, see also Chakrabarty (2000, 2002), D’Emilio and Freedman (1988), Freeman (2010), Grewal and Kaplan (1994), Hoad (2000), Love (2007), Narayan (1997), Narayan and Harding (2000), Rao (2010, 2014) and Spivak (1987, 1999).

recently forgotten.³²

Yet, an important question remains: why were lesbians themselves deploying the figure of the lesbian as pre-modern? If the re-enactment of French universalist principles, and of the national-colonial temporality of progress through which these principles had been devised, was an effect of the discursive practices in which their feminist agency was produced,³³ it is also crucial to understand lesbians' willingness to transmute into "women" and relinquish their lesbian particularity on the level of affect. As historian Christine Bard rightly remarks: "[r]elief at being, 'simply', women: this was the feeling of homosexuals who became feminists" (Bard 2003: 191, my translation). Indeed, the MLF's radical happiness pertaining to women's collective rebirth as "all sisters" (Des militantes du Mouvement de Libération des femmes et du Comité Liberté 1970, my translation) stood in stark contrast with the life experiences of lesbian pioneers before the movement.

Although "unnatural acts" (namely, the crime of sodomy) had been decriminalized in 1791, the collaborationist Vichy regime's Law of 6 August 1942, which prohibited same-sex relations where one of the partners was under twenty-one (the age of consent was thirteen for heterosexual relations), was confirmed after the Liberation by General de Gaulle's provisional government and only repealed in 1982. Moreover, the Mirgues Amendment passed by parliament on 18 July 1960 (named after the Gaullist member of parliament who proposed it) defined homosexuality as a "social scourge" alongside tuberculosis and alcoholism (and therefore authorized the government to prevent its "spread", for reasons of public health) and increased the penalties for "public indecency", under the terms of which homosexuals could be harassed and prosecuted.³⁴ Although these laws primarily targeted gay men, they created a

³² French lesbians' repudiation of a sense of lesbian belonging in the MLF can also be inscribed in the longer history of homosexuality in France. French historian Florence Tamagne explains that the absence of homosexual organizations in the interwar period in France, in contrast to countries such as Germany or Britain, resulted from the French Revolution's individualist ideology and the legal tolerance it offered to homosexuals (Tamagne 2000: 138). On the history of the French Republic's "elastic closet", which was at once protective and restraining for homosexuals, see Scott (2009).

³³ I return to the colonial and racial valence of the backwards time-space of lesbian difference in the next section.

³⁴ On the history of the criminalization and decriminalization of homosexuality in France, see Callwood (2017), Guérin (1959), Idier (2013), Jackson (2009a), Martel (1999), Mossuz-Lavau (1991), Perreau (2016), Scott (2009), Sibalis (2002), Sidéris (2000) and Shepard (2017a).

climate of fear and shame which consolidated the long-standing association of same-sex desire with contagion and moral decay (Perreau 2016): “we were not at all sure ourselves that homosexuality was not a disease”, wrote an anonymous contributor to the Brussels-based francophone feminist journal *Les cahiers du GRIF* (Ixé 1978: 62, my translation).

Almost all of the pre-MLF life stories that I heard during interviews with MLF lesbian pioneers or read in the archive involved traumatic experiences of rejection and pathologization, along with self-loathing, depression, shame, humiliation, sorrow and suicidal thoughts. These affects, which record the psychic costs of social exclusion and homophobia, constitute a pre-MLF “archive of lesbian feelings” – to borrow Anne Cvetkovich potent concept (Cvetkovich 2003: 239). For these feminist pioneers, lesbianism was considered irredeemable. The following testimony, also published in *Le torchon brûle*, is one example among many of the “insidious trauma” (Cvetkovich 2003: 44) of lesbian lives and the “ruined or failed sociability” (Love 2007: 22) that characterized them:

My life: all these silences: silences as a kid, silence as a woman, silence as a homosexual. [...] I thought for a long time that I belonged to nothing, that I was difference itself, that I could not talk or struggle with anyone [...] I have been sliced, cut up, broken into pieces, all silently. I have been gagged, I have been silenced, I have been crushed, all legally (Anon. 1971b: 9, my translation).

It is thus in this particular affective context that we ought to understand lesbians’ excitement and often messianic language about their shared renaissance as “women” in the MLF: after they had been exiled from womanhood as lesbians, the women’s movement made them *re-become* women; after they had been traumatically stigmatized as deviant, the MLF’s insistence on sameness made them *un-become* different; after they had been historically encoded as a drag on the march of progress (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Freeman 2010; Hoad 2000; Love 2007), they were finally entering the modern social order through the breach opened by feminism’s timely historicity. The MLF’s crucible was therefore, for lesbians, not only a political crucible erasing (traumatic) differences, but also an *affective* crucible: from the shame of being called “dirty dykes” or “tomboys”, lesbians suddenly became proud “women in revolt” (Anon. 1971c: 3, my translation). By developing “in the darkroom of liberation” the “negative” of the sorrowful lesbian “into a photograph” of a heroic rebellious woman – to borrow Heather Love’s metaphor (2007: 20) – the MLF’s

female universalism transvalued the negative structure of lesbian feelings into a positive structure of women's feelings, turning lesbian shame into women's pride, lesbian secrecy into women's visibility and lesbian loneliness into women's solidarity. In 1970, thanks to the MLF, lesbians had *finally* and with a great sigh of relief *become women*. When I asked one of the Féministes révolutionnaires who is herself a lesbian what Monique Wittig's well-known phrase "lesbians are not women" (1992 [1980]: 32) evoked for her, she responded: "I am a woman, in fact it was the MLF that made me a woman!" (my translation) Indeed, for some, assimilation can feel liberating – and even more than liberating, it can be healing. "Becoming" a woman chased queer traumas away.

Yet, if lesbians no longer felt different after relinquishing their lesbian affiliation, this was because there were no other differences between them and the "other" women to impede their transmutation. The condition for lesbians to "fully adher[e] to the 'we women' that appeared before [their] delighted eyes" (Bonnet 2014: 22, my translation) was an unstated racial regime that enabled them, as white lesbians, to assimilate with the MLF's modern temporality and "women"'s positive semiology. Indeed, the nation's abstract individual, into which 1970s feminists sought to incorporate women, was not only (implicitly) masculine, but also white and colonial: at the heart of the Republic's universalist promise lay the paradox of the French empire and of a legal distinction between French citizens (ruled by the Constitution) and natives of the colonies (ruled by the Code of the Indigenate).³⁵

If 1970s white feminists questioned the masculine bias of French abstract selfhood, they left its racialization entirely unquestioned. This point is brilliantly addressed by political theorist Françoise Vergès in *Le ventre des femmes* (Women's Wombs), a study of the forced abortion and sterilization policies implemented by the French state in the 1960s and 1970s on the island of Réunion. Vergès argues that MLF women's "blindness" (2017: 167, my translation) to this contrapuntal history, which was occurring at the same time as they were demanding free abortion in the name of "all women", is the epitome of the "Republican coloniality" (14) in which the MLF was forged. Therefore, the alleged female neutrality (or generality) with which lesbians sought to assimilate by (politically) un-becoming lesbians and being reborn as

³⁵ Analyses of the coloniality of French universalism include Bancel et al. (2005), Conklin (1997), Dorlin (2006), Girardet (1972), Hajjat (2012), Katz (2015), Khanna (2008), Larcher (2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c), Larcher and Germain (2018), Shepard (2006), Spire (2003), Vergès (2017) and Wilder (2005).

women was always already structured through the naturalization of their whiteness and the unthinkable of racial difference. This unchallenged whiteness explains why the racialized spatialization of lesbian difference as a lesbian “ghetto”, with its racist underpinnings, could discursively work to undermine lesbian identifications.

Born in Casablanca, and raised in Morocco and the Ivory Coast as the child of white settlers, Anne Zelensky was a pioneering radical feminist and one of the ten women who laid a wreath in honour of the wife of the Unknown Soldier in August 1970. Her autobiography, published in the successful book *Histoires du M.L.F.* (MLF Histories) in 1977 (and prestigiously prefaced by Simone de Beauvoir), is a case in point of the colonial modernity within which metropolitan French feminism was articulated. In Zelensky’s account, the entire continent of Africa is portrayed as a wild and mysterious *terra incognita*, a dark continent whose nights are “populated by frightening cries and noises” (1977: 17, my translation). It is in relation to this allegedly unrestrained environment outside modern civilization that she situates her emancipated feminist self:

My particular education in Africa had contributed [to my feminism]. [...] A rather wild childhood, liberated from the constraints of school, where I had learned a lot and in a short time with my father, with Blacks, and with animals. A childhood which explains this “external” gaze that I bring to bear on our civilization, this profound preference for independence, and the desire to have my own opinion about everything. With hindsight, I can gauge the determining character for me of this conditioning (1977: 21, my translation).

By discursively foreclosing “Africa” as “external” to “civilization”, Zelensky establishes her own sovereign sense of feminist selfhood in France. Building on postcolonial theorist Ranjana Khanna’s analysis of the psychic life of French colonialism, I argue that it is by drawing on this national-colonial “strife”, through which “some are spoken into existence” (or “worlded”) and “others” “concealed” (or “earthed”) (Khanna 2003: 4) as an “underside” (2), that white lesbians can transmute into white women, while (white) lesbians who cling to their lesbian particularity are conceived, along with non-Western women, as lagging behind the feminist struggle.

Yet if we follow the famous Law of Conservation elaborated by French chemist Antoine

Lavoisier (1743–1794) – “nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed” – and refuse to admit that differences magically “melted” (Bonnet in Mulheisen 1996: 43) in the operation of the MLF’s crucible, then what exactly became of lesbian difference in the MLF’s assimilationist rationality?

Women’s Love and the MLF’s “Miracle of the Mirror”

A curious paradox lies at the heart of the MLF: while lesbians were assimilated as “women”, “homosexuality” (unlike “lesbianism”) was simultaneously generalized to all women. In other words, while lesbians “became” women, all women in turn “became” homosexual. Thus, while the “lesbian” sign almost entirely disappeared, it morphed into the new “homosexual” sign (homosexuelle). As contradictory as it may seem at first sight, I argue that the generalization of homosexuality, while claiming to liberate homosexuality, sought precisely to erase lesbianism as a difference among women while concealing the heterosexual norm from which the universalization of female homosexuality – as a chaste version of lesbianism – was deployed. Indeed, if lesbianism was tantamount to a “ghettoized” betrayal of feminist unity, homosexuality was compatible with it insofar as it was defined as sisterhood: a love of women for women, with which all women could potentially align themselves. This peculiar homosexuality, blurring the lines between reality and fantasy, tenderness and sexuality, is eloquently described in an article on sisterhood from the radical feminist journal *La revue d’en face*:

[Sisterhood] was a new relationship between women [...]. Sisterhood was becoming a little incestuous, because the relationship that we were inventing aimed to be the bearer in broad daylight of something like homosexuality, a variable, diffuse, barely outlined part [...]. Of course, sisterhood was not homosexuality. It was blurrier, more distant, but not alien to that desire. [...] [U]nprecedented complicities were born, full of humour and tenderness, and for that matter of a good dose of narcissism as well [...]. Familial sisterly relationships are loving relationships, not lovers’ relationships (Marie-Jo 1978: 38–40, my translation).

The association of sisterhood’s homoeroticism with an “incestuous” and “narcissistic” relationship is strikingly reminiscent of Psychépo’s core idea, according to which the function of the women’s movement was to reactivate the original mother-daughter relationship, which

Antoinette Fouque defined as the locus of a “naïve” or “native” homosexuality (in Marlhiac 1982: 12). According to her, the MLF was meant to make this primary love relationship, which had been foreclosed by the phallogocentric symbolic order, re-emerge through women’s symbiosis:

What is a homosexual woman, deep down? It is a woman whose object of love – or desire – is another woman. If we take this minimal definition, we see that every woman has had in her life, at one time, a woman as love object: the mother, or rather the first woman (Fouque in Marlhiac 1982: 12, my translation).

In redefining homosexuality as a generalized love for the mother or women in general, as “a loving relationship” rather than “a lovers’ relationship”, these discourses on sisterhood (or women’s love) deterritorialize homosexuality as a sexual, social and cultural difference and redefine it as a subversive (and regressive) drive binding all women together through the cultivation of their sameness. For Psychépo, the MLF was a “‘homosexual’ place” whose homosexuality did not have to be sexual in the narrow sense: “it made possible the circulation of jouissance and love among us women” (Anon. 1980b: 28, my translation).

More than just an erasure of differences of sexuality among women, the universalization of homosexual desire was the key mechanism by which an abstract female individual was brought into being. Indeed, homosexual desire became an affective drive conceived as erasing *all* differences among women, not just differences of sexuality. In that sense, the MLF’s theorization of homosexuality was tantamount to Simone de Beauvoir’s view of female homosexuality in *The Second Sex* as accomplishing the “miracle of the mirror”:

It is only when [a woman’s] fingers trace the body of a woman whose fingers in turn trace her body that the miracle of the mirror is accomplished. [...] Between women love is contemplative; caresses are intended less to gain possession of the other than gradually to re-create the self through her; separatedness is abolished, there is no struggle, no victory, no defeat; in exact reciprocity each is at once subject and object, sovereign and slave; duality becomes mutuality (de Beauvoir 1997 [1949]: 436).

By allegedly abolishing differences among women and creating an “exact reciprocity” in which “duality becomes mutuality”, the (desexualizing) transformation of lesbianism into a

universal homoeroticism *realizes* the assimilatory function of the MLF's crucible: “[t]his shared emotion, these crossed deserts, this brutal deconditioning of affective automatisms, in a word this revelation of the active power of desire *united the feminist collective from within*”, comments radical feminist Marie-Jo Bonnet, also a member of the Gouines rouges (Bonnet 1995: 332, my emphasis and my translation). “Unit[ing] the collective from within”, the universalization of homosexual desire was seen as *resolving* abstract individualism's intractable tension between particularity and universality by operating a dialectical transformation from multiplicity to oneness. Therefore lesbians not only had to relinquish their difference to be included in the MLF community: the eradication of lesbian difference (through its universalization) was the very condition of possibility of that community. In this logic, laying claim to one's lesbian particularity was tantamount to a selfish (if not reactionary, phallic and capitalist) individualization of the revolutionary potential of homosexual desire, jeopardizing the possibility of a female individual.³⁶

Indeed, as one (heterosexual) MLF radical feminist writes, lesbians had to “constitute themselves as a territory which the nomadic desire of heterosexuals [could] temporarily or partially [hold] onto”. As she continues: “[h]omosexuals are under siege by the movement, which wants to bloody well storm their ramparts, the frontier behind which homosexuality still lies” – and this is why, according to her, the MLF is “the place of the liberation of female homosexuality” (Anne 1974: 2048–2049, my translation). This dreadful colonial conception of “liberation” as “siege” raises a fundamental question: what if the “collapse” of the “frontier” (Anne 1974: 2049) of lesbian particularity for the benefit of “a culture of women to come” (Catherine 1974: 2091, my translation), rather than being a liberation of homosexuality, amounted to a forced assimilation of lesbians into the heterosexual norm of the MLF, dissimulated under the deceptive claim to represent all women? In *Le torchon brûle*,

³⁶ If this woman-identified conception of female homosexuality echoes second-wave US lesbian feminism – and in particular Adrienne Rich's famous articulation of a lesbian continuum among all women (1980), which raises similar issues about the desexualization of lesbianism – it is also distinguishable from it for three fundamental reasons: the French universalization of female homosexuality is allergic to the word “lesbian” and the visibilization of lesbian difference; as I show later in the chapter, it is unable – unlike US lesbian feminism – to politicize heterosexuality (indeed, it is even a strategy for *not* politicizing heterosexuality); and its universalism is a very particular one insofar as it is a repetition of French abstract universalism, which cannot abide differences.

the unstated heterosexual particularity of the movement's so-called universality is laid bare in the following extract:

The [butch] homosexual avoids women's submissive role through a refusal on her own behalf which does not extend to women as a whole, in the political generality that the MLF is implementing, thereby enabling her to understand and to live differently her refusal (and her homosexuality), to free it from the contradictions in which it had been caught (Anon. 1973a: 14, my translation).

In this quote, butch lesbians are distinguished from "women as a whole", who represent the MLF's "political generality". If the lesbian must abandon her "refusal on her own behalf" insofar as it cannot be extended to "women as a whole", the MLF's "political generality" is therefore revealed not only as epistemically heterosexual but also as requiring lesbians' (epistemic) heterosexualization (the invisibilization of their difference) in order for them to be amenable to incorporation into this "political generality".

In fact, homosexuality was universalized to all women to the extent that it was a temporary moment in the process of women's subjective recognition and was meant to be ultimately superseded by heterosexuality: the exclusiveness of homosexuality was unthinkable, so to speak, in these discourses on "homosexuality". For example, Christiane Rochefort, a famous novelist and founding member of the Féministes révolutionnaires, defines sexual pleasure between women as

the first move in a tactical withdrawal by the oppressed, the inevitable stage wherein, ceasing to beg (to demand), she boldly steps back from her oppressor, in order to rediscover her integrity, and to retake possession, proudly and fully, of her own body and spirit. She must learn how to come alone – literally – symbolically (Rochefort 1970: 129, my translation).

As the "the first move in a tactical withdrawal", homosexuality can only be conceived as a "stage" leading towards, as one feminist writes in *Le torchon brûle*, "true relationships [with men], that is to say relationships of love, free from power" (Anon. 1973b: 19, my translation). The cathartic nature of homosexuality is also a defining feature of Fouque's vision. For her, "[w]omen's primary homosexuality should be only a step towards a rediscovered and truly

free heterosexuality” (1973 in Bonnet 1998, my translation). This heteronormative narrative reiterates Freud’s classic outline of sexual development in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (2011 [1905]), in which heterosexuality is conceived as a process of maturation from unruly polymorphism to adult reproductive sexuality (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Edelman 2004; Freeman 2010; Halberstam 2011; Hoad 2000). The developmental process of heterosexuality is proper to a colonial episteme in which homosexuality and bisexuality are conceived, like racial primitiveness, as backwardly spatialized, stuck within “ramparts” and “frontiers” (Anne 1974: 2048–2049).³⁷ From this perspective, the elaboration of a narcissistic universal homosexuality that effaces lesbianism as a difference among women is another avatar of the “institutions of intimacy” by which heteronormative culture, forged through the logic of colonial developmentalism, secures its “metacultural intelligibility” (Berlant and Warner 1998: 553).

This unthinkable of lesbianism as a *permanent* unavailability to the heterosexual male gaze was the heteronormative standpoint from which, I argue, lesbian difference was transformed into homosexual sameness in the MLF. In making “all” (white) women (transitorily) homosexuals, 1970s French feminists diluted and disabled the critical potential of lesbianism as a position of externality to the institution of heterosexuality. Indeed, as I explain in the next section, the universalization of homosexuality (as sisterhood) in the MLF enacted an entrenched prohibition of lesbianism whose function was to secure the unthinkable of the heterosexual particularity of the MLF’s “political generality” (Anon 1973a: 14). While feminist discourses were saturated with the proliferation of the “woman” sign, and while the “homosexual” shone on the horizon as the paragon of women’s liberation, the following questions remain unanswered: why did the lesbian have to be pre-modern for women to be modern? What was the function of women’s inevitable ultimate availability to the male gaze in the process of liberation? And where has the anachronistic lesbian from “before the movement” gone in the archive?

³⁷ The heteronormative narrative of progress, which incorporates a temporary generalization of homosexuality/bisexuality, is inseparable from the colonial modernity in which discourses on sexuality were forged: “it is impossible to divorce the claim that bisexuality is a universal, original state from the cluster of racial meanings – evolution, procreation, conquest, superiority – which constitute it. The claim that ‘everyone’s bisexual really’ rests on a covert racial and imperialist discourse of sexuality” (Storr 1997: 85). On the colonial genealogy of Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, see Khanna (2003).

2. The Hysterical Dyke in the Feminist Closet

Rational Women and the Hysterical Dyke

Although it would seem at first sight that the “lesbian” sign was subsumed by the totalizing “women” sign in feminist discourses, it would be a mistake to think that the lesbian was successfully suppressed. It was only after months of research in the feminist archive that the evidence struck me: the lesbian had not simply disappeared, left behind in the limbo of an irrelevant past “before the movement” (Anon. 1980a: 22; Deudon 1981: 83). In fact, she loomed large as the constitutive outside (in the sense of Derrida’s supplement) on which the proliferation of the “women” sign was discursively authorized, and as such she haunted the “political unconscious” (Jameson 1982) of the celebration of “women”. If, as Sedgwick argues in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), the closet is the site of insistent resurfacings as a consequence of the suppression of homosexuality, where are the traces of the lesbian in the 1970s feminist archive? If one never speaks only one language, as Derrida contends, what was the other language “women” spoke in the MLF? And how was the MLF’s racial regime used as a political and discursive resource to exile the lesbian from the domain of feminist intelligibility?

The impossible yet haunting lesbian excess makes a vivid appearance in an excerpt from Simone de Beauvoir’s preface to *Histoires du M.L.F.*, a collection comprising radical feminists Anne Zelensky and Annie Sugier’s autobiographical narratives (1977):

[T]he MLF has gained a name for itself, or rather, it has gained a bad name, because the image that has been conveyed is that of hysterical lesbian shrews. This book’s primary merit is to radically contradict this cliché [...] Throughout their stories [...], [Anne and Annie] appear rational and calm; and, knowing them well, I can testify that they really are like that. Nothing extravagant in their appearance, in their actions, nothing outrageous in their words. Two women like many others (Beauvoir 1977: 7–8, my translation).

In this quotation, the figure of “hysterical lesbian shrews” constitutively haunts the definition of its subject “women”. Indeed, Beauvoir’s production of legitimate “rational and calm [...] women like many others” is a narrative *effect* of the prohibition of “hysterical lesbian

shrews”. Thus, what makes Anne Zelensky and Annie Sugier “two women like many others” (and therefore acceptable subjects for feminism) is the fact they are – discursively – *not* “hysterical lesbian shrews” – hence that they *are*, albeit implicitly, heterosexual. Although undercut by its presentation as a “cliché”, the figure of “hysterical lesbian shrews” needs to be posited as the statement’s repudiated outside in order for the naturalization of women’s heterosexuality to textually operate. Consequently, while “women” are, in the quotation, a discursive effect of a compulsory heterosexual law, lesbians are textually defined as *not* “like many [other]” women, in other words: *they are not women*. Feminism’s political signifier “women” is revealed as “fundamentally dependent on that which it must exclude” (Butler 2011 [1993]: 24): the excessive, unassimilable and prohibited “lesbian” signifier. From this perspective, by reading the quotation against the grain we can therefore reconstitute a shadow definition of the lesbian as what women *are not*: she is not “rational and calm”, she has an “extravagant appearance”, performs “extravagant actions” and uses “outrageous words”. In sum, she is stuck in a state of irrationality – the very irrationality which in 1789 prevented women from integrating into the nation’s abstract community. I will return to this point. For now, let me continue my introduction to the lesbian ghost that creeps in the archive.

We find the exact same ghostly opposition between rational women and hysterical lesbians in the following two extracts – one from an article published anonymously in *Le torchon brûle* and resonantly entitled “Enough! Of the Caricature of the MLF”, the other from an interview with the differentialist Antoinette Fouque:

I want to stop whispering “I’m in the MLF”, to proclaim it all over the place. But it’s up to us to transform the brand image of our movement. I know it was through provocative actions that we emerged from anonymity. But I also know that today, we need to be taken seriously if we want to be effective. [...] Our goal is to struggle – not against men – as some would like people to believe, but against forms of domination [...]. Let’s denounce all abuse. All injustice. Let’s be provocative only in the audacity of our words. Let’s make people laugh only because of our sense of humour. Let’s take up right now the position we have been refused, and let’s prove that the MLF is not a gathering of “hysterical dykes”, but a great movement that unites all women interested in the edification of the society in which they live. I’M IN THE MLF! (Anon 1973c: 2, my translation).

[Homosexuation] must not be understood as aggression towards men, given that without some of them our fight could not have taken place. Yet, I wanted us to have non-mixed meetings, thanks to which we might perhaps manage to define ourselves as women. Immediately, we were stigmatized and bad-mouthed as lesbians! In fact, the creation of these “homosexed spaces” proceeded from a psychoanalytic process and from psychoanalytic thought. At the heart of this psychoanalytic thought was the question of the relationship to the mother [...]. This primary love is more difficult for girls to integrate than for boys. Now, poor integration of this love later becomes the source of a chaotic affective and sexual life, which can be manifested in a knee-jerk hatred projected onto men. Many feminists, I think, were like that (Fouque in Ego 1989: 16, my translation).

In both extracts, the “lesbian”— like the “bad name” of the MLF in Beauvoir’s quote – is either a “caricature” undermining the “brand image of the movement”, or an “insult” or “stigma” from which “women” must distinguish themselves: she seems only to exist as a fantasy. Yet, here again, despite being undercut by her presentation as a caricature, her presence *must* be textually posited. While in the first extract “hysterical dykes” – who make their appearance in the last sentence of the article after a series of convolutions as the purloined key signifier – are the discursive outside that stabilizes the definition of “a great movement that unites all women”, in the second they are foreclosed as a “stigma” and an “insult” on which the constituency of “women” who are trying to “define [themselves] as women” is posited. Here again, the MLF’s respectable subject “women” can only be discursively and epistemically established as *not* lesbians. What makes MLF women serious, effective, audacious, and not aggressive towards men – in short, “rational and calm”, to take up Beauvoir’s crystal-clear expression – is, discursively, the fact that they are *not* “hysterical dykes” with “a chaotic affective and sexual life” who struggle against men because of their “knee-jerk hatred” of them. “Hysterical dykes”, unlike “women”, are “provocative” because of something other than the “audacity of [their] words”, and they “make people laugh” because of something other than their “sense of humour”: their despicable and monstrous lesbianism. The lesbian, in both extracts, is stuck in a state of sexual hostility – the very hostility, as I have noted above, which in 1789 excluded women from the national community. I will indeed return to this point.

The production of feminism’s acceptable subject “women”, in all these instances, is founded

on the exclusion and repudiation – hence the *production* – of feminism’s abject other: the hysterical dyke. The representability of “women” as rational is thus systematically conditioned on the unsymbolizability of the hysterical dyke as the foreclosed figure of feminism’s symbolic order. It is as such, I argue, that the lesbian was foundationally produced in the MLF: as a prohibition on which the heterosexual coherence of feminist meanings was established. A “bad name”, a “cliché”, “a caricature”, a “stigma” and an “insult”: the lesbian’s alleged inexistence needs to be unremittingly conjured up in order to be repudiated insofar as there can be no heterosexual subject without a repudiated lesbian. Since “the subject is constituted through the force of exclusion and abjection”, the lesbian was brought into existence as a haunting “constitutive outside to the subject [‘women’], an abjected outside, which is, after all, ‘inside’ the subject as its own founding repudiation” (Butler 2011 [1993]: xiii).

In all of these extracts, the MLF’s founding *secret* is right before our eyes: while the MLF claims to represent all women, lesbians are – foundationally – excluded from the boundaries of female individuality. To the extent that women are definitionally heterosexual (as *not* hysterical dykes), in 1970s feminist thinking *lesbians are not women*. The reason why this truth must remain hidden as a secret is because it hides the MLF’s constitutive lie of assimilation, promising to assimilate lesbian difference while at the same time maintaining it as unassimilable – a foundational crisis in representation.³⁸ Therefore, at the heart of the MLF’s claim to universal representation is an unstated *heterosexual separatism*. Thus, since claims to universal representation rested on a secret separatism (or heterosexual law) prohibiting lesbianism, I argue that the much-celebrated identity category “women”, and lesbians’ compulsory transmutation into women in the MLF’s abstract universalist regime, while claiming to liberate homosexual desire in the name of women’s love, enacted what I call a feminist glass closet whose function was to conceal this unavowable lie. To put it differently, every time MLF women claimed “we are all women!” the epistemic/discursive glass closet that sustained the production of the subject “women” made them say at the same time, albeit unwittingly, “we are not lesbians!” Addressing the social effects of this discursive closet, Jacqueline Julien, a lesbian feminist who co-founded the MLF in Toulouse, remarks: “[w]e could be lesbians on condition that we were invisible (not effusive). [...] As soon as we

³⁸ I borrow the notion of a “lie” from Albert Memmi’s analysis in *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (2003 [1965]) of the lie of colonial ideology, which claimed to erase/assimilate difference while at the same time maintaining it as unassimilable (see Khanna 2003, 2008).

wanted to diverge from this primary [feminist] label, we had to leave" (2003: 60, my translation).

Given the MLF's epistemic definition of women as *not lesbians*, the trope of pre-modern lesbian ghettoization is actually the effect of a heterosexual law that created the fiction of homosexual liberation in the present. This fiction is a heterosexual "narrative strategy" (Butler 1999 [1990]: 100) producing the self-legitimizing myth of heterosexual repression in the enunciative present of the MLF – what Michel Foucault calls a "repressive hypothesis" (1984 [1976]: 15): indeed, the myth of liberated homosexuality after the dark age of the ghetto enables MLF women to replace the reality of lesbian abjection in the MLF with the fantasized reality of the repression of heterosexuals as a consequence of this new (fictive) liberation. In other words, by claiming that homosexuality was "finally" liberated from its "ramparts" (Anne 1974: 2049), heterosexual women could endlessly claim to be oppressed in turn by that very liberation and hence endlessly secure their (concealed) position of discursive/epistemic hegemony in the movement. In one striking example, a differentialist MLF woman complains in *Le torchon brûle* about the "new guilt-tripping ideology" of homosexuality in the women's movement:

[Homosexuality] degenerates into political validation, into a homosexual norm, accompanied by heterosexual guilt-tripping. Homosexuals who have experienced a long oppression shake it off through a phenomenon of inversion, a counter-norm. While most girls still have relationships with men, and need them, it is barely spoken about it in the movement, no one dares [...]. At La Tranche [a women's encounter in 1972] [...] homosexuality was presented as the revolutionary path, the goal towards which everyone had to strive [...] Many girls felt attacked. [...] Personally, I absolutely refused to be guilt-tripped about my heterosexuality, to exist only partially in the movement, to have a shameful outside (Anon. 1973d: 17, my translation).

The myth of homosexual hypervisibility, of a "counter-norm" that shames and silences heterosexuals – belied by the anti-lesbian epistemology of the subject "women" revealed above – prohibits lesbianism as always already too visible, and the lesbian as always already irrational (if not psychotic) – "degenerate". The substitution of the movement's heterosexual norm with a mythologized homosexual norm conveniently conceals the ways in which this narrative is itself the self-legitimizing effect of a dominant epistemic heterosexual standpoint.

The coup de force of this “repressive hypothesis” is thus to replace the lesbian “abjected outside” (Butler 2011 [1993]: xiii) through which the subject “women” is established with the fantasy of a heterosexual “shameful outside”, as the author above claims. The narrative of homosexual hegemony – even aggression – is not a description of a reality: it reveals instead the author’s own fears about lesbianism. She is so afraid of the visibilization (and reality) of lesbianism that she needs to perpetually fantasize its hegemony in the movement to make sure it never becomes a reality.

We find the exact same reasoning in an article published in 1980 by Emmanuèle de Lesseps – a founding member of the Féministes révolutionnaires – entitled “Hétérosexualité et féminisme” (Heterosexuality and Feminism). The author denounces “the establishment of a kind of political hierarchy between feminist lesbians and heterosexuals”: for the former, “lesbian practice” is supposedly “better” than heterosexuality, and heterosexual women have “a lesser degree of feminist consciousness” (1980a: 55, my translation). Here again, through her self-legitimizing “repressive hypothesis”, de Lesseps substitutes the foreclosure of lesbianism in the movement’s discursive legitimacy with the “unspoken censorship” of heterosexuals allegedly enforced by an authoritarian lesbian “correct line” (56). This homosexual hegemony, she claims, is established “in an implicit way, in the form of [forced] complicity” that “invalidates” heterosexuals and results in the latter’s “self-censorship” as well as a “taboo” on heterosexual issues (56).

The irony is that while MLF women (and historians) talk constantly about dogmatic lesbian pressure, I could find no text in the MLF archive written by a lesbian in which heterosexuals are shamed and a “counter [lesbian] norm” promoted as the “correct [feminist] line”. It is literally a fantasy of the straight mind that only appears in articles by heterosexual women. The fiction of the liberation of homosexuality in the present (supported by the myth of lesbians’ previous ghettoization) is produced for the purposes of heterosexuality’s self-legitimization: claiming to have joyfully erased all differences among women, it simultaneously produces lesbian difference as always already too visible and thus endlessly irrecoverable and foreclosed to present cultural possibilities. The myth of homosexual liberation not only conceals the hegemony of the heterosexual norm (of which it is a self-legitimizing strategy) but also makes it impossible to address it in return, since lesbians seeking to do so would necessarily be read as confirming their hegemony, while heterosexuals would always already be heroically resisting an “unspoken censorship”. This is also what I

mean by the “glass closet”: the well-worn claim that the universalization of homosexuality liberated homosexuals was in fact the self-naturalizing technique of a heterosexual law that prohibited lesbian cultural practices in the MLF.³⁹

In the autumn of 1970, Antoinette Fouque started the Groupe sexualité feminine, a consciousness-raising group on “feminine sexuality”. In the minutes of one of the group’s meetings on homosexuality, my attention was caught by one sentence that encapsulated what could be called the iron law of heterosexuality in the MLF (which is the law of the glass closet):

Everyone seemed to agree that we should strive to suppress this distinction [between heterosexuality and homosexuality]: prevent this difference from becoming antagonism; homosexuals must find their place in the movement and not congregate in a ghetto (A. [Antoinette Fouque] 1971: 3, my translation).

As we can see, the insistence on the need to “suppress [the] distinction [between heterosexuality and homosexuality]” in order to “prevent this difference from becoming antagonism” creates the myth of an undifferentiated present through the simultaneous production of lesbian difference (that of the antagonistic ghetto). It thus permanently prohibits lesbianism as always already (re)introducing an antagonism every time it makes itself visible. Thanks to the MLF’s looking glass of homosexual liberation, a discursive closet was firmly in place, and it was all the harder to identify and dismantle because it had been secured through a discourse that maintained that it had “finally” been unlocked – and even that homosexuality had been universalized as feminism’s most cherished revolutionary drive.

The cultural reality of the MLF glass closet is exemplified in the other half of the

³⁹ In the “Theoretical Framework and Methods” chapter I addressed the ways in which MLF women always describe Wittig’s lesbianization, and her critique of heterosexuality, as “paranoiac”. In fact, we can see how this heteronormative epistemology itself invents a lesbian threat out of its own irrational fears of lesbianism, to secure its own domination. These MLF archival narratives that denounce an alleged lesbian hegemony are those from which MLF historians uncritically write their histories of the MLF: they take these narratives at face value as the “truth” about the MLF. In 1980 the article by de Lesseps, along with the publication of Wittig’s “La pensée straight”, triggered an explosion of the conflict over lesbianism/heterosexuality in the MLF. Wittig explicitly referred to de Lesseps’ article in 1983 when she defined “heterofeminism”. I return to these points in the last archival chapter.

aforementioned article from *Le torchon brûle* in which the author complains about a new homosexual “counter-norm”:

The movement is of a homosexual nature, this does not mean that all the girls in the movement practise homosexuality. On the contrary, [...] a certain antagonism has appeared between the group homosexuality, which is expressed through the warm presence of half-naked bodies in the sun, deep affective communication, tenderness, sensuality, and which does not call for any “act”; and homosexual relationships in couples, relationships between two people, which could only be lived by excluding oneself from the group (Anon. 1973d: 17, my translation).

If one cannot “act” like a lesbian without “excluding oneself from the group”, this confirms that the neutrality of feminism’s emancipated community of “women” is the naturalized effect of the exclusion of lesbianism – exactly as in Fouque’s aforementioned iron law of heterosexuality. In other words, if the lesbian who “acts” like a lesbian is seen as producing “a certain antagonism” that manifests an unnatural difference within the (purportedly) undifferentiated community of women, it is because the starting point from which undifferentiation is defined is an invisibilized and unquestioned heterosexual norm. The lesbian betrays the unity to the extent that she exposes the heterosexual imposture that sustains the fiction of women’s sameness. While falsely claiming to liberate homosexuality, the MLF’s erasure of the distinction between “real”, “imaginary” and “symbolic” homosexuality (Fouque in Marlhiac 1982: 13, my translation), and its reduction of lesbianism to a chaste mother-daughter or sororal relationship in the name of women’s sameness, produced a spectacular prohibition of lesbianism.

In that sense, I argue that the MLF’s ecstatic happiness and the homoerotic feelings of love that underwrote the fantasy of women’s reunification after the (self-legitimizing) age of ghettoization and separation were all self-amplifying techniques foreclosing lesbianism from the cultural domain of feminism. If homosexuals were positioned as “absolutely the heart of the movement” (Fouque in Marlhiac 1982: 13) insofar as their desire was said to enable a symbiotic unanimity between women, the suppression of lesbianism, understood as the performative effect of this myth, was therefore also produced from the very heart of the movement. Against Bernheim’s contention that a lesbian is “a woman marked ‘lesbian’” (Crachat 1975: 1833), the epistemology of the glass closet sustaining the MLF subject

“women” confirms the ways in which gender identifications are normative institutions that govern the regulation of sexuality.⁴⁰ To use Terry Castle’s metaphor, the MLF was a “kind of derealisation machine: insert the lesbian and watch her disappear” (1993: 6) in the magic closet of the “women” sign and reappear as an unassimilable obtrusion: the hysterical dyke.

The central questions are now: why are women foundationally defined as *not lesbians*? Why *must* lesbianism be prohibited for women to be representable? What does this repression tell us about the productivity of abstract universalism’s paradoxes *within* feminism when feminism itself is defined, on the model of abstract universalism, as an abstract community of women? In other words, what does this repression *do* for feminism in France?

The Feminist Heterosexual Contract

To answer these questions, let me continue my visit to the lesbian-haunted house hidden in the feminist archive. The MLF’s materialist branch sprang in 1970 from (among other components) Féminin-Masculin-Avenir (FMA, Feminine-Masculine-Future), a feminist groupuscule created in 1967 (Delphy 1991; Feldman 2009; Lasserre 2014; Picq 2011; Tristan and de Pisan 1977). Plunging into the FMA archive at the Marguerite Durand Library in Paris, I came across the following statement in a text written by group members in 1969:

Because men’s relationships with women are not only relationships of dominator-dominated, but double as a *loving* exchange as well as a shared responsibility for children, we will not have a “sex war” between separated communities – since separation is impossible – but oppositions between the sexes within a single community (Anon. 1969: 4, emphasis in original, my translation).

In this extract, the out-of-sight repression of lesbianism – even though it is not named – once again underwrites the extract’s ability to signify. Indeed, if men and women’s “loving exchange” and “shared responsibility for children” is the condition that prevents a “sex war”, this “sex war” discursively reveals itself to be what is *not* heterosexual, hence what *is* lesbian.

⁴⁰ On the regulation of sexuality through the naturalization of the binary categories of sex/gender, see Butler (1999 [1990], 2011 [1993], 1997a, 2004a), de Lauretis (1987a, 1987b, 1988), Jagose (1997), Rubin (1993 [1984]), Sedgwick (1990), Warner (1993), Weed and Schor (1997) and Wittig (1992).

The naturalization of women's heterosexuality (the "we" of "we will not have a 'sex war'") is therefore revealed as hinging on the production of an unthinkable yet constitutive outside that functions as a performative: a "separation" between men and women which is deemed "impossible". As in all the extracts above, the universalization of heterosexuality is a discursive *effect* of a prohibition of lesbianism.

Yet, something additional appears in this quotation. As it reveals, the threat of a (lesbian) "sex war" is the discursive condition against which is devised not only a normative heterosexual subject for feminism but also the possibility of a *democratic* feminism compatible with the French nation's Republicanism. An important parallel is drawn between heterosexuality and the French nation in the second part of the quotation: producing the merging of men and women "within a single community" where the "sex war" has dialectically transformed into "oppositions between the sexes", the (unstated) heterosexual regime appears as the *sexual crucible* which, by democratizing the radical antagonism of sexual difference (the state of sex war), makes sexual difference peacefully amenable to incorporation into the abstract unity of the nation. Thus, for the author of the text, in refusing heterosexuality's democratic promise of the mixedness by which sexual difference is civilized (abstracted from its natural hostility/particularity), the (purloined) lesbian remains stuck in a tyrannical separatist sexual community, and the sex war she wages undermines the (heterosexual) unity of the nation (men and women's "single community"). Set against the belligerent figure of the lesbian, heterosexuality – which harmoniously brings men and women together in a "single community" – is conceived as safeguarding (democratic) sexual sociability within the nation, and therefore as the condition of women's integration into the nation – that is, of a feminism compatible with French republicanism. This regime of meaning produces heterosexuality as feminism's most desirable promise – heterosexuality as democratic humanism – and the lesbian as feminism's illiberal and totalitarian other that refuses alterity (through sexual mixedness).

Although I have purposefully started this section with three extracts in which the lesbian is explicitly addressed as a hysterical dyke, such cases are quite rare in the archive. As in the quotation from FMA above, I argue, it is through the structuring narrative oppositions of democracy/totalitarianism and reconciliation/sex war that heterosexual/lesbian difference is *signified* in 1970s feminist discourses, albeit never explicitly mentioned. This is what I mean when I say that the lesbian is everywhere and nowhere at the same time, conjured up as a

ghost. She is hidden in the unconscious meanings of discourses, as the unstated subject of an undemocratic feminism that sustains the coherence of feminist discourses through her repudiation. From this viewpoint, the lesbian presence in the archive becomes tantalizing. We can identify her in statements such as:

No, for MLF activists women's liberation does not come through men's enslavement [...], but through parallel paths that men and women have to travel before they are capable of forming true relationships, that is relationships of love, free from power, sadism and blackmail (Anon. 1973b: 19, my translation).

In order not to be object-women [...], [a fair number of women] move from being "Beautiful" to being "Ugly". [...] By "Ugly" I mean an anti "object-woman" role that takes its elements from the non-aestheticism of masculine roles. [...] [T]hey mimic some of [men's] acrobatics. [...] I love the movement that starts from a form of oppression – woman's oppression – and liberates men and women (Anon. 1971d: 13, author's emphasis, my translation).

[W]e are neither witches, nor shrews, nor hysterics-sexists-terrorists, but a group that is absolutely friendly and open (Lyon University Women's Group n. d. in CLEF 1989: 101, my translation).

In these three extracts, the lesbian is the purloined (and unsayable) key signifier: she is the repudiated possibility who supposedly wants to liberate women through "men's enslavement" and against "true relationships [...] of love". She is the "ugly" woman "mimic[king] [...] [men's] acrobatics" who does *not* want to "[liberate] men and women", that is, who wants to liberate women by tyrannically oppressing men. She is neither "friendly" nor "open", but a "witch", a "shrew", a "hysteric" and a "terrorist". In a letter that was sent to FMA, one woman interested in the group's activities writes:

I have written that "I do not want to be a feminist", doubtless... for fear of ridicule, and also because it seems wrong to me to fall into certain excesses [...]. I am not for feminine "revenge", but for truly harmonious relations between the sexes (Legrand

1970, my translation).⁴¹

While the “revenge” is implicitly the “sex war” of the irrational lesbian who is unable to love men, and her “fear of ridicule” and of “fall[ing] into certain excesses” is a fear of the “metacultural sign” of the “figure of the feminist-as-lesbian” (Hesford 2005: 228), the democratic alternative of “harmonious relations between the sexes” to which the author refers signifies heterosexuality. Heterosexual love for men is always textually posited as the key to a pacified and humanist feminism that supports the Republican promise of sexual mixedness, while the lesbian is systematically defined as a separatist (hence anti-Republican) and tyrannical subject entrenched in her sexual difference and her refusal of (sexual) alterity. This discursive regime fully sustains the entire 1970s feminist archive. As the radical feminist Anne Zelensky, looking back on her experience in the MLF, makes perfectly clear: “[f]eminism is about reconciliation, whereas lesbianism is exclusionary” (interview in Martel 1999: 82).

The “political unconscious” (Jameson 1982) of all these excerpts tells us that the lesbian, as a hysterical dyke waging an undemocratic sex war against men, is always already stuck in a state of radically uncivilized (or hysterical) sexual difference – the very radicality which in 1789 prevented women from integrating into the abstract community of the nation. I argue that if the signifier “women” naturalizes heterosexuality in 1970s feminist discourses, it is because availability to the male gaze is the unquestionable condition of women’s entry into the French political and symbolic order: the national-colonial logic presiding over heteronormative developmentalism, and the ways in which it informs the compulsory sexual mixedness of the French Republican social contract, makes women’s availability to the male gaze inevitable in the process of liberation. In that sense, I argue that while women were historically denied citizenship on the grounds of their lack of autonomy and incapacity for abstraction – their sexual difference was deemed too irreducible, too natural to be integrated into the abstract and indivisible nation (Scott 1996) – heterosexuality functioned in 1970s feminist discourses as a technology of civilization that enabled the integration of sexual difference into the nation while maintaining (and concealing), through the reification of women’s availability to the white heterosexual male gaze, women’s subordination to men. In this context, the lesbian can only be stuck in an irrational state of nature as a state of perpetual

⁴¹ The sender’s name has been changed for reasons of confidentiality.

war, insofar as she does not submit herself to the civilizing (white heterosexual) male gaze on which the MLF's subject "women" is founded. For 1970s feminists, it is through heterosexuality's domestication of sexual difference (hence through the reification of women's subordination to men) that sexual difference can be harmoniously assimilated into the nation. In that sense, we could say that lesbians are "sex" (or nature), "the 'raw material' of culture [...] that begins to signify only through and after its subjection to the rules of kinship" (Butler 1999 [1990]: 47), while heterosexual women are "gender" (or culture), the "cooked" (47), the rational, the human, after the law.

The logic that presides over women's availability to the male gaze as a condition of the democratization of the naturalness of their sexual difference is profoundly Hegelian. In *The Second Sex*, heterosexuality is the ubiquitous apparatus on which men and women's dialectical relationship of mutual recognition is articulated. Describing the heterosexual act, Beauvoir writes:

Under a concrete and carnal form there is mutual recognition of the ego and of the other in the keenest awareness of the other and of the ego. Some women say that they feel the masculine sex organ in them as a part of their own bodies; some men feel that they *are* the women they penetrate. These are evidently inexact expressions, for the dimension, the relation of the *other* still exists; but the fact is that alterity has no longer a hostile implication (1997 [1949]: 422, emphasis Beauvoir's).

The heterosexual act is the site where the radical hostility of sexual difference is at once confronted in a "concrete and carnal" struggle and reconciled through "harmony", "gratitude" and "affection" (de Beauvoir 1997 [1949]: 422) "giving place to the idea of an exchange" (737). At the conclusion of heterosexual intercourse, sexual difference has not disappeared through the fusion of the two bodies, but rather has reappeared in a different form, that of having been pacified: men and women are "similar yet unlike" and "alterity has no longer a hostile implication" (422). Heterosexuality is like the force in Hegel's dialectical reasoning: it provides an absorption of sexual difference that surpasses the intractable contradiction between sexual sameness and difference while conserving nature's law: a "unity of opposites" (Hegel in Butler 2012 [1987]: 12) in which difference is "cancelled yet preserved" (Butler 2012 [1987]: 43). As such, it realizes "the transition between consciousness and self-consciousness" (Butler 2012 [1987]: 24): "[b]etween man and woman love is an act; each torn

from self becomes the other” (de Beauvoir 1997 [1949]: 436). In the 1970s extracts analysed above, the (Republican) conception of heterosexuality as a sexual crucible (a technology of assimilation of sexual difference) – which abstracts the unsurmountable hostility of women’s sexual difference, while retaining “the relation of the other” through men and women’s “impossible separation” and necessary reunion within the “higher form” (Butler 2012 [1987]: 47) of the (national) “single community” (Anon. 1969: 4) – is built on this dialectical reasoning. Heterosexuality, like the Republican crucible, provides a “sense of the union of really separate bodies” (de Beauvoir 1997 [1949]: 422) – “separate bodies” in the literal sense as much as in the metaphorical sense of (sexual) communities. The recognition of the other sex through the heterosexual encounter founds the Republic’s plea for democratic alterity.

In this scheme, the lesbian, in a paradoxical feat, is at once in a state of permanent war (the pacification of sexual difference through heterosexuality is out of her reach) and in a state of permanent withdrawal (she does not engage in heterosexuality’s struggle towards mutual recognition). In that regard, homosexuality is compared simultaneously in an article from *Le torchon brûle* to a “total counter-dependence to [male] repressive authority” and, just a few lines later, to “a flight from social and economic reality, the abandonment of the field where one encounters men in order to remain among women, among ‘sisters’” (Anon. 1973e: 24, my translation). The lesbian, in other words, both has a mimetic relationship to men’s world (aggressively denying sexual difference) and withdraws from the political struggle into a world of sameness. The heterosexual woman stands exactly between these two extremes – war and withdrawal – as a happy medium, not too different from but also not too similar to men, not too far from but also not too close to them, not a master but no longer a slave either, in a kind of perfect arrangement that makes her “similar yet unlike” (de Beauvoir 1997 [1949]: 422) – and therefore amenable to incorporation into the nation as *equal yet (still) subordinated*. The paradox of what I call lesbian *hostile withdrawal* is a consequence of lesbians’ failure to engage in the dialectic of heterosexuality.⁴²

⁴² Scott and Fassin explain that the conservative myth in France of a natural harmony between men and women, developed in the 1990s, conceives of French women as standing on an exact fulcrum between sameness and difference in contrast to American radicalism, which “in the most contradictory ways” (Scott 1997: 17) is said to promote both “‘differentialism’ [...] where group identity – a return to tribalism – triumph[s] over individualism” and the eradication of the “natural difference of sex” (Scott 1997: 17). Fassin also speaks about a “profound” and “major contradiction” in universalist argumentation (1999a: 128–129). In fact, this “contradiction” is, in my view, the effect of the French (universalist) dialectic of heterosexuality, and it defines lesbian difference rather than American feminism as both too

Drawing on Monique Wittig's notion of a "heterosexual contract" conditioning the social contract (1980a, 1989), I argue that 1970s feminists sought to absorb and annul the nation's "sexual contract" (Pateman 1988) – the "repressed dimension of contract theory" (Pateman 1988: ix), which considered the universality of sexual difference too irreducible to be incorporated into the universality of the Rights of Man – through the production of what I call a feminist heterosexual contract.⁴³ While women's exclusion from the social contract was justified with reference to their natural condition, by entering into a (hidden) heterosexual contract *prior to* the feminist social contract that officially claimed to welcome all women, (heterosexual) women sought to absorb the "difference in rationality [that] follow[ed] from natural sexual difference" (Pateman 1988: 5). Arguably, through this heterosexual contract heterosexuality was performatively produced as feminism's public sphere, while lesbianism remained repressed as feminism's private sphere. Paraphrasing Carole Pateman, we could say that the feminist social contract – officially welcoming all women who identify as such – is a "story of freedom", while the feminist heterosexual contract is a "story of subjection" (Pateman 1988: 2) repressed in the closet of the "women" sign. The discursive production of the hysterical dyke as standing before the advent of the heterosexual law in an anachronistic state of nature is a "foundationalist [fiction]" (Butler 1999 [1990]: 6) that serves to secure the legitimacy of heterosexual freedom in the feminist present, a generative tactic by which a feminist heterosexual civil state is secured.

Therefore, I make the important argument that in seeking integration into an exclusionary regime (abstract universalism) through the production of a feminist heterosexual contract, (heterosexual) women displaced the unassimilability of women's sexual difference onto lesbians. As uncivilized (or undemocratized) by the male heterosexual gaze, lesbians carried the burden of an unbridgeable sexual antagonism which had stuck to "women" since the French Revolution. As the bearer of a difference that was too "primary", too "rooted in

differentialist and too individualist. In that regard, it is not specific to 1990s French sexual conservatism but is at the heart of the MLF's conception of heterosexual/lesbian difference. I return to the analogies between the MLF and the 1990s myth of French sexual singularity in the conclusion.

⁴³ The feminist political theorist Carole Pateman has famously argued that contract theory is founded on the untold story of a sexual contract that established modern patriarchy through women's exclusion from civil freedom. Thus the story of civil freedom is inseparable from the story of women's oppression. As she notes: "Contract always generates political right in the form of relations of domination and subordination" (1988: 8).

nature” and too “visible” (J. Scott 2004: 35), the lesbian in turn became unnamenable to abstraction in the MLF’s universal and indivisible community of female individuals. In other words, lesbian difference stood for sexual difference itself. As Scott brilliantly explains in *The Politics of the Veil*, the display of women’s bodies in France serves at once to confirm women’s subalternity and to *deny* the “persistent contradiction in French political theory between political equality and sexual difference” (Scott 2007: 170). I suggest that women’s emancipation was founded on similar premises in the MLF: the democratization of women’s sexual difference through women’s availability to men served to deny (or to cover up) the natural hostility of women’s sexual difference, which was therefore transferred onto the lesbian.

Since the lesbian exposed the constitutive contradiction of French republicanism – its foreclosure of women, which the MLF sought to conceal (and preserve) through a feminist heterosexual contract – she had to remain hidden in the closet of the “women” sign as the repudiated *trace* of abstract universalism’s shameful 1789 secret.⁴⁴ A nagging reminder of women’s radical unassimilability into the sexual regime of the Republican social contract – which it was heterosexuality’s function for feminism to repress – the lesbian had to remain locked in a feminist closet insofar as she revealed more than feminists wanted to see: this conspicuously embarrassing French paradox. This is why, as I will show in the next section on the Gouines rouges (Red Dykes, the MLF’s first lesbian collective) and in the following chapters, lesbians aroused a storm of outrage every time they sought to be visible *as lesbians* rather than as women in the MLF: they were exposing feminism’s “obscene underside” (Žižek 2000: 220), that is, women’s insurmountable sexual particularity and the paradox of a movement that was seeking liberation through women’s availability (and hence

⁴⁴ On the basis of this, we could make the broader argument that the constitutiveness of the heterosexual family and the French Republic since the French Revolution (Perreau 2016; Robcis 2013; Verjus 1998) is directly tied to abstract universalism’s founding paradox of women’s exclusion: the heterosexual family as a transcendent political and social unit would have been a way of concealing this paradox. French political scientist Anne Verjus explains that the campaign in favour of family suffrage (granting the father a number of votes proportional to the number of family members) arose in the middle of the nineteenth century, when women significantly began to challenge their exclusion from the public sphere (1998). Drawing on Verjus’ argument, Camille Robcis notes: “In opposition to women’s insurmountable particularity, the family represented the most general interest, the most abstract form of universalism, the true universalism, which encompassed men, women and children” (2016: 69, my translation).

subordination) to the male heterosexual gaze.⁴⁵

The disciplinary regime of “irrationality” (or hysteria) that had sustained women’s inability to enter the nation was thus handed over to the lesbian as the “hysterical dyke”, while (heterosexual) “women” suddenly became “rational and calm” (de Beauvoir 1977: 7). While accusations of “hysteria” had precluded women’s entry through the boundaries of (rational) abstract individualism since the French Revolution, by seeking integration into this exclusionary regime, feminists redeployed that same disciplinary power/knowledge regime of hysteria onto lesbians, who became radically unassimilable – as “hysterical” – into feminism’s female individualism. Being stuck, in their turn, in the insurmountable particularity of sexual difference, lesbians caught “hysteria”, the “latent disease par excellence” (Dorlin 2009: 50, my translation), “this *problem of exacerbated femininity*” (59, emphasis Dorlin’s) which had been – not long before – “the disease specific to women” (50).⁴⁶

Building on Butler’s dazzling analysis of gender melancholy, we could say that the reason why the lesbian figure haunts 1970s universalist feminist discourses – through fantasies of lesbian hegemony, along with the obsessive repudiation of the warlike “hysterical dyke” as what the feminist is not – is that “gender is acquired [...] in part through the repudiation of homosexual attachments” (Butler 1997a: 136). Hence, in the formation of its political subject “women” the MLF politically repeated the psychic processes by which heterosexualized gendered identifications are formed. As Butler explains, ungrieved lesbian attachments are preserved as a “repudiated identification” (137) that conditions the emergence of a (heterosexualized) feminine gender. Thus, calling the MLF lesbian a “terrorist” (Zelensky interview in Martel 1999: 82) who supposedly wants to alienate other women by forcefully converting them to homosexuality actually reveals MLF women’s own terror about their

⁴⁵ Since the veiled woman who defies availability to the male gaze also reveals, as Scott explains, “the problem that sex poses for republican political theory” (2007: 170), I argue that a political and epistemic continuity between the figure of the lesbian in 1970s feminist discourses and the figure of the veiled woman in contemporary liberal/universalist discourses can be drawn. Eschewing the democratizing/civilizing white male gaze, both figures are accused of promoting a totalitarian separation of the sexes (an undemocratic sex war) that threatens the civil (heterosexual) mixedness of the nation. I return to this point in the conclusion.

⁴⁶ On the history of the invention of the medical category of female hysteria see Arnaud (2015), Chesler (1972), Dorlin (2009), Gilman et al. (1993), Showalter (1985), Trillat (1986), Veith (1965) and Wilson (1993).

“ungrieved and ungrievable homosexual cathexis” (Butler 1997a: 139). In that regard, we could say that French universalist feminism and its messianic celebration of “women”, exemplified and performed through feelings of ecstatic joy and plenitude (which are overflowing in the archive), is “a culture of heterosexual melancholy” (147) in which the much-celebrated femininity “emerge[s] as the [trace] of an ungrieved and ungrievable [homosexual] love” (140) – and that consequently, the French universalist feminist is a profoundly lesbian melancholic. Since the stability of the MLF’s “normative [phantasm]” (Butler 1994: 19) of a universally representable community of “women” rested on the violent repudiation of the psychotic lesbian, her “reentry into symbolization” threatened to “unravel the subject itself” (Butler 2011 [1993]: 154) “only because this [feminine subject] is made of repudiated homosexuality” (Butler 1997a: 143). The lesbian ghost that haunts the archive as a terrifying spectre illustrates how, to borrow Butler’s magnificent formulation, “what remains unspeakably absent inhabits the psychotic voice of the one who remains” (196).

Thus, if “[f]eminism is [...] to be grasped as a trauma to the societies in which it emerges [...] because it emerges repeatedly as a contestation of the entire symbolic and imaginary orders of meaning and subjectivity” (Pollock 2016: 27), I suggest that lesbianism is not only “the ‘repressed idea’ at the heart of patriarchal culture” (Castle 1993: 61–62) but also the unsymbolizable and non-narrativizable trauma concealed at the heart of French feminism’s (heterosexual) symbolic order, “the mute outside that sustains all systematicity” (Irigaray 1985 [1974]: 365), who lives on in the archive as an “unthematizable loss” (Butler 2011 [1993]: 149), “the unprocessed affect of the unthinkable event” (Pollock 2016: 27–28). The lesbian-as-hysterical-dyke is “the loss of something irretrievable but unidentifiable in the [...] state of [women’s] entering into [French] civil society” (Khanna 2003: 244).⁴⁷

From Dark Continent to Lesbian Ghetto: The Colonial Matrix of Feminism’s Heterosexual Contract and the Racialization of the Lesbian

The characterization of lesbian visibility as a conspicuous hostile withdrawal into a spatialized “ghetto” builds on the long Western history of racist and antisemitic exclusion.

⁴⁷ On the ways in which the feminine is produced through elimination as the repudiated outside that delimits the possibility of representation, see Butler (1999 [1990], 2011 [1993]), Cornell (1991), Khanna (2008), Irigaray (1985 [1977]), Schor (1989) and Spivak (1987, 1988).

Indeed, it was by drawing on the colonial strife identified in the previous section that “women” could be spoken into existence on the back of illegible and alienated lesbians – thereby sustaining and confirming the MLF’s female sovereignty as a heterosexual *and* white standard. This colonial strife, I argue, made racialization *available* as a tool of feminist governmentality to uphold the heterosexual boundaries of the MLF’s subject. Although Françoise Vergès sheds light in *Le ventre des femmes* on the “blindness” (2017: 167) of 1970s French feminists to the “coloniality of power” (Quijano 2000) through an astute analysis of gaps and obliterations regarding racial oppression in MLF publications, she does not provide insight into the ways in which the MLF’s national-colonial selfhood enabled race to operate as a “primary way of signifying relationships of power” (Scott 1986: 1067) *between* women in the MLF. Indeed, it was through the deployment of racialized tropes of savagery that the unassimilability of the lesbian as uncivilized by the white male heterosexual gaze was signified in MLF discourses. In that regard, you can consider this section as revealing a fantasy-ethnography, manufactured on the borders of feminist reason, of the underworld of (heterosexual) civilization inhabited by the hysterical dyke.

The insistence on the liveliness and openness of the MLF cannot be fully understood unless one reads it against the MLF’s pervasive other that embodied the anti-Republican threat of a nation within the nation: the morbid lesbian ghetto. For the Féministes révolutionnaires, “the movement exists, [...] it is lively, [...] it is getting bigger, [...] it is everywhere, and it is for women, we call it feminist” (Féministes révolutionnaires 1972 in Bernheim et al. 2009: 160, my translation); for Christiane Rochefort, talking about MLF women: “these women start moving, converging towards each other: they ‘put themselves into movement’. [...] Together they begin to feel they are a force” (Rochefort 1971 in Bernheim et al. 2009: 142, my translation). Yet, these positive descriptions are discursively haunted by parallel descriptions of the alienation of the lesbian ghetto in both radical feminist and differentialist rhetoric (the first extract below was written by a Féministe révolutionnaire, the second by a Psychépo member):

Women’s Liberation Movements [...] have also given themselves the means to access a COLLECTIVE feeling through COLLECTIVE SPACES [...]. [T]heir perspectives are REVOLUTIONARY, feminist (that is, encompassing ALL women). Which is not the case with the lesbian ghetto, which is always enclosed within SINGULARITY, SEGREGATION. And whose collective spaces are not THE EXPRESSION OF FREE

WILLS STRUGGLING FOR THEIR LIBERATION, BUT SPACES FOR THE EXPLOITATION OF SUSTAINED MISERY (Catherine 1974: 2091, my translation).

Homosexuality suffers repression (policing, punishment, etc.), which contributes to its confinement in nightclubs and luxurious private clubs, which means “lesbians” are exploited as gimmicks for intellectuals, artists and bourgeois in search of erotic novelty, or else remain on the margins. The movement is a place for “women among themselves” whose revolutionary and subversive force can no longer be denied [...]. But homosexuals who are in the movement are privileged in comparison with those who are isolated or penned into clubs or nightclubs (Anon. 1972: 9, my translation).

If, as I have previously argued, what makes “lesbians” “hysterical” and “women” “revolutionary” or “rational” is a hidden heterosexual contract underpinning the MLF’s female universalism, I suggest that what makes the lesbian ghetto the space of “sustained misery”, “repression” and “confinement”, “enclosed within singularity, segregation” as opposed to the MLF’s “revolutionary and subversive force”, is the unstated fact that it remains *untouched* by the white male heterosexual gaze. The MLF’s heterosexual contract, through which lesbians *become* women and are “released” from the backwardness of their ghetto, is an inherently colonial contract that brings lesbians out of hiding and into the broad daylight of women’s (heterosexual) emancipation through the (epistemic) forced intermediation of the white male gaze. This colonial logic is what makes Catherine (herself a lesbian), the author of the first extract above, consider homosexuality a “‘CULTURE’ that is currently in a ‘SUBCULTURE’”, the “‘ROTTEN PRODUCT OF THE LITTLE LESBIAN GHETTO” (Catherine 1974: 2090, my translation), which can only reach a higher stage of development – that of becoming a “culture” – if lesbians relinquish their underdeveloped ghetto in favour of their assimilation into the (heteronormative) women’s movement.

The (unconscious) colonial/racial regime that governs the primitiveness of the lesbian as withdrawn from the civilizing male gaze and stuck in the spatialized “rotten” ghetto is especially perceptible in a 1980 article published in the far-left daily *Libération* on an international feminist lesbian summer camp organized in the south-west of France. Throughout the piece, the feminist journalists position themselves as colonial ethnographers revealing a newfound space hidden away “at the far end of the world”, as the title of the piece

states (the subtitle asks: “Ghetto or Not Ghetto?” in English in the text)⁴⁸ and occupied by “creatures” who “have withdrawn there”:

The rain was pouring down onto the path that crawls up the mountain towards the Prieuré du Monastier de Marcebolles. It really was the far end of the world, buried deep in the brush; were we going to catch sight of one of the creatures in the Renault’s headlights? Well, here was the dilapidated stone hut which a group of women had rented under a false name: “You understand”, explained Nicole, [...] “dykes have to stay hidden” (Guinebault and Clavel 1980: 4, my translation).

In the “political unconscious” (Jameson 1982) of 1970s French feminist discourses, the lesbian is signified, I argue, through colonial schemes and animalizing tropes that produce her as a racialized and theatrical freak (using a “false name”) who is hiding away from the civilized world and in need of a civilizing gaze. Just as the veil has been conceived in the history of French colonialism as “an impenetrable membrane, the final barrier to political subjugation” (Scott 2007: 67), the anxieties surrounding the hiddenness of the “lesbian ghetto” in 1970s feminist discourses reveal the fear of an impenetrable membrane between men and women, of women’s irrevocable sexual inaccessibility to men. In that regard, the feminist obsession with releasing lesbians from their alleged spatialized ghetto by way of their civil entry into the emancipated (heterosexual) women’s movement recalls the male colonizer’s frustration with the veiled woman who “does not yield herself, does not give herself, does not offer herself” (Fanon 1965 in Scott 2007: 160) to him and whom he thus seeks to unveil.

As Khanna notes, “a national-colonial self was brought into existence, or perhaps more accurately, into un-concealment” in Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, “[a]nd it situated itself, with fascination, in opposition to its repressed, concealed, and mysterious ‘dark continents’: colonial Africa, women, and the primitive” (2003: 6). Women’s endeavours to integrate into an exclusionary system (abstract universalism) and its subjective ideal (the human or the individual) by holding onto the civilizing power of its colonial and heterosexual standard entailed the production not only of the hysterical dyke as the new hysterical woman but also of the lesbian ghetto as feminism’s *new* excessive and

⁴⁸ I return to the Americanization of lesbian difference in the last section of the second archival chapter.

unspeakable “dark continent”. Building on the historical racialization of tribadism as a monstrous African “mutation of gender” (Dorlin 2009: 13, my translation), a whole racial semiology constructed the “ghettoized” lesbian as a primitive freak.⁴⁹ Women’s physical bodies in the MLF – arguably after having gone through the curative stage of the “miracle of the mirror” – are pervasively described as regenerated and healthy. In issue “zero” of *Le torchon brûle*, the radical feminist Christiane Rochefort describes women’s physical metamorphosis in the feminist movement:

“For the first time, I felt comfortable in my own skin.” “I have been much happier ever since.” “In the street, I can walk better. I feel able to stand on my own two feet.” [...] “I got my voice back.” “I breathe better” (Rochefort 1970 in Bernheim et al. 2009: 127, my translation).

This description of “new” female bodies after women’s entry into the MLF stands in stark contrast with statements describing lesbians as “shameful phallic women, suffering bodies” (Anon. 1975: 17, my translation). Explaining in her autobiographical fiction *Perturbation ma soeur* why she wants to be called a “woman” rather than a lesbian, Cathy Bernheim opposes her own homosexual desires, which are “quite simply human”, to those of the lesbian “monster”:

[She] had not succeeded in sliding into the skin of the monster: had really tried, though, wearing ties and smiling at the beautiful ones as one does in pictures stories, aping the gestures of virile love in order to be loved by women at last (2010 [1983]: 200, my translation).

This description reactivates circus freak tropes, especially rendered through the animalizing verb “aping” – recalling the use of the verb “to pen” in the extract above that compares homosexuals in the movement to “those isolated or penned into clubs or nightclubs”. The lesbian nightclub (“box” – “boîte”) – the trope that most feminists have in mind when addressing the “lesbian ghetto” – is pervasively depicted by feminists as a sort of clandestine

⁴⁹ The lesbian was historically pathologized along racialized lines: “By 1877 it was a commonplace that the Hottentot’s anomalous sexual form was similar to other errors in the development of the labia [...] leading to those ‘excesses’ which ‘are called lesbian love’. The concupiscence of the black is thus associated also with the sexuality of the lesbian” (Gilman 1985: 218; see also Dorlin 2009; Traub 1995).

cage, a “hiding place, at worst, a prison” (Anon. 1971e: 15, my translation), in which the lesbian seems to twirl as a hypersexualized and theatrical freak, giving free rein to her sick instincts. Catherine Deudon, for example, depicts Le Katmandou, an iconic Parisian lesbian bar, as a place where “on public holidays one can see stripteases by women for women being whistled at by ‘julesses’ [butchesses]”, and she opposes the MLF’s “forms of socialization in movement” to those “frozen in alienation onto oppression at the Katmandou” (Deudon 1981: 83, my translation).⁵⁰ While Cathy Bernheim and Catherine Deudon were lesbian radical feminists, we can read similarly sordid descriptions of the lesbian world *prior to* MLF emancipation as a world of primitive darkness outside time and history – echoing Zelensky’s invocation of the “frightening darkness of Africa’s nights” (Tristan and de Pisan 1977: 19, my translation) “populated by cries and scary noises” (17) – in the differentialist magazine *Des femmes en mouvements*:

[The Psychépo meeting] was a surprise to me, and I am somewhat familiar with lesbian environments where there is hardcore cruising. That was not the case here. I could feel that everybody loved everybody else, with no chasing going on [...]. When your own life has to be kept underground, every day, when you have to hide... My life for a long time was about Parisian nightclubs, but I found it unhealthy. I might be a reactionary, a puritan, but it can’t satisfy my desire for life, for living with women... I knew other MLF women, but they were hardcore lesbians, and, if it is about aping hetero couples it is not interesting (Danielle 1978: 43, my translation)

The “unhealthy” and ostentatious sexuality of “hardcore lesbians” is textually posited to encode the moderateness of the MLF’s (heterosexual) female individuals. (Heterosexual) women’s emancipated and healthy bodies in the MLF are performed on the backs of broken, suffering, animalized and primitive lesbian bodies hidden in the “underground” of (white and heterosexual) civilization. Importantly, the colonial thinking in which the lesbian was racialized and spatialized – and thus encouraged to emerge from her developmental failures by integrating into the MLF – entailed the unthinkable of non-white lesbians: racialization could work to subjugate lesbians to the extent that they were always already imagined as white.

⁵⁰ The word “julesses” is the author’s own invention. The feminine ending “-esse”, alluding to “duchess” or “princess”, is in my view meant to mock lesbian masculinity while reactivating the theatrical tropes by which lesbian unnaturalness and inhumanity are signified.

The emphasis on healthy female bodies in the MLF is inseparable from the ways in which “[t]he issue of the Nation constantly refers to its corporeality” (Dorlin 2009: 208, my translation). Drawing on French feminist and Foucauldian philosopher Elsa Dorlin’s brilliant analysis of the sexual and colonial genealogy of the French nation, I suggest that in becoming hysterical subjects *par excellence*, lesbians inherited the humoral and physiopathological diseases attached to the uterus – the organ of hysteria – in classical and modern medicine. The feminist heterosexual contract is therefore not only political; it is also a purifying physiopathological contract transmuting morbid lesbian bodies into healthy and lively female bodies: “[a]s a homosexual, I refuse to descend incognito the wet, cold steps of their secret and sterile society. I want to live in the light” (Une féministe “inconvenable” 1978: 47, my translation), one MLF woman writes of lesbianism in Psychépo’s magazine. In classical medicine,

the warmth of the body is perceived as a principle of life, health and strength, whereas cold is a sign of death. [...] These qualities of cold and wet, systematically assimilated to the female body, thus imply a whole regime of imperfections: always lacking in respect to normal temperature, which is embodied in the warm and wet temperament of men, women were compared to incomplete, mutilated, powerless beings” (Dorlin 2009: 22–23, my translation).

A heterosexual “nosopolitics” was substituted for classical sexual “nosopolitics” (Dorlin 2009: 14), replacing women’s unhealthy and morbid bodies (now free and warm in the MLF) with the sick body of the lesbian freak enclosed in the “wet”, “cold” and “sterile” walls of the lesbian ghetto. In other words, as 1970s feminist discourses cleaned out the female body, the lesbian body was “struck down by the order of nature” (Dorlin 2009: 42) like a “demonic possession” underpinning lesbians’ “physical and moral corruption” (45).

The paradox is that in seeking to symbolically integrate the nation through the institution of heterosexuality, 1970s feminists – although fighting against traditional motherhood – upheld and enshrined the rationality that presided over the regime of reproductive sexuality in which women were “purified” and integrated into the nation *as mothers* in the late eighteenth century (while still being excluded from the Republic). As Dorlin explains:

[At the end of the eighteenth century], health was closely linked to coitus in the lives of women. The injunction to engage in reproductive heterosexuality was thus a matter of medical prescription. It was therefore not simply motherhood that was the mark of health and the quintessence of femininity, but also heterosexuality. Marriage and motherhood both functioned as antidotes, as a temporary antivenom to femininity's morbidity and natural weakness. Sexuality was at the centre of the new definition of feminine health. [...] Marriage and motherhood clearly came to "sublimate" the female body, which without this *regime* would be incapable of health. [...] From this perspective, the wife and "mother" are necessarily superior to the hysterical, the nymphomaniac, etc., the "white" mother is necessarily superior to the "savage" woman, the African woman, the slave (2009: 135–136, emphasis Dorlin's, my translation).

According to Dorlin's analysis, the curative logic of heterosexuality – in a paradoxical feat – had feminist potential insofar as it articulated a logic of "indistinction of the sexes" (Dorlin 2009: 135): "married women and mothers were virilized, as it were, by dint of being 'impregnated' by masculine sperm" (134), and this virilization "testified to a significant amelioration of the health of the feminine condition" (135). The "antivenom" of heterosexuality presiding over the "sublimation" of women's bodies, which developed in the context of the formation of the French nation at the turn of the eighteenth century with a view to integrating white women into the nation as mothers, is the same antivenom by which women's bodies were allegedly purified through their civil entry into the MLF (and hence made equal to men) while (visible) lesbians were radically excluded from MLF individuality. Persuasively showing how the classical medical model of women's hysterical illnesses and of the female body as "*the Sex*" – the "paradigm of the sick body" (109) – was applied, by means of a "genetic relationship" or "reciprocal generation" (12), to slave bodies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by modern medicine, Dorlin talks of a "*hystericization* of the slave body", which she calls "racial hysteria" (2009: 247, emphasis Dorlin's, my translation; Birnbaum 1999). We could therefore argue that a "genetic relationship" runs reasonably straight from classical misogynist discourses on women's hysteria, to modern colonial discourses on racial hysteria, to second-wave feminist discourses on lesbian hysteria.

If the "fear of communitarianism" – that is, of group identities triumphing over individualism – "has a long genealogy related to a pathologizing of sexuality as a health risk and to a fear of

a homosexual cabal against the interests of France" (Perreau 2016: 145), this fear is far from being specific to conservative genealogies of national belonging: it was fully present in 1970s feminist discourses against the abject figure of the psychotic and hysterical lesbian "penned" into her "secret and sterile society". By calling upon a universal female individuality purely organized along the discrete line of gender subordination – aspiring to an epistemological model which they "[could] not not want", to use Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's classic formulation (Spivak 1993 in Arteaga 1996: 28) – MLF women did not simply "remove" lesbian "markers": they "buil[t] a fence around [themselves]" (Brown 2000: 231) that enshrined a definition of women based on the heterosexual and racial regulation of the liberal individual.

What happened, then, when lesbians claimed to speak *as lesbians* in the MLF, thus making visible the MLF's "obscene underside" (Žižek 2000: 220) or the "impossible within the possible" (Butler 2011 [1993]: 180)? What happened when they threatened to expose the unavowable secret of a primary crisis in representation and to reawaken the buried trauma of women's unassimilability into the nation, a trauma that had been firmly sealed in the MLF's lesbian crypt and hidden inside the closet of the "women" sign?⁵¹

3. "We Lesbians, We Are Not Others": The Gouines Rouges' Paradoxes to Offer

Foregrounding the paradoxical nature of feminism in the context of liberal individualism, Joan W. Scott has famously deconstructed the traditional opposition between equality and difference in the history of feminism:

To the extent that it acted for "women", feminism produced the "sexual difference" it sought to eliminate. This paradox – the need both to accept *and* to refuse "sexual

⁵¹ I am borrowing from psychoanalysts Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok the notion of a "crypt" as that which melancholically preserves a lost object within the body while disavowing the loss in the form of an entombed secret (1994 [1987]). Incorporation – the process by which a lost object is maintained in the body – "preserves the past *as* past, in a crypt imperfectly sealed off from the present, in a psyche with unpredictable leakages, in a body semiotically and sensually at productive odds with itself" (Freeman 2010: 119). We could say that the MLF's lesbian crypt seals and conceals the trauma of repudiated lesbian attachments and the lie of assimilation that goes along with it, making it susceptible to "unpredictable leakages". I return to the issue of lesbian melancholia in the second archival chapter.

difference” – was the constitutive condition of feminism as a political movement throughout its long history (Scott 1996: 3–4).

The contrast between equality and difference, Scott explains, is not a contrast between two competing ideologies but a constitutive tension of the feminist movement insofar as women were trapped in the paradox of demanding the Rights of Man for women. It is, I argue, the same paradox that confronted the Gouines rouges. Insofar as the MLF was founded on a heterosexual contract that sealed the rights of heterosexual women as universal, lesbians found themselves relentlessly demanding inclusion as lesbians in a collectivity which equated femaleness with heterosexuality. As such, to paraphrase Joan W. Scott:

To the extent that [they] acted for [“lesbians”], [the Gouines rouges] produced [in the MLF] the “[lesbian] difference” they sought to eliminate. This paradox – the need to accept and to refuse “[lesbian] difference” – was the constitutive condition of [lesbian political subjectivity in 1970s France].

In other words, lesbians had to simultaneously assert their particularity as lesbians – which had been foundationally excluded from the boundaries of femaleness – and to deny the relevance of that particularity in order to be politically included in the MLF as “women”. The MLF’s lie – claiming that all women are female individuals while positing lesbians as outside the boundaries of female individuality – was the condition for the birth of a paradoxical lesbian agency in 1970s France. Paradoxes are not only unresolvable as paradoxes, but also to the extent that as we optimistically attempt to resolve them they endlessly produce *new* unresolvable paradoxes. Paradox as the site of liberal violation is a productive and regulating site.

The impetus for the creation of the Gouines rouges in February 1971 arose from two particular meetings – one of Fouque’s Groupe sexualité féminine, and the other of Les Petites Marguerites (a group of MLF radical feminist artists) – during which some participants (exposing the false neutrality of women’s sameness) overtly expressed their contempt and aversion for lesbianism. As Wittig recalled in a 1974 interview for the libertarian monthly *Actuel*, the Gouines rouges were born out of the realization of entrenched homophobia in the MLF:

In the first small groups we started to focus on all the things that were most apparent about women's oppression: abortion, the lack of control over our own bodies, rape, domestic work, relationships between men and women. There were homosexuals in these groups. But we did not think about talking about that. A kind of embarrassment. A fear of scaring "women" away, a feeling of guilt, a feeling of being out of place. We were not real women who had real women's problems. We were afraid the movement would be perceived as an organization of angry dykes. In the end it happened, all the same: a mundane conversation in one of our homes about homosexuality. Questions out of pure curiosity: "how do you do it?" "What is lesbian pleasure?" [...] Comments like: "what's annoying about homosexuality is that you can't have children". And "Enough about homosexuality". So, a few of us felt attacked, because it was the only aspect of our oppression that was not approached from a political standpoint, it was the weird, entertaining department of the movement. We thought it was necessary to begin talking about it among ourselves, as had been the case for all the other issues. The Gouines rouges were born from that (Wittig in *Actuel* 1974: 12, my translation).

This extract is particularly interesting insofar as it recounts – from a lesbian perspective – the exact opposite of what (dominant) narratives of homosexual hegemony (discussed above) recount: while heterosexual women claimed to "[feel] attacked" by the "degeneration" of homosexuality into "political valorization" in the MLF (Anon. 1973d: 17, my translation), Wittig's testimony highlights that it was lesbians who were actually attacked by a naturalized homophobia. While heterosexual women complained that one "barely [spoke] about [relationships with men] in the movement, one [did] not dare" (Anon. 1973d: 17), Wittig makes clear that it was exactly the other way around: lesbians felt "embarrassed", afraid of "scaring 'women' away", "guilty" and "out of place". Her (correct) description of how the MLF never publicly addressed issues pertaining to lesbians also gives the lie to the (outrageously dishonest) claims that heterosexual women "withdrew" from the MLF because of a "taboo" on heterosexuality that "took out of collective thinking" "private issues connected to relationships with men" (Pipon 2013: 183, my translation). Further, her critique of how homosexuality "was the weird, entertaining department of the movement" foregrounds the condescending (and prohibitive) heteronormative standpoint from which homosexuality was desexualized and universalized to "all women". She finally makes explicit the fear of the hysterical dyke which haunted feminist discourses and which I revealed above: "we were afraid the movement would be perceived as an organization of angry dykes".

It was in response to this homophobic context that a group of lesbians from the Féministes révolutionnaires created the Gouines rouges, whose name was not chosen until the summer of 1971 when a male passer-by called a group of feminists selling *Le torchon brûle* “red dykes” (Delphy, interview, 20 March 2016; Lasserre 2014: 28; Martel 1999: 46). Meeting in Monique Wittig’s home between February and September 1971, and then in Evelyne Rochedereux’s home from September 1971 until the group’s disintegration in 1973, the Gouines rouges brought together around fifty women, and “for those who had ‘always’ been lesbians [it was] the only official space where they could be heard in the movement” (Bonnet 1995: 339–340, my translation). Monique Wittig was a founder and core member of the Gouines rouges: she participated in most meetings throughout the group’s two years of existence, “pushing [them] to become more visible” (Bonnet 1997, my translation).

However, as Marie-Jo Bonnet recalls, this desire to form a lesbian group was “extremely contested in the MLF” (Bernadette, Nelly et Suzette 1981: 115, my translation). Speaking of an “outcry”, Christine Delphy corroborates this memory:

I remember very well the reactions in the feminist movement when gay women said that they wanted to have non-mixed meetings, among themselves. Married women had their meeting one night a week and were active alongside other women the rest of the time; no one raised an eyebrow when they said they were going to do this. We simply wanted to do likewise. The outcry that our announcement provoked led to interminable discussions (2015: 25, my translation).

For one of the radical feminists who strongly opposed the creation of the group, the Gouines rouges threatened to undermine the unity of the movement, as she recalled during our interview:

- When did they pull the trick on me of standing up and leaving all together, as a block [...]? After a general assembly of Féministes révolutionnaires, we went to a café to discuss. [...] We had only recently arrived [in the movement], with our stories about fellas... Caught up in it... And then we saw two or three of them stand up and say “we’re off” and “we have a meeting... the Gouines rouges...” They did not even say [the Gouines Rouges] but it was clear that we did not

belong there... We were furious! We were already very, very, very close friends, we had already done loads of things together... And they did that to us! [...]

- Why were you furious?
- Because we loved them! (My translation)

The fiction of an *original* uncorrupted unity, which naturalizes and conceals the heterosexual hegemony, inevitably produces the Gouines rouges' political gatherings as a (hostile) *separation* – in contrast to married women's meetings, as Delphy notes. This separation is visually constructed in the interviewee's memory as the interruption of a pure unity around a table ("we went to a café to discuss") – itself a continuation of the unitary general assembly of the Féministes révolutionnaires – by a "block". It is worth noting that the word "block", used here by the interviewee, is reminiscent of the anonymous author in *Le torchon brûle* who enjoined women to struggle as an indivisible "block" in the MLF, to which I referred in the first section. As a block within the block, within the logic of universalist feminism, the Gouines rouges represent the anti-Republican threat of a nation within the nation – the lesbian ghetto – undermining its abstract purity by questioning its invisibilized heterosexual norm. They are, indeed, portrayed as violently fracturing an uncontaminated unity, like a proliferating threat crawling from within the womb of the movement: "we saw two or three of them standing up and saying 'we're off' and 'we have a meeting... the Gouines rouges...'"

The interviewee's narrative is also particularly compelling insofar as it reveals the performative effects on lesbians' closeting of feminist feelings of collective happiness and symbiotic love. The fiction of sameness, which concealed an antagonism between heterosexuality and lesbianism, was constantly secured by calling upon these feelings of love. The fascinating (albeit violent) feat enabled by the invocation of positive affects to support a fictive political unity in the present is that the "fury" to which the interviewee refers is thereby described not as the effect of a hegemonic resistance against the visibilization of a political minority ("when did they pull the trick on me of standing up?") but as the effect of her "love" for them: "we were furious! [...] Because we loved them!" Thus, while her hegemonic rejection of the visibilization of lesbianism is narratively transvalued into a manifestation of "love" for those she sought to prevent from getting together, the Gouines rouges are implicitly portrayed in return as unable to love their feminist friends and as selfishly seeking to divide the movement – in short, as anti-feminist.

Feminist affects of ecstatic joy and love, of which the naturalized fiction of sisterhood is a performative effect, are instrumental in concealing the genealogy of lesbians' subjugation and in invisibilizing (and relentlessly securing) heterosexuality's hegemony. Therefore, what I have identified as the textual manifestation of the MLF's heterosexual iron law – “[e]veryone seemed to agree that we should strive to suppress this distinction [between heterosexuality and homosexuality]: prevent this difference from becoming antagonism” (A. [Antoinette Fouque] 1971: 3) – ensnared lesbians who wanted to politicize their position in a conundrum made of two impossible options: either remaining invisible in the closet of the “women” sign (“suppressing the distinction [between heterosexuality and homosexuality]”, which would mean leaving heterosexuality unthinkable as an oppressive regime), or speaking up in a discursive/epistemic context where they were always already read as inaugurating a conflict (since the present antagonism was denied by the fiction of sameness) and thereby as embodying the figure of the hysterical dyke.

This impossible conundrum is further exemplified in a tract distributed by the Gouines rouges during one of the movement's general assemblies in early 1971, which reads:

How, in the movement, we represent women to ourselves: having abortions performing abortions workers mothers housewives wives chicks always implicitly women in sexual relationships with men. When these are talked about in the movement, it's “we” women. When homosexuals are talked about, it's “them”. We lesbians, who say “we” with those who have abortions, the workers, the mothers, etc., we are not others (Bernheim 2010 [1983]: 198, my translation).

In this text, the discursive life of the lesbian paradox is starkly laid out. Speaking on behalf of their difference as “lesbians” in the MLF's “we” of “women” in order to protest at their exclusion from it, the Gouines rouges conclude their statement with a properly paradoxical formulation: “we lesbians, [...] we are not others”. Lesbians had to speak on behalf of their own difference, “we lesbians”, in order to not be “others” any more – in order to count as “women”. In other words, they had to be lesbians in order to become women, to lay claim to their difference in order to be treated equally. Addressing the irresolvable paradox between ““we are all sisters”” and ““dirty hetero””, “the ‘liberation movement’” and “the ‘ghetto’” in which the group “got trapped”, one Gouines rouges member uses the humorous metaphor of an “oscillation [...] like the crazy needles of a compass that has lost magnetic north” to

describe the collective's position in the MLF (Anon. 1973f: 22, my translation).

In relation to lesbians' double affiliation as "women" and "homosexuals", a short-lived alliance between gay men and lesbians arose in the spring of 1971 when a group of mostly lesbian activists founded the Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire (FHAR, Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action). The FHAR originally sprang from a merger of activists from the Féministes révolutionnaires/Gouines rouges (including Christine Delphy and Monique Wittig), participants in an MLF consciousness-raising group named Les polymorphes perverses (Polymorphous Perverts), and members of a collective named Groupe homosexualité (Homosexuality Group), which had been created in September 1970 by mostly lesbian dissident activists from the "homophile" organization Arcadie (Arcadia), an assimilationist homosexual organization founded in 1954 by former seminarian and philosophy professor André Baudry.⁵² Taking aim at "fascist sexual normality" (FHAR 2013 [1971]: 11, my translation), FHAR activists – much inspired by the Freudo-Marxist literature that was then in fashion – considered homosexuality a revolutionary force with the potential to dismantle capitalist exploitation along with "the sacrosanct institutions of the family and monogamous patriarchy" (FHAR 1971 in Chauvin 2005: 117, my translation). Hence, the FHAR advocated a radical transformation of society through the promotion and visibilization of homosexual difference (Scott 2009). Its inaugural action consisted in the flamboyant sabotage on 10 March 1971 of Ménie Grégoire's popular live radio broadcast, that day's edition of which was devoted to "the painful problem of homosexuality" (see Figure 25). For historian Michael Sibalis, this action marks "the founding moment of gay liberation in France" (2005: 265).⁵³

In this context, feminists, lesbians and gay men promoted a "merger of revolts" (FHAR 2013 [1971]: 60, my translation) against their common enemy: "'normal' society" (9). In an

⁵² On the history of Arcadie, see Jackson (2009a), Martel (1999), Miles (1996, 1997), Prearo (2014).

⁵³ On the history of the FHAR, see Bonnet (1995, 1998, 2018), Bourg (2007), Callwood (2017), d'Eaubonne (1996, 1996–1997), de Segovia (1996–1997), FHAR (2013 [1971]), Fleig (1996–1997 [1973]), Girard (1981), Guérin (1996–1997), Hahn (1996–1997 [1976]), Hocquenghem (1972, 1974, 1996–1997 [1972]), Idier (2017), Jackson (2009a, 2009b), Lasserre (2014), Marchant 2005, Martel (1999), Mile (1997), Mossuz-Lavau (1991), Prearo (2010, 2014), Roy (1996–1997 [1981]), Scott (2009), Sibalis (2005) and Turlot and Venner (1998).

explosion of laughter, shouts and singing, lesbians and gay men from the FHAR and the MLF marched together in Paris' annual May Day march in 1971 – to the dismay of the trade unions and leftist parties – loudly shouting: “male, female, had enough! Down with the dictatorship of normal people!” (Girard 1981: 95, my translation) The presence of homosexual activists on this march made it homosexuals' first public demonstration in France.

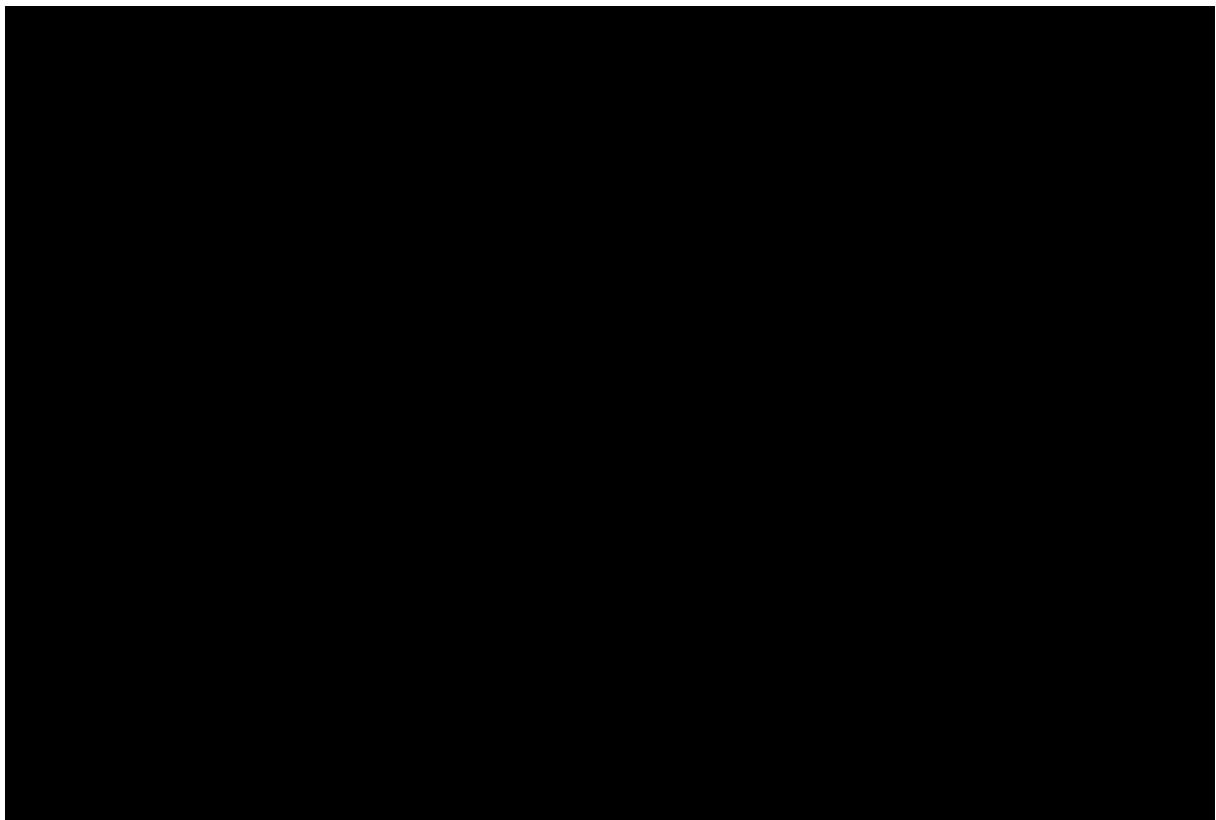


Figure 25. Members of the FHAR after sabotaging Ménie Grégoire's radio broadcast. Second from left is Christine Delphy, third from left is Monique Wittig, and second from right is Antoinette Fouque. Paris, 10 March 1971. Photographer: Catherine Deudon.

A dozen, mostly lesbian activists had founded the FHAR (see Figure 25). However, the successful publication of a special edition on homosexual liberation – the famous issue twelve – of the Maoist-anarchist newspaper *Tout!* (Everything!) in April 1971 drew about 400 gay men to the FHAR's weekly general assemblies. In this overwhelmingly male environment, lesbians felt increasingly uncomfortable, and a rift opened up that terminated the alliance (Bonnet 1995, 1998, 2018; Bourg 2007; Chauvin 2005; Martel 1999). In addition to their dismay at the male chauvinism of many of the gay men, it was “‘the overly hot topic’ of pleasure” (Bonnet 1995: 333, my translation) that provoked the departure of most of the lesbians from the FHAR. While lesbians – who had mostly come from the MLF (with the

exception of a few members of Arcadie, such as Anne-Marie Grélois and Françoise d'Eaubonne) – framed their political interventions in the humanist (and feminine) language of love and mutual recognition, declaring that they were seeking to “finally discover our total humanity” and build “relationships that we could really dare to call love” (Des militantes du MLF 1971 in Bonnet 1995: 335–336, my translation), gay men on the other hand promoted a hypersexual culture anchored in anti-humanist philosophies of the desiring machine (Deleuze and Guattari 1977 [1972]; Hocquenghem 1978 [1972]). Addressing this incompatibility, iconic FHAR activist Guy Hocquenghem recalls:⁵⁴

From the beginning, the FHAR distinguished itself as a sexual movement. We talked sex; in fact, we talked only about sex, to the point, some women told us, where love and human relationships hardly seemed to interest us at all. I tend to believe that's true: there is little place, or no place at all, in a homosexual movement for a psychology of relationships founded on “truly human love”. If there is such a thing as an antihumanist movement, this is it, where the sex machine and organs plugged into other organs make up almost all the desire that is being expressed. We are come machines (1972 in Martel 1999: 47)

In a text entitled “Lesbians’ response to their homosexual brothers”, FHAR lesbians laconically encapsulated their difference from gay men: “[w]e lesbians, we want to talk about our love, because we have had enough of seeing men flaunting sex and sex alone” (FHAR 2013 [1971]: 81, my translation).

By the summer of 1971, all the women (with the exception of Françoise d'Eaubonne) had left the FHAR, which itself disintegrated in 1974. The recognition of an irreducible difference between men and women on the matter of sexuality definitively convinced the lesbians that they belonged to the MLF and that the most relevant social contradiction for them was not that between “heterosexuality and homosexuality, but [between] the mode of expression of male sexuality [and] the new impulses behind women’s desire” (Bonnet 1995: 334, my translation). After their departure from the FHAR, I argue, the Gouines rouges progressively abandoned their “oscillating” position between femaleness and lesbianism in favour of a renewed fusion with women in the MLF. As Guy Hocquenghem notes, in the spring of 1971,

⁵⁴ On Guy Hocquenghem, see Bourg (2007), Callwood (2017), Haas (2004, 2007), Marshall (1997), Martel (1999), Idier (2017) and Robcis (2013).

when they were still active in the FHAR, “lesbians asserted their double quality as homosexuals and women” (1972: 156, my translation); but a year later, on 14 May 1972, when they spoke in front of about 1,000 women at the Mutualité meeting hall at a “Condemnation of Crimes Committed Against Women” organized by the MLF, they defined themselves as “a group of women who collectively express our rejection of the roles and functions they have wanted to impose on Women” (Un groupe de lesbiennes 1987 [1972]: 9, my translation). Although they were still demanding full inclusion in the MLF, this time the lesbian word was almost absent from their manifesto. Defining themselves by way of long paraphrases such as “Women who reject the roles of wife and mother” (as the title of the manifesto states), the text is deployed around the anaphor “We Women” (with the recurring capitalization of “We Women”):

We were spat at in disgust, We Women

We were locked up in the silence of our insignificance, We Women

We are rejected, hidden or made into spectacles, insulted because we are Women who refuse to submit to the law of male phallocrats and hetero-cops (Un groupe de lesbiennes 1987 [1972]: 9, my translation).

The Gouines rouges’ (paradoxical) tour de force in this manifesto is to speak doubly as both lesbians and women while barely mentioning the word “lesbian” (or “homosexual”), that is, while disavowing their position of enunciation in order to be included in the MLF as the same as the others (“women”). It must also be noted that the Gouines rouges’ paradoxical position limited their visibility *within* the feminist movement. The Gouines rouges never undertook public actions as lesbians (unlike gay men in the FHAR), and the few actions they did undertake were all directed towards the other feminists *in* the MLF (demanding inclusion): insofar as they were born *from within* the discursive space of feminism “in and as contradiction” (Scott 1996: 12), their position was established exclusively in relation to the MLF. Thus, feminism’s internal lesbian paradox also resulted in the limitation of lesbians’ visibility within the sphere of feminism, and forbade from the outset – even as it allowed its emergence – the expansion of a lesbian agency beyond the women’s movement.

Asked why the group separated in early 1973, one of the Gouines rouges explains: “[m]eanwhile, in the movement, the divisions were increasing and one felt more like a Féministe révolutionnaire than a Gouine rouge, more woman than lesbian” (Anon. 1973f: 22,

my translation). Similarly, Marie-Jo Bonnet recalls:

It is true that after a period of functioning as a group, there was an interruption because we no longer saw any reason to meet as lesbians. We had organized a few things in the movement, and among ourselves, and it went no further. We did not see the need for purely lesbian activism. That might have hindered the expression of our oppression as women (Bernadette, Nelly et Suzette 1981: 115, my translation).

After reading their manifesto on stage at the Mutualité meeting hall on 14 May 1972, one of the Gouines rouges, Cathy Bernheim, asked all the women in the room to join them on stage because “it was time to get to grips again with every kind of love and to make them not into new pretexts for putting ourselves into categories, but real reasons for hope” (Bernheim 2010 [1983]: 201, my translation). Although this collective act of coming out at first aroused shared feelings of “refusal” and “embarrassment” (Bonnet 1995: 339, my translation) in the audience, it was followed by a joyful and enthusiastic debate on homosexual pleasure between women, “which led to an improvised party with singing and dancing, in a moment of collective fusion which would remain indelible” (Bonnet 1995: 339), invoking the same affects of women’s togetherness through which the MLF’s symbiotic unanimity had been brought into being (see Figure 26).

Addressing the history of the Gouines rouges, Wittig makes a particularly interesting comment on the group’s stasis:

The Red Dykes never developed any strong lesbian front. We had meetings, we tried to do several actions. The group was so static that finally I left it. I don’t understand what happened. I’ve had years to think about it, but I don’t know how to analyse the situation. [...] I left the group because nothing happened (Delphy, Wittig and Douglas 1980: 26).

Indeed, apart from their 1972 public performance and a few consciousness-raising discussions, the scope of the Gouines rouges’ actions turned out to be extremely limited. I argue that the reason why “the group was so static” and eventually disbanded was because of the context in which it had emerged as a symptom of the MLF’s paradoxical heterosexual individualism. As Wendy Brown rightly remarks:

Paradox appears endlessly self-canceling, as a political condition of achievements perpetually undercut, a predicament of discourse in which every truth is crossed by a counter-truth, and hence a state in which political strategizing itself is paralyzed (Brown 2000: 239).

The “self-canceling” effects of their “oscillating” position (Anon. 1973f: 22) – indebted to the structural impossibility of deciding whether one is a woman or a lesbian – led to what Wittig calls the Gouines rouges’ paralysis, finally pushing them into fully relinquishing their paradoxical position (which was already perceptible in their 1972 manifesto). The Gouines rouges ended up privileging their “woman” identification in a renewed fusion with “all” women. That is why no lesbian movement developed in France in parallel with the feminist movement in the early-to-mid-1970s.

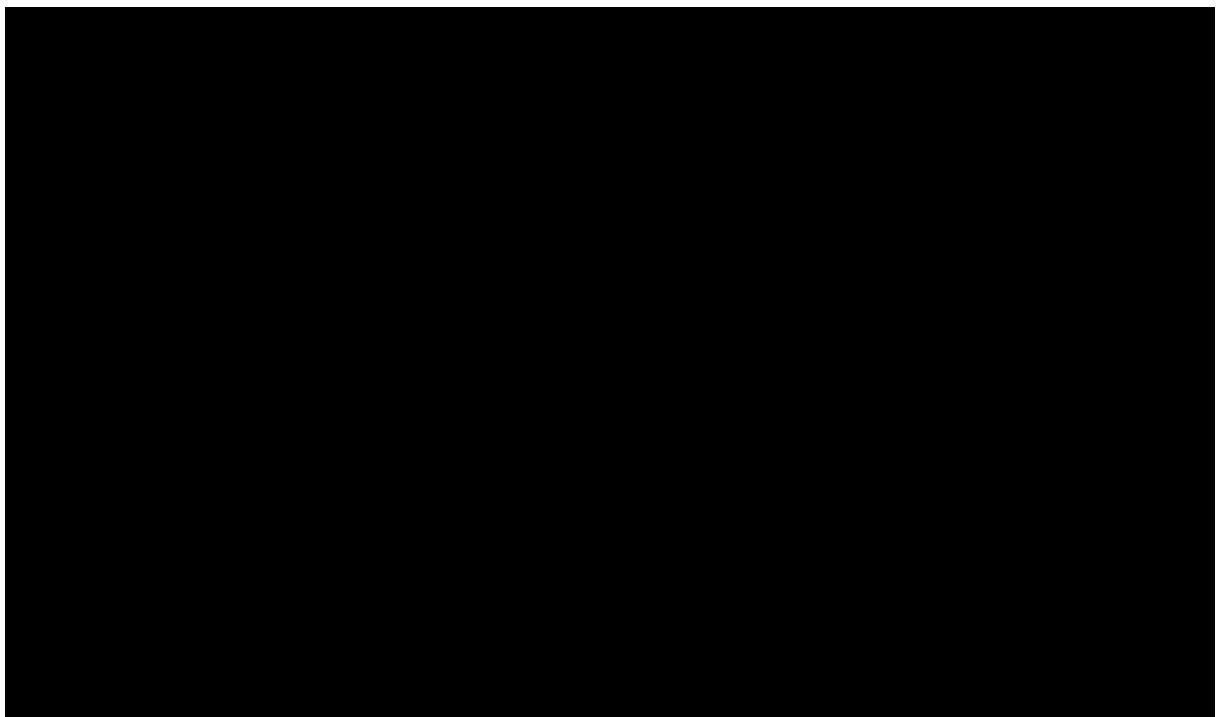


Figure 26. Gouines rouges’ performance at the “Condemnation of the Crimes Committed Against Women”. Paris, 14 May 1972. Photographer unknown (Archives, recherches et cultures lesbiennes, 6, December 1987: 7).

On the Gouines rouges, sociologist Frédéric Martel writes:

After the first years of battle, however, visibility had become more possible – and more desirable. [...] With the first public appearances of the Gouines Rouges, homosexual women became more prominent in the MLF (Martel 1999: 46).

While the visibilization of MLF lesbians in the Gouines rouges was indeed an important coming out, I do not share the narrative that presents this visibilization as having “finally” liberated lesbianism in the women’s movement. Such a narrative does not fit with the future conflicts over lesbianism in the MLF (which remain untold in the historiography) and helps to foreclose any more critical enquiry into the heterosexual foundations of the MLF. Just as women’s exclusion from the Republic was not an “accidental postponement but rather [...] a constitutive principle of modern democracy” (Fassin 1999b: 143, my translation), lesbians’ exclusion from the MLF’s female individual was not a temporary oblivion ultimately resolved by the Gouines rouges, but a structural repression. There was no real change of perspective after the Gouines rouges, who chose to “re-become” women when the group disbanded; rather, there was a fiction of progress that was conveniently used to further silence lesbian voices later in the decade by claiming that the issue had already been resolved. Thus, the Gouines rouges mark not the end of the story, as Martel suggests, but rather the very first manifestation of the awkward lesbian paradox that spanned the decade of the 1970s.

In a 1975 video interview with her close MLF friend Louise Turcotte, Monique Wittig says of MLF lesbians:

They were lesbians in the movement, but first and foremost they were activists, and they completely forgot who they were... we completely forgot who we were (Turcotte 1975: 2 mins 6 sec, my translation).

If the national temporality of assimilation rests on the need to “remember to forget”, as Ernest Renan, the most famous theorist of modern nations, has contended (1882 in Khanna 2008: 143), assimilation in the MLF’s (colonial) modernity of “women” entailed forgetting about particular identities – represented by the horrendous ghetto of the lesbian “from before the movement”. In this extract, Monique Wittig clings to feminism’s lesbian losses, refusing to forget the Gouines rouges’ ultimately successful mourning of their lesbian difference (“we no longer saw any reason to meet as lesbians”) and their feelings of satisfaction (“we had organized a few things in the movement”). Thus, Wittig introduces us to a “different political

reason” (Khanna 2008: xvii) that favours lesbian remembering over feminist forgetfulness, lesbian dissatisfaction over women’s radical happiness, insurgent “critical agency [...] in search of justice” (Khanna 2008: 59) over exclusionary liberalism. In the next chapter, I look for the traces of lesbian melancholic hauntings, the traces of those stubborn and liminal subjects who, resisting the MLF’s injunctions to assimilate, refused to “forget who [they] were” – and who, as such, exceeded the feminist archive.

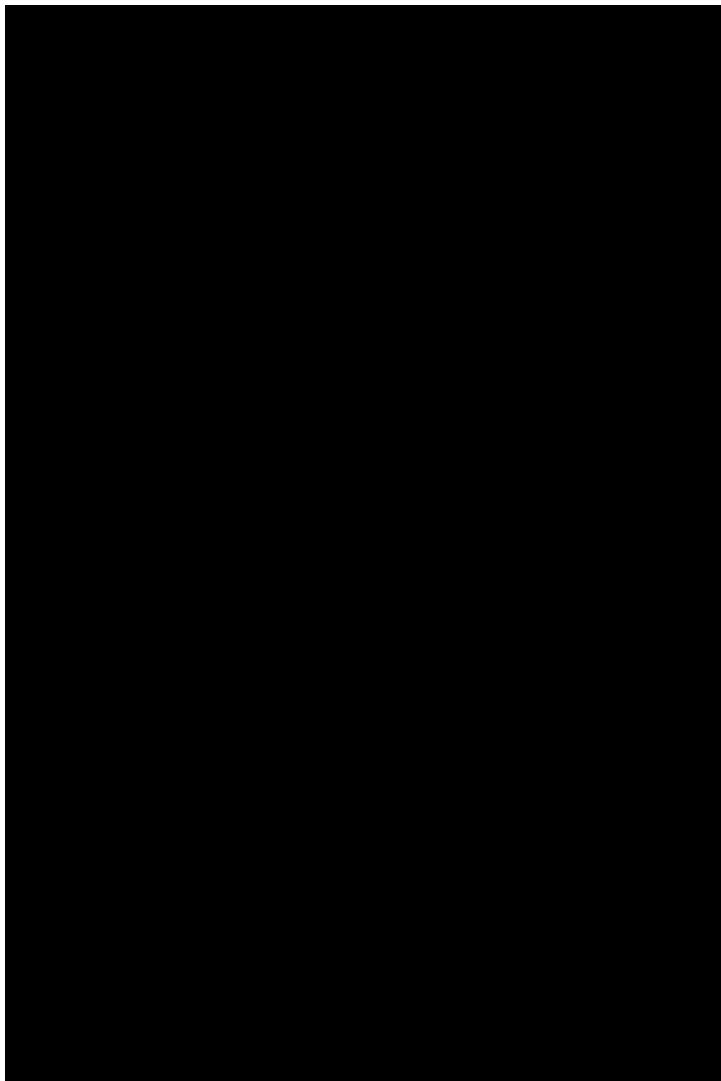


Figure 27. Monique Wittig during her interview with Louise Turcotte. Paris, May 1975. Photographer: Irène Bouaziz. Source: <http://www.moniquewittig.com/francais/medias1.htm>. Last accessed: 14 May 2018.

Chapter 3

Lesbian Melancholic Hauntings (1973–1979)

In his classic essay “Mourning and Melancholia”, Sigmund Freud (1957 [1917]) defines mourning and melancholia as two psychic reactions to the loss of a love object: mourning is the successful psychic assimilation of the lost object, while melancholia is the dejected state resulting from a failure of assimilation in which the loss cannot be identified. Building on this distinction, postcolonial and feminist theorist Ranjana Khanna, whose superb work on the psychic life of the French colonial lie of assimilation has been highly influential on this thesis, addresses “assimilation as a form of narcissism that can be linked to the dominant fiction of nationalism” (2003: 24) and defines colonial melancholia as a “spectral remainder of the inassimilable colonial structure of the modern nation-state” (2003: 12). Colonial melancholia, she continues, manifests itself through haunting: “haunting is a symptom of melancholia. [...] Haunting constitutes the *work of melancholia*” (2003: 25, emphasis Khanna’s).

In this chapter, I consider lesbianism as a remainder of the dominant fiction of feminism understood as a mythologized reinscription of the metacultural, ideological and temporal apparatus of the liberal nation-state in the name of a community of women. I read the lie of lesbians’ assimilation into feminism as giving rise to what I call lesbian melancholia. Lesbian melancholia is a remainder of the failure to assimilate into the feminist community of women, and it brings a critical agency into being as the breakdown of the ideal of assimilation: it claims “catachreses from a space that one cannot not want to inhabit and yet must criticise” (Spivak 1990: 27).⁵⁵ Lesbian haunting is thus the material manifestation of a melancholic critical lesbian agency that is responding to an “epistemic violence – which is the violence of assimilation” (Khanna 2008: 169).⁵⁶

⁵⁵ If MLF women are lesbian melancholics as a result of their heterosexual melancholia, then in response to this hegemonic heterosexual melancholia lesbian-identified feminists experienced melancholic feelings of disidentification from feminism as a refusal to repudiate feminism’s (ungrieved) lesbian attachments.

⁵⁶ Ranjana Khanna extends the structure of melancholic haunting to “any group entering into a liberal democracy that was based on their exclusion: women entering into full citizenship in postcolonial contexts, or indeed otherwise, could similarly experience melancholic haunting” (2003: 263). On racial melancholia as characterizing nation-state formation and the postcolonial psyche, see Bell (1999), Bhabha (1984), Cheng (1997, 2001), Chow (1991, 2014), Eng (1999), Eng and Han (2000), Eng and Kazanjian (2002), Gilroy (1987, 2004) and

Lesbian melancholia is the political and psychic underside of the assimilationist mourning of differences within the community of women. It is bound up with a loss that cannot be identified and hence cannot be mourned. This loss is the loss of feminism's secret – that lesbians are not women – and therefore of the ideal of feminism itself. It is the haunting life of this encrypted secret, the “inaccessible remainder”, the unknown “kernel of melancholia” (Khanna 2003: 24), that I chart in this chapter. The subject of lesbian melancholia is thus the ghostly subject of MLF modernity: this chapter recounts the story of the lesbian who did *not* become a woman with the advent of the MLF. It must be added that lesbian melancholic attachments to feminism are also the effect of an unquestioned whiteness that makes feminism a love object with which one can both identify (as a white woman) and disidentify (as a lesbian) at the same time.

Giving rise to a melancholic spectre, the MLF modernity of women introduced “an interruptive time-lag in the ‘progressive’ myth of [women’s] modernity” (Bhabha 2004: 344) as its self-legitimizing technique. The lesbian spectral presence therefore exerts a “gravitational pull” (Freeman 2000: 728) or a “temporal recalcitrance” (Freeman 2010: 92) on MLF temporality, dragging into the modernity of “women” the obsolete lesbian who seeks to obtain reparations for losses. It undermines the linear and assimilationist temporality of “women” based on a sequencing of past, present and future by calling upon what is left behind (Baraitser 2017; Freeman 2000, 2010; Halberstam 2005, 2011; Hemmings 2011; Love 2007; McBean 2015). It is, in a sense, the scary temporality of the living dead, of the lesbian from “before the movement” (Anon. 1980a: 22; Deudon 1981: 83) who appears to have survived her own suppression. In this section, I seek to explore “how that which appear[ed] as a constitutive outside of [feminism] [came] to question, supplement, and cut through the whole structure of politics and representation at play” from 1973 to 1979 (Khanna 2008: 238–239).

“Looking for the ghosts” (Hesford 2005: 228), I unearth a feminist history that certainly feels unfamiliar and disconcerting. It is a darker history that starts from the premise that MLF narratives of success and rebirth “[relied] upon the excision of the lesbian mark of failure” (Halberstam 2011: 96) and performatively silenced those who did not share those feelings. It

replaces the traditional emphasis on (assimilationist) happiness and ecstatic feelings of love with a lesbian structure of backwards feelings characterized by anger, refusal, passivity, resentment, escapism, regret and isolation. This lesbian structure of feeling, the underside (and condition of possibility) of feminist happiness and plenitude, reveals the ways in which affects not (only) reflect a social reality but help to produce it: I read feminist feelings of ecstatic joy as naturalizing sisterhood and its exclusionary effects. Since haunting is the sign of “something that must be done” (de Certeau 1988 in Gordon 1997: 168) when “the repression isn’t working anymore”, creating a “trouble” that “demand[s] renarrativization” (Gordon 2011: 3), I ask in this chapter: what is the alternative MLF story that the lesbian melancholic ghost compels us to read in the archive?

1. *Le Corps Lesbien*: Lesbian Passion Against Women’s Love

“With her black hat and blue denim suits, she looks a little bit like an avenger from a western movie” (Actuel 1974: 12, my translation): with these words the journalist interviewing Monique Wittig on the occasion of the publication of her novel *Le corps lesbien* (The Lesbian Body) (1973) introduces her to the reader. In the interview, Monique Wittig explains:

[S]ometimes it is necessary, in order to rediscover the Amazon that lies dormant within us, to borrow from the other sex, his clothes, his behaviour. That is to say, the signs of what is positive in him and in us: strength, courage, determination, non-passivity, violence (Actuel 1974: 12, my translation).

Fascinatingly, not only has the noun “women” disappeared from Wittig’s statement (replaced by the word “Amazon”), but her reclamation of “violence” as a “positive sign” stands in stark contrast with the MLF’s outpouring of love as a revolutionary drive.⁵⁷ The year the Gouines rouges disbanded for fear of “hinder[ing] the expression of [their] oppression as women” (Bernadette, Nelly et Suzette 1981: 115), Monique Wittig made an antithetical move: she wrote a book which she later described as “totally lesbian in its theme, its vocabulary, its texture, from the first page to the last, from title page to back cover” (2005: 44). Against the

⁵⁷ Textual violence is a crucial aspect of Monique Wittig’s conception of literature. The disruption of the conventional order of meaning can only happen for Wittig through the “shock” (Wittig 2005: 45) that unprecedented new forms produce in the reader by defamiliarizing frozen significations (Butler 1999 [1990]; Crowder 2005; Ostrovsky 2005; Zerilli 2005).

MLF's assimilationist ideology, exemplified by Beauvoir's contention that women must claim "full membership in the human race" (de Beauvoir 1997 [1949]: 29), Monique Wittig proposes a distinctive counter-gesture grounded in minority politics: universalizing the minority standpoint of lesbianism. When Wittig co-founded the MLF in 1970 she was already a renowned nouveau roman writer whose literary work was inseparable from her political project of universalizing minority standpoints (Wittig 1992: 59–67), which she conceived as an epistemic weapon to fight the appropriation of universality by dominant standpoints – an appropriation she called a "criminal act" (Wittig 1992: 80; see also Bourque 2006; Butler 2007; Henderson 2017; Kim 2015; Shaktini 1982).⁵⁸ For Wittig, this politico-literary technique is akin to a "Trojan Horse" operating as a "war machine" and "always produced in hostile territory" (Wittig 1992: 68–69). It wages an epistemic/linguistic war that takes place on the terrain of dominant significations as "a strategy of reappropriation and subversive redeployment" (Butler 1999 [1990]: 160) of the universal (which Wittig calls "borrowing" in the interview mentioned above) and seeks to reveal its contingency in order to "[fracture] and [reconstitute] our senses" (Butler 2007: 533).⁵⁹

In *Le corps lesbien*, Wittig provides an assemblage of poems in which the narrator *I* (split pronoun "j/e") reanimates her lover "you" (tu) through a series of passionate invocations, an exhausting journey through sordid underground realms, and orgasmic sexual acts. In and through the violence of lesbian passion and lovemaking, Wittig rewrites an unassimilable lesbian body, organ by organ, "until the point where, freed from the female straitjacket or heterosexual reading, it bursts, open to infinite mutations" (Rognon Écarnot 2005: 184). In my view it is in *Le corps lesbien* – which Namaskar Shaktini considers Wittig's "most experimental work" (2005: 150) and Teresa de Lauretis an "enigma" (2005: 59) – that the genesis of Wittig's political vision for lesbianism takes shapes, precociously announcing the

⁵⁸ In contrast to the MLF's sovereign subject "women", Wittig later developed the notion of a "minority subject" which "is not self-centered as is the straight subject. Its extension into space could be described as being like Pascal's circle, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere" (1992: 61–62).

⁵⁹ Some critics have misunderstood Wittig's universalization of minority standpoints as essentialist (Fuss 1989; Suleiman 1985) rather than as an epistemic/literary weapon (Butler 2007; Chisholm 1993; Cope 1991; de Lauretis 1990, 2005; Findlay 1989). For Wittig, "women" is the product of material relations: "Our first task, it seems, is thus always carefully to dissociate 'women' (the class within which we fight) and 'woman', the myth. For 'woman' does not exist for us; she is nothing other than an imaginary formation, while 'women' are the product of a social relation" (Wittig 2001 in Epps and Katz 2007: 439). Wittig's universalization of the particular seeks to render social categories obsolete.

theoretical insights she went on to develop at the end of the decade. In *Le corps lesbien*, I suggest, Wittig conjures up what the MLF's (heterosexual) female universalism had excised through the redefinition of homosexuality as a regressive affective drive: namely, lesbian sexuality. In a 1973 interview on *Le corps lesbien* Wittig explains:

Through writing, I experiment with lesbian love as a violent and wild practice. We must put an end to the myth of this insipid, decorative female homosexuality that is harmless to heterosexuality and can even be co-opted by it (Louppe 1973–1974: 25, my translation).

It is difficult not to read this as addressing not only male patriarchal culture but also the heterocentric norm by which lesbianism had been updated into “harmless” female homosexuality in the MLF. At odds with the MLF's heterosexual coherence of women's sovereign consciousness as “coextensive with human thought” (de Lauretis 2005: 55) – the consciousness which is magically brought into being through the reassembling stage of homosexuality's “miracle of the mirror” (de Beauvoir 1997 [1949]: 436) – Wittig foregrounds a lesbian consciousness that is irreducibly split and for which self-reflection is an ontological impossibility (Cope 1991; Écarnot 2002a; Shaktini 2005). Instead of a feminine symbiotic fusion, lesbian love is characterized in *Le corps lesbien* by disintegration: “you suddenly disintegrate m/e all your eyes fixed on m/e” (1975 [1973]: 134). In contrast with the MLF's anthem, which enjoined women to “recognize each other”, “talk to each other” and “look at each other” (Anon. in Fouque 2008: 456, my translation), the trope of women's mutual recognition is discarded outright in *Le corps lesbien*: “I draw near you, you do not look at m/e, I address you you do not answer m/e, I make gestures of allegiance you ignore them [...] I speak to you of m/y long march of m/y unbroken zeal, you do not listen to m/e” (1975 [1973]: 110). This might be the meaning of *Le corps lesbien*'s unsettling pronoun “j/e” (“I”): the novel's lesbian subject is not a subject, but rather the very lesbian supplement – “split, crumbly, multiple, dispersed” (Écarnot 2002b: 100, my translation) – that could not be integrated into the MLF's assimilative trope of women's mutual recognition: “[t]he bar in my j/e is a sign of excess”, writes Wittig (2005: 47).⁶⁰

⁶⁰ I fully share Brad Epps and Jonathan D. Katz's contention that “in clear contrast to many of her feminist allies, [...] a little examined or hushed, even ‘unconscious’, affinity to a Frankfurt School criticality” (Epps and Katz 2007: 439) can be identified in Wittig's work. Wittig's staunch critique of universalist reason as a tool of domination is rather reminiscent of

While MLF dominant discursive practices sought to subsume differences in order to comply with the nation's universalizing ideal, Wittig's universalization of the particular privileges the "grotesque" (Whatling 1997: 242), "'excessive' significations" (Spinelli 2002: 86) and "images sufficiently blatant to withstand reabsorption" (Marks 1979: 375; de Lauretis 1987b, 1988), subsuming the general in return. It is thus "a profoundly anti-essentialist and anti-assimilationist gesture" (Shaktini 2005: 155). Against the humanist recognition of women's consciousnesses in the MLF rhetoric, Wittig elaborates a failed head-to-head perpetually destabilized through cannibalistic acts of lovemaking, absorption, rejection, disintegration, fragmentation, dismemberment, regurgitation, pulverization and dejection:

I try to reach your throat then your mouth, from within, I seek to be absorbed by you during m/y writhings in your interior to be spat out rejected vomited entirely, I implore in a very low voice, vomit m/e with all your might muzzled suckling-lamb queen cat spit m/e out, vomit m/e up (Wittig 1975 [1973]: 89–90).

Thus, she literally recreates a body – one that eschews the heterosexual coherence of the female body: she "shows that the 'integrity' and 'unity' of the body, often thought to be positive ideals, serve the purposes of fragmentation, restriction, and domination" (Butler 1999 [1990]: 146). Against the MLF's recreation of a healthy female body, Wittig invests in the excessive and hyperbolic figure of the monster (Cope 1991; de Lauretis 1988; Preciado 2002; Whatling 1997) which emerges from the debris of the abjected lesbian sexual ghetto. Indeed, the force that she unearths to exhume the non-conforming lesbian body is the death drive in lesbian sexuality, which the MLF's gender-identified female homosexuality as a feminine love for sameness had eradicated. As Teresa de Lauretis explains:

[It is] the death drive and not the Platonic Eros, that is the agent of disruption, unbinding, negativity, and resistance that [Freud] had first identified in the sexual drive (2005: 59).

If the MLF's homoerotic sisterhood was all about the "pleasure" principle, the bar of the "j/e" in Wittig's *Le corps lesbien* retrieves the shattering (or "self-shattering", to use Leo Bersani's

the Frankfurt School's theories. In that regard, it is worth noting that in 1968 she translated Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) into French in collaboration with the author.

expression (2009: 30) referring to the negativity unleashed by libidinal energies) power of lesbian sexuality as far as the unravelling of the social order is concerned. We could say that in so doing Wittig smashes the narcissistic ontology of “the miracle of the mirror” to bits: “*Le corps lesbien* is not about love. It is an extended poetic image of *sexuality*, a canto or a vast fresco, brutal and thrilling, seductive and awe-inspiring” (de Lauretis 2005: 59, emphasis de Lauretis’). As such, Wittig’s commitment to dismemberment and masochism in her portrayal of the lesbian body dismantles the MLF’s fantasy of wholeness, which reproduced traditional conceptions of heterosexual femininity. In claiming the “antisocial bent” (Edelman 2004: 143) of lesbian sex, *Le corps lesbien* can be read as a lesbian version of Guy Hocquenghem’s “dark homosexuality” (1977 in Bourg 2007: 187–192 and Martel 1999: 67–78). Thus Wittig’s “dark lesbianism” is the antithesis of the MLF’s heterosexual democratic imaginary.

While for Beauvoir, it is only “[b]etween man and woman” that “love is an act” (1997 [1949]: 436), a “passion” (740), a “frenetic [ecstasy]”, “violent and vertiginous” (440), and “a paroxysm” (418), Wittig *steals* heterosexuality’s privilege of embodying the “carnal embrace” (de Beauvoir 1997 [1949]: 552) and restores it to lesbian sexuality through a “parasitic usage” (Butler 2007: 527) of the dominant language. Indeed, Wittig redeployes Beauvoir’s very language of heterosexual carnality, violence and passion when describing *Le corps lesbien*:

[L]ayer after layer I could add multiple references to carnal love, and they would all mingle to create what I named lesbian passion. This anatomical vocabulary is cold and distant and I used it as a tool to cut off the mass of texts devoted to love. At the opposite end of the scale there was for me the necessity of textual violence as a metaphor for carnal passion (Wittig 2005: 46).

Le corps lesbien is a “Trojan Horse” occupying heterosexuality’s exclusive right to “transcendence of the self” (de Beauvoir 1997 [1949]: 419) (or to the death drive) and giving it back to lesbian sexuality. Against a harmless sisterly love for sameness, “the mildest kind of love” (Wittig 2005: 45), Wittig promotes “the violence of passion” (Wittig 2005: 44). She unearths the sexuality of the repressed, illegible and unsayable other of feminism, namely the sexuality of the “hysterical and lesbian [shrew]” (de Beauvoir 1977: 7) supposedly wandering the darkness of her “besieged” ghetto (Anne 1974: 2049). She unearths the sexuality of the lesbian who knows – unlike the FMA women, who wrote in 1969 that “separation [between

man and woman] is impossible" (Anon. 1969: 4) – that separation *is* indeed possible. Thus, against the rhetoric of light and lesbians' release from their ghetto through a happy reunion with their "sisters", Wittig offers a dark and dreadful poem, depicting the infernal, anxious and menacing atmospheres of galleries, underground realms and caves through which the lesbian lovers advance together (Feole 2016): "[i]n this dark adored adorned gehenna [...w]e traverse the length of the galleries the underground tunnels the crypts the caves the catacombs" (1975 [1973]: 15, 19). In that regard, it can be said that Wittig produces in *Le corps lesbien* a "‘reverse’ discourse" (Foucault 1984 [1976]: 101) of the MLF's dominant discursive practices: in the novel, it is the heterosexual libidinal economy that is a dark and infernal ghetto and that must be escaped through an "interminable" "march along the underground passages" (1975 [1973]: 19; Preciado 2002). By restoring the death drive in lesbian sexuality, Wittig seeks to re-empower the repudiated lesbian. As she says: "[f]or what is total ecstasy between two lovers but an exquisite death?" (Wittig 2005: 47). Wittig elaborates a "project of gory counter-pornography" (Preciado 2002: 213) in which "lesbian fucking" (211) triumphs over women's love.

The figure of the ghost looms large in the novel, which recounts the story of "I"’s efforts to bring her lover "you" back from the dead through a passionate summons:

There is no trace of you. Your face your body your silhouette are lost. In your place there is a void. [...] *I* question an absence so strange that it makes a hole within m/y body. [...] *I* summon you to appear you who are featureless [...] *I* summon you to show yourself, *I* solicit you to emerge from this non-presence which engulfs you (Wittig 1975 [1973]: 36).

Yet, Wittig's endeavour to conjure up the evanescent lesbian is not a "permutation" of the "apparitional" (1993: 60), to use Terry Castle's expression in her analysis of the recurring theme of the embodiment of the lesbian ghost in modern lesbian literature.⁶¹ Against Castle's notion of a "permutation" as a kind of positive inversion from absence to presence, I suggest reading *Le corps lesbien* as a melancholic song for the return of the lesbian *as living dead*, bearing witness to her forced exile in the underworld of (feminist) civilization. As such, Wittig's lesbian does not return as a new human welcomed into the world of the living: she

⁶¹ Terry Castle does not include *Le corps lesbien* in her analysis.

returns as the forbidden affiliation that seeks to enact justice by putting an end to the conditions that ostracized her.

“I am paralysed by the suddenness of your advent” (Wittig 1975 [1973]: 25): there is no happy reunion with “the absent loved one” (Castle 1993: 46) or transformation “from a negating to an affirming presence” (Castle 1993: 65) in *Le corps lesbien*. The lesbian’s return from ghost to flesh is scary and unexpected. It is not a magical reassembling of the body from spectrality to human flesh, but a complete rewriting of the body in and through the “filiations and affiliations that haunt” (Khanna 2003: 18). In one of the poems composing the novel, Monique Wittig rewrites the Orphic myth without the fatal turning back: “you” successfully rescues her lover “I” from “the very depths of hell” (Wittig 1975: 19). Yet, I would suggest that in not turning back towards her lover, “you” is not simply aiming to resuscitate her in the “daytime truth” (Blanchot in Love 2007: 50), pleading allegiance to amnesia so as to live happily ever after as if nothing had happened. Rather, if “you” does not turn back, it is because she wants to drag her lover’s “nocturnal obscurity”, “her closed body and sealed face” (Blanchot in Love 2007: 50), out into the open so as to allow the humans to see it. The lesbian who is coming back from the underworld in *Le corps lesbien* has “sign[ed] a contract with the forces of the non-human” (Preciado 2002: 207); she has “ke[pt] faith with those who drew back and those whose names were forgotten” (Love 2007: 71). “I” is the lesbian who was made into a monster, a non-woman, and who comes back as the melancholic trace of unassimilability that cannot be put to rest. As “the archaeological remainder [...] of unresolved grief” (Butler 1997a: 133), she wants to confront the living from the standpoint of her death in order to tell them the story of their inception, the story of the losses that constitute the plenitude of their lives. “You” wants to save her lover so that she can ask, like Stephen Dedalus enquiring about Hamlet’s father in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*: “[w]ho is the ghost from *limbo patrum*, returning to the world that has forgotten him?” (1922 in Khanna 2003: 235) The lesbian who comes back from *limbo patrum* speaks the language of “prosopopoeia, giving face to the dead or figure to the absent” (Khanna 2003: 18). She is the hysterical dyke who refuses to mourn feminism’s lesbian losses and enforces a demand on the future so as to be able to live as something other than a female human. And she has brought along with her, to the incantatory sound of the “siren voice” (Wittig 1975 [1973]: 15), a whole procession of lesbian shrews, virile monsters and Amazon warriors.

It was the “suddenness of [the] advent” (Wittig 1975 [1973]: 25) of the unrepresentable

lesbian spectre – I want to believe – that made Monique Wittig burst out laughing when she first came up with the book’s title:

Suddenly giving me a big laugh (for one can laugh even in anguish) two words came in: *Lesbian Body*. Can you realise how hilarious it was for me? That is how the book started to exist: in irony. The body, a word whose gender is masculine in French with the word *lesbian* qualifying it. In other words “lesbian” by its proximity to “body” seemed to destabilize the notion of the body. [...] Such was my “Lesbian Body”, a kind of paradox but not really, a kind of joke but not really, a kind of impossibility but not really (Wittig 2005: 46).

I argue that what made Wittig burst out laughing – for one can laugh even in anguish, as she herself warns – was the resuscitation of the lesbian melancholic remainder performed in the very title of the book *Le corps lesbien*: by transforming the noun “lesbian” into an adjective, and by making the adjective agree with the masculine of the noun “corps” (body) in French, the lesbian in the title of *Le corps lesbien* is *already* – grammatically – a non-woman. The “lesbien” is the degendered lesbienne (lesbian): as such, she *is* the illegible other of the “homosexuelle” (female homosexual), whose ending “elle” (the pronoun “she”, and also the adjectival mark of the feminine) absorbs and includes the feminine. In assembling the noun “corps” with the (somewhat absurd) masculine adjective “lesbien”, the phrase “le corps lesbien” already contains the very “paradox”, the very “joke”, the very “impossibility” – born and raised in *limbo patrum* – that blew the MLF away in the sentence “lesbians are not women” in 1980.⁶² Around the time she published *Le corps lesbien*, Monique Wittig started asking her feminist friends to call her Théo (short for Théophane), a male name meaning “God” – a way for her, perhaps, to lesbianize God as a non-woman. To this day, all those who knew her in the early 1970s refer to Théo when they are talking about Monique Wittig.⁶³

⁶² Teresa de Lauretis similarly argues that from *The Lesbian Body* to “The Straight Mind” and “One Is Not Born a Woman”, a “new figure – a conceptual figure – emerged [...] and was encapsulated in the statement ‘lesbians are not women’” (2005: 51).

⁶³ Wittig’s use of a male name indicates a rich way of reimagining lesbian history in line with a trans critique of gender identity, heteronormativity and embodiment that arguably disrupts the line between lesbian and trans genealogies. In light of this finding, it would be worth exploring Wittig’s lesbian figure and embodiment as part of a trans history (somewhat repudiated within lesbian theory and politics) that has yet to be written. What if the lesbian (who is not a woman) was always already trans? What if Wittig was a “lesbien” rather than a “lesbienne”? And what if she burst out laughing when she came up with the title *Le corps*

Laughter in *Le corps lesbien* is bound up with the anxious and grotesque resuscitation of the lover, as if announcing the imminence of the long-awaited “something-to-be-done” (Gordon 1997: 183): “I choke with laughter, I fall over backwards, m/y tears stream” (104); “you begin to laugh very loudly head thrown back the curve of your throat exposed” (67). Wittig’s laughter when she came up with the title *Le corps lesbien* was, I suggest, as anxious and grotesque as the laughter in the novel, because it bore the intimation of an interruptive reality for feminism. It was the laughter of the lesbian ghost who had brought feminism’s entombed secret back from her long journey through feminism’s underworld: the laughter of the lesbian who *knew* that lesbians were not women, and that it was as such that they were coming back to demand their due. “*Le corps lesbien* is above all, Wittig writes, a hymn to lesbian love, and then it is a kind of call” (Louppe 1973–1974: 25, my translation): in 1973, feminism’s unspeakable lesbian was resuscitated in a messianic burst of laughter – as “a kind of paradox but not really, a kind of joke but not really, a kind of impossibility but not really”. As a “lesbien”.

2. The Front Lesbien International: Feminism’s Failed Lesbian History

“Monique Wittig’s literary work irradiated the emerging feminist and lesbian movement” (Bourcier and Robichon 2002: 15, my translation), writes Suzette Robichon, one of Monique Wittig’s close friends from the early 1980s onwards and a pioneer of lesbian activism in France.⁶⁴ Published in 1969, Monique Wittig’s *Les guérillères*, a call to arms in which the universalized plural female pronoun “elles” wages “a total war” on “ils” (the plural male pronoun) (Wittig 1992: 85), magnificently anticipated the eruption of the MLF a year later: “[o]pening the way, clearing the ground for new possibilities of struggle, this epic poem accurately prefigured a decade of women’s activism” (Lasserre 2014: 47, my translation). Yet, in my view, in the shadow of *Les guérillères*’ successful prophecy there lies a forgotten failed prophecy: the one that *Le corps lesbien* was supposed to make, and to which the Front lesbien international (International Lesbian Front) was meant to give reality. I will not write the history of the Front lesbien, since it did not really exist; rather, I will write the history of its thwarting by French feminists, that is, the paradoxical history of a non-existence.

lesbien out of the pleasure of finding her own “lesbien” body?

⁶⁴ Suzette Robichon’s pen name in the 1970s was Suzette Triton. I therefore refer to her as Triton when speaking of her 1970s persona.

It was at the International Women's Conference in Frankfurt, in which 600 women from eighteen countries participated on 15–17 November 1974, that Monique Wittig began rallying people around her plans for an International Lesbian Front.⁶⁵ In 1974, the political context was already very different from the heady utopianism of the May '68 uprisings from which the MLF had emerged. The year 1974 marked an important political and emotional rupture, which inaugurated for the revolutionary left as a whole “the beginning of the end of this effervescent flourishing of invention associated with '68” (Ross 2002: 14). As far as feminism was concerned, 1974 was also “the movement's terrible year” (Tristan and de Pisan 1977: 10): the spectre of the co-optation of feminist struggles by the liberal state – with the election of the centre-right candidate Valéry Giscard d'Estaing as President of France and the creation of a secretary of state with responsibility for the “feminine condition”, as well as the United Nations' decision to declare 1975 “International Women's Year” – proved to be an urgent issue that opened up a new fault line within feminism between radicalism and reformism (Garcia Guadilla 1981: 109–111; Larrouy 2010: 62–63; Picq 2011: 249–262).⁶⁶ Further, the decriminalization of abortion in January 1975, which had been the MLF's most prominent demand since 1971, raised the spectre of the end of the feminist struggle if nothing was done to re-energize it.

Furthermore, 1974 was characterized by the flourishing of écriture féminine (feminine writing) in line with Psychépo's differentialist principles. Introduced from 1974 onwards with the publication, among others, of Luce Irigaray's *Spéculum de l'autre sexe* in 1974, Annie Leclerc's *Parole de femme* in 1974, a series of five interviews between Marguerite Duras and Xavière Gauthier under the title *Les parleuses* in 1974, and Hélène Cixous' *Le rire de la méduse* in 1975 (Lasserre 2014: 299–364), écriture féminine's proponents posited “the possibility and the necessity of a form of writing under the aegis of a different libidinal and cultural economy [from masculine writing] as well as the capacity of such writing to

⁶⁵ Between the disintegration of the Gouines rouges in 1973 and the Front lesbien in late 1974, a few MLF lesbians (mostly former Gouines rouges) held sporadic meetings, from October 1973 to June 1974, in a small group named “Lesbianisme-féminisme” (Lesbianism-Feminism) (Louise Turcotte, interview, 1 November 2017).

⁶⁶ The MLF's radical branch clashed in 1974 over the issue of feminist reformism when Anne Zelensky and Simone de Beauvoir created the Ligue du droit des femmes (League of Women's Rights), whose goal was to lead the struggle against sexist discrimination and violence against women in the legal arena and in connection with political and governmental institutions (de Pisan and Tristan 1977: 118–124 and 152–156).

contribute to a transformation of social and cultural structures” (van Rossum-Guyon 1977 in Lasserre 2014: 404, my translation).⁶⁷ Monique Wittig clearly expressed her worries about the development of this trend in a 1975 video interview with her MLF friend Louise Turcotte:⁶⁸

You see, we always talk about [feminism’s] co-optation in our groups, we talk about the Women’s Year [...]. That’s not what seems to me to be the most [...] dangerous for us, the most treacherous thing is what we are developing ourselves, this kind of new femininity which is supposedly a liberation but which is a regression in fact (Turcotte 1975: 2 mins 19 sec, my translation).

I therefore suggest reading Wittig’s project for an international lesbian coalition, which she laid out publicly in Frankfurt in November 1974, as her own political proposition for withstanding feminism’s reabsorption into patriarchal ideology, whether that reabsorption be manifested as reformism or essentialism – just as *Le corps lesbien*’s monstrous aesthetic prevented “reabsorption into male literary culture” (Marks 1979: 375). In that sense, in 1974 Wittig already saw lesbians’ resistance to the institution of heterosexuality as feminism’s most impregnable asset – its “Trojan Horse”. In fact, some of Wittig’s friends recall that a few months before the Frankfurt conference she suggested renaming the MLF the Mouvement des lesbiennes féministes (Feminist Lesbians’ Movement), thereby replacing its subject “women” with a new lesbian subject while keeping the original initials unchanged (Bonnet 2003; Kandel, interview, 12 May 2016). Rather than being a “radicalization” of her feminism, as her politicization of lesbianism is often described in MLF historiography, this gesture, I suggest, is in direct lineage from her phrase “one man in every two is a woman”, which she wrote on the banner she held at the Arc de Triomphe action in August 1970 (see Figure 24): just as “one man in every two is a woman” sought to unveil the epistemic violence of the appropriation of universality by men, the “Mouvement des lesbiennes féministes” sought to expose the invisibilization of lesbians that claims for women’s universality performed within the MLF. As she said in a personal letter: “we wondered why we called ourselves ‘feministes’

⁶⁷ The flourishing of écriture féminine was fostered by the creation of Antoinette Fouque/Psychépo’s publishing house Des femmes in late 1972 (Lasserre 2014; Naudier 2000, 2001, 2006; Pavard 2005). Des femmes opened one bookshop in Paris in 1974, one in Marseille in 1976, and one in Lyon in 1977.

⁶⁸ On Wittig’s staunch critique of differentialism through her opposition between the Amazon and the Mother in “Un jour mon prince viendra” (1978) and *Lesbian Peoples: Materials for a Dictionary* (1979 [1976]), see Crowder (1983, 2003) and Lasserre (2014: 467–473).

révolutionnaires’ even though we all were lesbians” (Wittig 1980d: 1–2, emphasis Wittig’s, my translation). Her suggestion about replacing the name Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF) with the designation Mouvement des lesbiennes féministes (MLF) perfectly exemplifies her anti-assimilationist praxis, which consists in hijacking dominant significations in order to unveil their contingency and unleash the subjugated meanings they have ensnared (her “Trojan Horse” technique). Just as Wittig steals Beauvoir’s language of heterosexual transcendence to describe lesbian passion, with the Mouvement des lesbiennes féministes she steals the letters “MLF” to “mimetically [occupy]” (Henderson 2017: 15) women’s presumption of universality. In so doing, she endows lesbians with a capacity for universality that is meant not to replace “women” but to expose and fracture “women”’s appropriation of universality.

The only archival trace of the Front lesbien international on which I could lay my hands was a single sheet bearing the title “Lesbian Front Contacts (November 1974)” at the Marguerite Durand Library in Paris (Anon. 1974). Typed during or immediately after the Frankfurt conference, the document provides a list of thirty-three representatives of the Lesbian Front in eleven Western countries (Germany, Italy, England, France, Denmark, New Zealand, Holland, USA, Switzerland, Sweden and Norway). However, if the Lesbian Front visibly triggered highly positive responses in Frankfurt – as is suggested by the number of people listed on the contact sheet – reactions in France turned out to be drastically different.

In her PhD thesis on the literary history of the MLF, Audrey Lasserre contends that Monique Wittig’s Front lesbien sought “to foment a split between the women’s movement and the lesbians” (2014: 141, my translation). Yet, this separatist reading is not only at odds with my contention that Wittig’s gesture sought to dismantle “women”’s treacherous appropriation of universality, which had kept lesbians in the closet of the “women” sign; it also contradicts Wittig herself, who made clear in a 1973 interview that she simply sought to make the visibilization of lesbianism *possible* in the MLF:

Not all women in the movement are homosexual. [...] So it would seem to me to be a shame if we were to institute new laws: everyone must be homosexual, or everyone must be heterosexual. [...] It is not about imposing homosexuality as the only practice, but about giving it a possible space (Le Garrec 1973: 29, my translation).

Yet, it struck me that in accordance with Lasserre's interpretation, the radical feminists who had opposed the creation of the Front lesbien in 1974 justified their position during our interviews by invoking Wittig's wicked desire to divide the movement. The Front lesbien's opponents were all lesbians – and almost all former Gouines rouges – who pledged allegiance to their identification as “women” only.⁶⁹ If in my analysis I uncompromisingly stand with Wittig and her allies who supported the Front lesbien in Paris, I do so not only because their voices have never been taken seriously before (as is attested by Lasserre's interpretation, which uncritically takes the views of those who opposed the Front lesbien as the truth of what happened), but also because the failure of the Front lesbien rests on the deployment of the exact same discursive and affective tropes through which the creation of the Gouines rouges had been harshly criticized three years earlier.

Back from Frankfurt, Wittig and other radical feminists⁷⁰ raised the topic of the Front lesbien international at a winter 1974 meeting of the Féministes révolutionnaires, hoping they would be willing to develop a branch in Paris with them. However, it turned out that Wittig's demands were immediately interpreted as aggressive, if not incomprehensible, by the woman-identified feminists. As one woman who had been present at the meeting and opposed to the Front lesbien recalled during our interview:

We were waiting for Wittig, who was supposed to present her lesbian front to us. [...] We were waiting for her, we were all sat in a circle in the room, and she turned up with a certain forcefulness, very determined. [...] It turned me off... So then her Front lesbien international, I didn't really get it, I was wondering what she was talking about (my translation).

I would suggest that as a “space invader” (Puwar 2004) seeking to address an issue – lesbianism – that fundamentally upset the universalist and heterosexual normative arrangements of the MLF, Wittig was always already going to be perceived as disruptive before she even spoke. The memory of Wittig's physical interruption (by arriving late) of a

⁶⁹ The conflict was therefore not between heterosexuals and lesbians, but between universalist lesbians who wanted the MLF to speak exclusively on behalf of “women” and lesbians who laid claim to the visibilization of lesbian difference.

⁷⁰ The activists who strove to create the Front lesbien included Marie-Jo Bonnet, Annie Cohen, Anne-Sylvie Dhaussy, Annie Opatowski, Louise Turcotte and Marie Vendeville, among others.

seamless unity (“we were all sat in a circle in the room”) reiterates the previously mentioned narrative of the feminist according to whom the Gouines rouges “[left] altogether in a block” to attend a separate meeting while the radical feminists were all in “a café to discuss”. Those visual memories materialize the effects of the MLF’s heterosexual iron law, which refused to address differences by presupposing a neutral unity in the present moment of “sisterhood”. Since this iron law necessarily reads lesbians’ visibilization as producing an antagonism, it is therefore not surprising that both the Gouines rouges and Wittig’s position at that meeting are remembered as hostile interruptions of a previously flawless unity. The memory of Wittig as “very determined” is a “figure” that entered the room *before* Wittig herself did (Ahmed 2010a: 7) and that was meant to save the frame of the MLF’s heterosexual iron law. As a result of this frame, which ineluctably read her as aggressive, what she had to say inevitably became incomprehensible: “I was wondering what she was talking about”. These memories figure the impossibility of a lesbian speaking position in the context of the MLF’s discursive/epistemic arrangements.⁷¹

The feminist quoted above who referred to Wittig’s belatedness and determination at the meeting continued her narrative as follows:

In the way she presented the lesbian front it was more to mark a rupture, to mark that “we are not like the others, we are not like heterosexual women”. It was more a kind of radical violence, and it lacked vision for me [...]. It wasn’t offering anything more than forcefully marking one’s difference [...] She went about it the wrong way, I have to say [...] And so her international lesbian front, I didn’t like it very much, and I never had anything to do with it... I thought to myself... this woman here is too... a bit fascist, well... in the way she expressed things [...] One has to calm down, you see! [...] And this violence... I think indeed we didn’t want it (my translation).

I find this extract particularly fascinating insofar as it confirms the ways in which the lesbian as a fascist figure is an inevitable product of the democratic/universalist heterosexual imaginary in which the MLF was established. Wittig’s endeavour to visibilize lesbian difference is necessarily perceived as an irrational and apolitical violence: “it wasn’t offering

⁷¹ Sara Ahmed has analysed at length the ways in which minority voices unsettle the allegedly neutral atmosphere of feminist spaces (and the happiness attached to that belief) through the conceptual figure of the feminist “killjoy” (2010a, 2010b, 2017).

anything more than forcefully marking one's difference". And perhaps it was the case that the angrier Wittig became about her position of unspeakability, the more she legitimated the perception of her as irrational.

Exactly as with the Gouines rouges, another feminist who had attended the meeting invoked feelings of love and sisterhood to explain opposition to Wittig's alleged separatist tendencies:

[Monique Wittig's Front lesbien] didn't work... It didn't work well... Most of the former Gouines rouges [...] said "we don't want to leave our friends!" [...] I think the desire not to be separated from all the women we loved [...] was extremely strong, so we didn't want to abandon them... Very, very strong... Sisterhood... Relationships were very intense... There was no question of splitting! [...] It was really love, completely... I think that was what we did not want to give up... (my translation).

Love is abusively used as a performative resource to secure the epistemic violence of the heterosexual/universalist frame that considers the visibilization of lesbian difference a "splitting". Therefore, Wittig's speaking position is not only politically undermined as "a kind of radical violence" but also affectively discredited as the nonsensical and egotistical gesture of someone who does not love her feminist friends. How could lesbians seeking to visibilize lesbianism be heard in a discursive/affective frame that necessarily produced them as aggressive separatists? How could the violence unleashed against Wittig (calling her a fascist and accusing her of seeking to undermine the movement she had helped to create) be condemned when the language of love was the very means by which that violence was enacted?

Another of my interviewees made a stunning comment: "it's true that we did not delve any further into the issue, we refused to delve further because of the way it had been brought up, aggressively. They were real bitches". In fact, I suggest, it was exactly the other way around: the perception of the group who supported the Front lesbien as "very determined", "fascist", "violent", "aggressive", even "bitches", was precisely meant to *prevent* the issue from being delved into. Against the "evidence of [women's] experience" (Scott 1991) in the MLF – which would treat Wittig and her group's allegedly hostile attitude as a transparent social reality and as historical evidence – I make the case for a genealogical reading that seeks to ask what political antagonism was being unacknowledged, overridden, avoided and displaced

through the perception of violence, as well as what *other* kind of violence was being authorized (calling someone a fascist or a bitch, for example) by the perception of lesbians who sought to politicize/visibilize lesbian difference as aggressive and the other MLF women as overflowing with love.

The paradoxical lesbian position that the Gouines rouges had struggled with a few years earlier and relinquished in favour of a renewed fusion with “all women” *returned* in the case of the Front lesbien international. In that sense, the history of lesbian difference in the context of the 1970s French feminist movement is by no means the history of progressive inclusion into the “we” of women, but rather is a discontinuous history of lesbians “grappling repeatedly with the radical difficulty of resolving the dilemmas they confronted” (Scott 1996: 17). However, while the Gouines rouges’ relinquishment of their paradoxical position in 1972 had ended in an “indelible” “moment of collective fusion” to the sounds of “singing and dancing” (Bonnet 1995: 339, my translation), two years later, when the paradox resurfaced, the atmosphere turned much darker. The actual eruption of violence at the meeting in the winter of 1974 made one of my interviewees remark: “it was something difficult. It went very, very badly the day we heard [Monique Wittig] talk about it... It’s awful, it’s a small story, but it’s truly awful” (my translation). Louise Turcotte, who supported Wittig’s Front lesbien, remembered “crying her eyes out” at the end of the meeting while Wittig tried to console her (interview, 1 November 2017, my translation). The violence engendered that day highlights not only the ways in which the eruption of violence was meant to displace the political issue that was being raised, but also the nastiness that the unveiling of the MLF’s secret produced when it could no longer be contained. “It’s truly awful” indeed when the “impossible within the possible” (Butler 2011 [1993]: 180) – the ungrieved and “repudiated [lesbian] identification” (Butler 1997a: 137) – is about to become visible. The perception of Wittig as violent is a displacement *onto her* of the nastiness of feminism’s lie of assimilation (or of feminism’s shameful secret of heterosexual separatism). As Monique Wittig put it in a long letter she wrote in 1981 to her allies from the editorial board of *Questions féministes* with a view to renarrativizing her “sad experience” (Wittig 1981a: 9) in the MLF and inform them about the archaeology of the conflict:

[I]t works like this: those who have power scream their heads off that one must watch out for attempts to take power, and to deflect attention from themselves they designate scapegoats, usually plausible (Wittig 1981a: 6, my translation).

In exposing feminism's "obscene underside" (Žižek 2000: 220), Wittig herself became "obscene" and had to be silenced as "violent", "aggressive" or "fascist" – in short, as a hysterical dyke. Feminism's lesbian paradox appears insurmountable: calling upon lesbian difference with a view to making up for the inconsistent exclusion of lesbians from the category "women" simultaneously reactivates and fulfils the very discursive tropes of irrationality that justified its exclusion in the first place. I argue that the violence that erupted six years later in 1980, when a spectacular conflict over lesbianism publicly broke out in the MLF, was a deferred and exponential echo of this unremembered and buried violence from 1974. In that respect, the 1980 conflict over radical lesbianism turns out to be the loudest echo of a very old vibration.

As Monique Wittig herself asserted, her departure from France in 1975 – first to Greece, where she wrote the utopian lesbian dictionary *Lesbian Peoples: Materials for a Dictionary* with her partner Sande Zeig, then to Italy, and finally to the US, where she permanently settled in 1976 – is directly tied to her failure to establish a lesbian position *within* the French feminist movement (which was in any case not a separatism):

After [the Gouines rouges], several [lesbian] groups have started and tried to constitute and they had internal fights. This disintegrated all of them. Finally, the situation was so bad I left France (Delphy, Wittig and Douglas 1980: 26).

Wittig's archive provides a drastic counter-narrative to the dominant narratives of affective success and hospitality in the MLF. Accusing her of taking up too much space in the movement, MLF women frequently asked Wittig to "withdraw from the 'public stage'" (Wittig 1981a: 2, my translation). In sharp contrast to narratives describing the MLF as a "cocoon" in which women were "in 'communion'" (Garcia Guadilla 1981: 19, my translation), in private letters she wrote in the early 1980s Wittig complains about how "sectarianism had claimed [the Féministes révolutionnaires]" and about the "prevailing bloody mess" in the group (Wittig 1981a: 6). Regarding the "'Front lesbien international' affair", she speaks about the "worst attacks" (1981a: 6) perpetrated by the group of radical feminists who opposed her and whom she dubs "oppressors and liquidators" (Wittig 1980d: 2, my translation). Describing the situation as "dramatic", she concludes: "I have been used as a scapegoat, a fact that led to my own personal destruction and the destruction of the group"

(Wittig 1980d: 2). Although Psychépo's abusive practices were fervently condemned by radical feminists throughout the 1970s (and are largely accounted for in the MLF historiography), the unearthing of this conflict over lesbianism sheds new light on what gets invisibilized by radical feminists in their condemnation of Psychépo's practices: according to Monique Wittig, they used “the same authoritarian methods” as Psychépo to “prevent [...], paralyse and destroy lesbian groups”. She continues: “[f]rankly, and between you and me, they almost succeeded in completely destroying me, and they have, yes, chased me out of Paris. You see for me Psychépo is far from being the only problem” (Wittig 1980c: 2, my translation). Refusing the pervasive narrative of radical incompatibility between French materialist and differentialist feminists from the standpoint of their shared repudiation of lesbian difference (as I have also done in the thesis) – a decentring which remains unthinkable in MLF historiography – Wittig makes an important statement: “[t]hey are in the same position as Psychépo [...] regarding lesbianism. I don't see where their novelty lies [...] [I]n France one does not use the word *lesbian*” (Wittig 1980c: 2, emphases Wittig's).

At odds with the dominant MLF archive, Monique Wittig's own private archive replaces ecstatic affects of love and happiness – which I argue pertained to women who successfully identified as “women” – with backwards affects of extreme anger, loneliness, depression, resentment and melancholic bitterness. Those affects, I suggest, are the distinctive affects of the lesbian “temporal drag” (Freeman 2010: 59) on heroic MLF modernity: the inevitable improper affects of those lesbians who dragged the anachronistic figure of the lesbian into the amnesiac present of “women”. In contrast to Cathy Bernheim's recollection of her experience in the MLF as “an overdose of ‘happiness’ that was almost fatal” (Bernheim 2003 [1991]: 17, my translation), Wittig speaks about “an explosion of hatred towards me from people I believed were not only sisters politically but also friends” (1981a: 7, my translation). In a letter addressed to American lesbian feminist poet and theorist Adrienne Rich, she encapsulates in a few lines the nightmare she went through in the feminist movement in Paris:

Dear Adrienne,

When I first came here [to the US] and decided to stay, it was in order to flee the Parisian political life. I was then broken, that is this I was when we met, you may remember it. Later on when I felt better, I learnt to respect and love the sense of freedom American people gave me. Meanwhile, the resent and bitterness I always felt toward the ways my own people act did not lessen: although I was one of the main

elements that started the women's liberation movement in France, I may say that except for a few elected moments these seven years (1968/1975) have been like being in hell (Wittig n. d. [circa 1981b]: 1).

Her talk of a journey in hell, which she has escaped through forced exile to the US, parochializes dominant MLF discursive practices about a limitless movement that welcomes "all women in revolt who are taking up speech" (M.L.F. *partout!* 1971, my translation) and celebrates women's union through feelings of radical joy. It confirms the argument I have made about how the overemphasis on positive affects is also meant to conceal and naturalize the MLF's exclusionary practices. In 1985, Monique Wittig published a political parable on the power struggles within the MLF entitled *Paris-la-politique* (Politics in Paris). The fable tells the story of a narrator who is executed in the middle of a carnivalesque general assembly where "delirium has become reason" (Wittig 1985: 12, my translation): "the Judases" (25) or "the legitimates" (19) who claim to "be the general interest, which elsewhere is called taking the part for the whole" (1985: 14, emphasis Wittig's) "overcome all resistance through harassment" (14) in front of silent "zealous acolytes" (25). Looking back in 1999 on her experience in the MLF, she revealed the subtext of the situation depicted in *Paris-la-politique*:

In all political groups, whatever they are, there is a way of functioning, always the same, one does not attack the enemy but those closest to one, and it hurts, it can kill. It is a parable about all that, about what it can do to people. The whole time I was immersed in this political substance, I dreamt about this, I was taken to the guillotine, my head cut off. It was horrible (Devarrieux 1999: iii, my translation).

Heroic MLF narratives were conditioned on political and affective losses/prohibitions that were most blatantly materialized through Wittig's eradication from the MLF and her subsequent displacement to the United States. Hence, Wittig's archive of backwards feelings – the MLF's paradigmatic lesbian archive – is a performative effect of the universalist/heterosexual celebration of love, plenitude, happiness and sisterhood that naturalizes exclusions and violence. Wittig's trajectory is illustrative of a ruined lesbian future for French feminism – a future critical of the universalist/nationalist heteronormative regime on which the whole political and affective semiology of the MLF rested. This potential future was actively disqualified, refused and forgotten. I therefore suggest embracing Wittig's

trajectory in France as one of political and affective failure forged through stubborn refusal and exile. One of my interviewees, who had staunchly opposed the Front lesbien international in 1974, insisted that Wittig “couldn’t do it in France”. “She couldn’t do it” because French feminists never wanted to hear about the lesbian. French feminism’s lesbian history is the history of a political elimination. They never wanted to have anything to do with lesbian Wittig, and they got rid of her – leaving unfinished business and an irredeemable void for French feminism (see conclusion).

It is important to recognize that the expansion in the second half of the 1970s of the MLF’s “proper” branches – the radical and differentialist branches – which both shared a subject “women” was also an effect of the eradication of Wittig’s unrealized lesbian branch. For the differentialists, the mid-to-late 1970s were characterized by the flourishing of *écriture féminine*, the development of several commercial enterprises linked to Psychépo,⁷² and the creation of the high-profile differentialist journal *Sorcières* by Xavière Gauthier in 1975 (Goldblum 2009; Lasserre 2014). For the radical feminists, core participants in the Féministes révolutionnaires (many of whom had opposed Wittig’s lesbian front) drew closer to Simone de Beauvoir. From December 1973 to 1984, Liliane Kandel, Cathy Bernheim, Anne Zelensky, Evelyne Rochedereux, Catherine Deudon, Françoise Flamant, Marie-Jo Bonnet and others published regular feminist pieces in a special section entitled “Les chroniques du sexisme ordinaire” (Chronicles of Ordinary Sexism) in Beauvoir and Sartre’s prestigious journal *Les temps modernes*, at Beauvoir’s invitation. Simone de Beauvoir called this group of women her “favourite feminists” (Zelensky 2014 in Lasserre 2014: 163).⁷³

⁷² See note 67. Additionally, Psychépo inaugurated the widely distributed monthly and later weekly *Des femmes en mouvement* in 1978.

⁷³ These radical activists, although all lesbians, staunchly refused in the 1970s to deviate from their singular woman identification (with the exception of Marie-Jo Bonnet). They all fervently opposed Wittig’s lesbian politics throughout the 1970s and at the time of the 1980/1981 clash. MLF lesbians who agreed with Wittig’s vision, such as Louise Turcotte, Anne-Sylvie Dhaussy, Marie Vendeville or Annie Opatowski, are not part of this (Beauvoirian) political genealogy, and although radical feminists themselves, they are absent from MLF historiographical narratives. Woman-identified feminists (those who were close to Beauvoir) are the historical representatives of the MLF’s radical branch. Their experience represents the history of the MLF’s radical branch for another important reason (alongside the elimination of lesbian possibility): they have prolifically published memoirs, books and articles on the MLF’s history from the late 1970s until today (Bernheim 2010 [1983], 2003 [1991]; Bernheim et al. 2009; Bonnet 1995, 2004, 2014, 2018; Delphy 1991; Deudon 2003; Flamant 2007; Kandel 1980; de Pisan and Tristan 1977).

Far away from the French feminists who had always resisted the politicization of heterosexuality as an institution of power (instead of considering it the most cherished gift of French democracy), Wittig writes in her essay “Paradigm” in 1979:

Politically, feminism as a theoretical and practical phenomenon, encompasses lesbianism and at the same time is surpassed by it. [...] Lesbianism is the culture through which we can politically question heterosexual society on its sexual categories, on the meaning of its institutions of domination in general, and in particular on the meaning of that institution of personal dependence, marriage, imposed on women (1979: 188).

By “surpassed”, she means not that all women should become lesbian or that “lesbianism has become [...] the future of feminism”, as Lasserre contends (2014: 532, my translation), but (rightly) that lesbianism provides an additional critical standpoint on the heterosexual system by which sexual categories are produced – which is why feminism, while “surpassed” by lesbianism, “encompasses [it] *at the same time*” (my emphasis). It provides a fuller framework for understanding women’s oppression. Wittig reverses the liberal logic according to which the lesbian “marker” (along with other markers such as “prostitute”, “mother” etc.) must be removed in order to discover a neutral and hence emancipated female human: in her perspective, the female human, in a sense, always already bears a heterosexual marker.

If melancholia gives rise to a critical agency that attempts to revive the lost love object (Freud 1957 [1917]), the failed history of the Front lesbien international is also the history of persistent attempts to bring it back to life in the mid-to-late 1970s as a refusal to mourn the loss of a lesbian history for feminism. Indeed, despite vehement opposition, the hope of a lesbian front never completely vanished. Thus, Monique Wittig’s exile to the United States and the killing off of a lesbian future for feminism in France gave rise to a lesbian ghost as the trace of an ungrieved repression that manifested itself as a “seething presence” (Gordon 1997: 8) in the second half of the decade. Incorporating the failed history of lesbianism into the history of second-wave French feminism also means incorporating a history of stubborn attachments to unrealized lesbian futures.

In March 1975, the first meeting of the Front lesbien international (following its creation in Frankfurt) was held in Amsterdam for three days, bringing together approximately 500

lesbian activists from the Netherlands, France, Germany, the United States, Denmark and Australia (Graziella 2010 [1981]: 42; Melo 1981a: 66–67; Wittig 1980d: 1). Following this meeting, an international lesbian summer camp, called Camp Lilith, took place in July 1975 in Sanguinet near Bordeaux in the south-west of France, gathering around eighty people (Une femme de Lilith 1975: 4). It was co-organized by Marie-Jo Bonnet, a close friend of Monique Wittig who had supported the creation of the Front lesbien. Yet, judging from interview material as a whole, it seems that very few French women attended the camp (I could find no archival material on the camp, which was barely reported in the feminist press). In November 1975, meetings of the Front lesbien in Paris were announced as taking place every Monday in the feminist monthly *L'information des femmes* (L'information des femmes 1975a: 3). However, in the following issue, it was said that “general assemblies in future might be bimonthly” (L'information des femmes 1975b: 1, my translation), and subsequent issues no longer make any mention of the Front lesbien. Yet, on 5 April 1978 there was another convulsion: six of the original participants in the Front lesbien (Anne-Sylvie Dhaussy, Annie Cohen, Annie Opatowski, Louise Turcotte, Marie-Jo Bonnet and Yannick) attempted to revive it by organizing a meeting. In the minutes of the meeting, they talk about how “the issue of the Front lesbien in the movement [...] was quickly shrugged off by being turned into a clash of personalities” and point to “violent opposition to the Front lesbien [...] from the Féministes révolutionnaires in [...] 1974” (Bonnet 1978, my translation). This meeting did not lead to any successful actions.

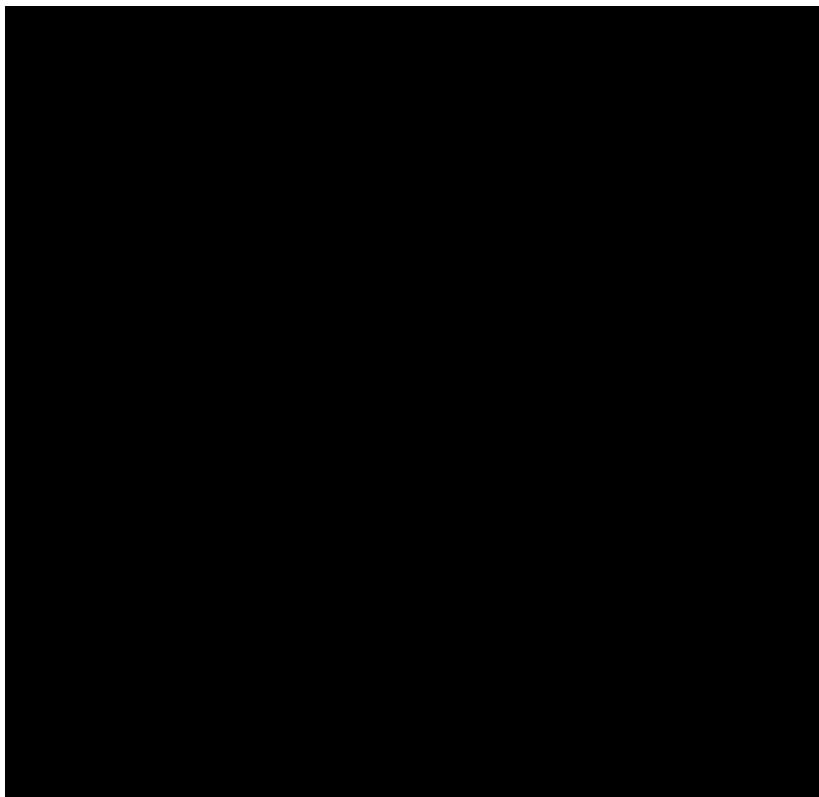


Figure 28. From left to right: Monique Wittig, Sande Zeig, Christine L. and Martine Laroche. Berkeley, California, 1979. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1979.htm>. Last accessed: 19 July 2018.

In a picture from 1979 (see Figure 28) taken in Berkeley, California, we can recognize (from left to right) Monique Wittig, Sande Zeig, Christine L. and Martine Laroche (the latter two were French lesbian activists) wearing T-shirts that bear the inscriptions “Front lesbien international”, “a lesbian body” and “Front lesbien”. As is evidenced by this picture, Monique Wittig clung onto her dream of a lesbian front after arriving in the United States. She even launched a political call to arms in the San Francisco area in the name of the Front lesbien in 1977 to protest against popular folk singer Anita Bryant’s homophobic campaign to repeal an ordinance that prohibited discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in Florida (Turcotte, interview, 1 November 2017). I suggest reading the French used on Wittig’s T-shirt as a refusal to mourn the impossibility of the Front lesbien in France and to forget its elimination. As Martine Laroche (far right in the picture) recounts:

We wore the T-shirts to make Théo happy... “International” was for the memory, to make her happy... We told her we were going to continue... Then we came back and we fought with Christine [L.] and others to make the Front lesbien [... Wittig] pushed

me, pushed me, pushed me: “it’s time to do something lesbian”, she would say (Laroche, interview, 15 April 2016, my translation).

Indeed, a few months later, on 6 October 1979, at a demonstration in Paris to support the permanent adoption of the abortion law, two activists posed for a photograph wearing similar T-shirts, seemingly announcing the imminent return of Wittig’s exiled laughter (see Figure 29).

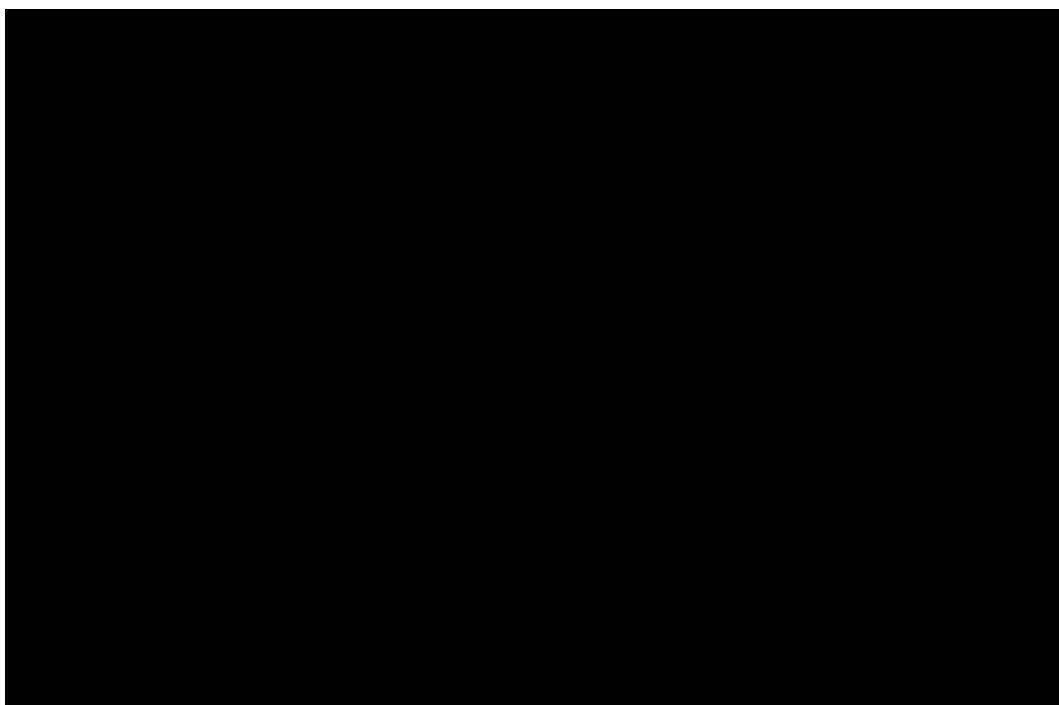


Figure 29. Demonstration for the permanent adoption of the abortion law. Paris, 6 October 1979. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1979.htm>. Last accessed: 19 July 2018.

A year and a half later, in April 1981, when a significant number of lesbians officially split from the feminist movement in order to create an autonomous movement of lesbians for the first time in the history of the MLF, the name they gave themselves – the Front des lesbiennes radicales (Radical lesbians’ front) – was an explicit reference to the Front lesbien international that had been “stifled” (Graziella 2010 [1981]: 39; Melo 1981a: 67, my translation) in the middle of the previous decade.⁷⁴ Recovering the failed history of the 1974

⁷⁴ In an article on the creation of the Front des lesbiennes radicales in the mixed homosexual magazine *Homophonies*, the author remarks: “the idea of a Lesbian Front has been trundling along since 1974... since then, it has progressed” (Anne-Marie 1981: 10, my translation).

Front lesbien international, the Front des lesbiennes radicales revived unfulfilled possibilities, and perhaps sought to repair the MLF's unrecognized losses and all the injuries done to Monique Wittig.

Wittig's figure of the lesbian as not a woman does not so much mark the beginning of a lesbian story as seal the end of a feminist one. At the abovementioned meeting in 1978 when a few activists tried to relaunch the Front lesbien international, Louise Turcotte seems to have pointed to the crux of the problem: “[t]he group has died because it could not justify its existence” (Bonnet 1978, my translation). Indeed, between the photos taken in California and in the streets of Paris in 1979 – when the Front lesbien was still a dream conjured up in T-shirt slogans – and the creation of the Front des lesbiennes radicales in 1981, something absolutely crucial happened that made this impossible history finally become possible: the publication in 1980 of Monique Wittig's “*La pensée straight*” (The Straight Mind) and “*On ne naît pas femme*” (One Is Not Born a Woman), in which she wrote that “lesbians are not women”, thereby putting a definitive end to lesbians' aporetic demands for inclusion in the “we” of “women” and providing them with the theoretical foundations they needed to withstand their universalist/heterosexual reabsorption into French feminism. Wittig recurrently complains in her archive that she was politically and theoretically “knocked down” (Wittig 1981a: 7, my translation) by other feminists every time she attempted to create a lesbian group; I suggest that her radical statement “lesbians are not women” was born of an exhausting ten-year battle to ground a lesbian speaking position in a discursive/epistemic frame that foreclosed it as an impossibility. Wittig knew the necessity of providing lesbian politics with “unknockable” theoretical ground because of her own long journey “in hell” and because of lesbians' ongoing “out-of-placeness” (Wittig in *Actuel* 1974: 14) in the MLF, which were the price paid for this haunting absence. In that regard, her statement was itself the way out of an epistemic violence which had hurt her badly.

From the standpoint of the failed history of the Front lesbien international and the melancholic “rebellious consciousness” (Gordon 2011: 5) to which it gave rise, the dramatic controversy over radical lesbianism that occurred in the wake of the publication of Monique Wittig's articles “*La pensée straight*” and “*On ne naît pas femme*” in 1980 appears to be haunted by its own “retrospective urgency” (Gordon 2011: 5) and the numberless “historical alternatives” (Marcuse 1964 in Gordon 2011: 5) “that could have been” (Gordon 2011: 5) but never were.

3. Lesbians Are Not Women: A Structure of Feeling

Looking back on the very beginnings of the MLF in the feminist magazine *Le temps des femmes*, Christine Delphy recalls:

It was a bit like in a romantic passion. [...] For us it was mind-blowing! You can see how the momentum waned just a year later, things no longer had that kind of magic (Le temps des femmes 1981: 19, my translation).

In this section, I further parochialize the feelings of ecstatic joy pertaining to successful identification with feminism's subject "women". I explore lesbians' "backward" feelings (Love 2007) in relation to "women" as affects of a failure of identification, further revealing the unstated norms regulating the subject "women". The shameful lie of lesbians' assimilation into the MLF was not only (unsuccessfully) denounced by Wittig throughout the 1970s, but I argue it also had an affective life of its own. Beyond Wittig's particular case, numberless lesbians who did not recognize themselves in the community that the MLF offered experienced feelings of reluctance, sadness, loneliness, unease, regret, deception, lassitude, bitterness, exasperation, discontent or anger – feelings that are at odds with the MLF's "proper affects" of radical happiness and euphoric love. These belated lesbian testimonies, emerging at the end of the decade, resound as dissonant and uncanny narratives surfacing from a sea of inaudibility. They are crucial for parochializing dominant MLF discourses insofar as they reveal what those joyful discourses leave in the dark: those who withdrew from the MLF, or who never wanted to join it in the first place.

It is from the standpoint of those who haunted the MLF by their absence that I wish to rewrite the (biased) history of MLF affective plenitude. I argue that the persistence of those backwards feelings in the glorious modernity of "women" exerts the "temporal drag" (Freeman 2010: 59) of the anachronistic lesbian and her pre-MLF structure of feeling (which the MLF sought to get rid of) upon revolutionary and blissful "women". This "stubborn lingering of pastness" (Freeman 2010: 8) bears witness to the lesbian presence as a melancholic remainder, but it also, and perhaps more importantly, reveals the heterosexual epistemology sustaining the "proper" MLF feelings of happiness, plenitude, "romantic passion" or "magic" (invoked in Delphy's statement above) pertaining to the celebration of "women". In this section, I chart lesbians' unrecorded turning back from a feminist social

experience and futurity that no MLF woman thought could be unwanted, and which was inseparable from a melancholic longing for something else.

What I wish to show here is that the MLF's secret – that lesbians are not women – had an affective life of its own that stretched across the whole decade of the 1970s as “a cultural hypothesis” (Gordon 1997: 201) before it solidified into a theoretical and political formulation from 1980 onwards. I am interested in the ways in which the lesbian as not a woman was “actively lived and felt” (Williams 1977: 132) before she was theorized as such. In contrast to “other semantic formations which have been precipitated and are more evidently and more immediately available” (Williams 1977: 133–134) – feminism's subject “women” and its well-worn positive structure of feeling – the lesbian structure of feeling I am seeking to address is “emergent” (Williams 1977: 132), not yet classified or rationalized. This social experience is difficult to grasp: the structure of feeling of the lesbian who is not a woman is hardly recorded in the feminist archive, but it is also one of “those elusive, impalpable forms of social consciousness which are [...] as evanescent as ‘feelings’ suggests” (Eagleton 1991: 48). Since the notion of structure of feeling enables us to grasp what is not (yet) “recognised as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating” (Williams 1977: 132), it is especially helpful, as Avery Gordon argues, for capturing “ghostly matters” (1997), that is, effects of a social or epistemic violence that are invisible to the eye. These ghostly feelings are the insurgent traces of feminism's lie and of the radical failure of the MLF's crucible to forcibly erase differences among women.

Suzette Triton is a pioneer of lesbian activism in France. Originally a far-left activist in the Trotskyist organization the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Communist League), in 1978 at the age of thirty-one she co-founded the Groupe lesbiennes de Paris (Lesbians from Paris Group), one of the first lesbian groups seeking to represent lesbians as lesbians and independently of the MLF (unlike the Gouines rouges) (see next chapter). In 1979, in the first issue of the mixed homosexual journal *Masques*, Triton published an eloquent account of the reasons why she had been reluctant as a lesbian to join the feminist movement throughout the 1970s and had ended up creating a lesbian group:

I looked from outside, I followed what was happening, I haunted the demonstrations, I say “haunted” because I could not integrate into it. Love between women, sisterhood, it was not for me. For me, it was about masks, mistrust, distrust, defence. They wanted

to be similar to each other, I did not want to be similar to them. They wanted to discover their common traits, to speak about their experiences, to question the suffocation of the couple, the traditional notion of love, but their descriptions, their narratives were not mine. [...] I felt totally close, and yet I had never felt so alien, since my difference was so obvious. [...] For fear of repressing myself a bit further by going to women's groups, I therefore remained to one side, on the lookout for anyone like me (Suzette 1979: 91, my translation).

By pointing to the paradox between feeling "totally close" (as a woman) and "yet [...] so alien" (as a lesbian), Triton exemplifies what Judith Butler addresses when she describes "disidentification" as an "experience of *misrecognition*, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong" (2011 [1993]: 166, emphasis Butler's). The reason why disidentification rather than identification occurred for Suzette was because she clung onto her lesbian difference. Hence, "women" was not a hospitable referent for her; it was experienced as a catachresis. As she unequivocally says: "I could not integrate into it". Thus, Triton's experience enables her to provincialize the dominant MLF discursive practices that underpinned the fantasy of women's sameness. By laying claim to a "them" and a "we" – which appears even more clearly in the piece's title, "For Them, It Was About Sisterhood, For Me, Masks and Distrust" (Suzette 1979: 90) – Triton unabashedly *reintroduces* the very lesbian difference which the MLF's heterosexual iron law had coerced into erasure: "[l]ove between women, sisterhood, it was not for me. [...] They wanted to be similar to each other, *I did not want to be similar to them*" (my emphasis). Explaining why she "had never wanted" to join women's groups, Triton points to the erasure of differences on which women's sameness was conditioned: "the pitfall of their desire to be similar to each other was that lesbians only appeared as individualities" (Suzette 1979: 90).

Through Triton's reintroduction of lesbian difference, the (unacknowledged) heterosexual norm sustaining the MLF's injunctions to assimilate is revealed to her: "their descriptions, their narratives were not mine". Thus, the fantasy of women's mutual recognition through love – generative of the MLF's proper affects, and of successful identification with the "women" sign – *fails* for Suzette Triton: she does not *see* her own reflection, and does not experience a subjective reassembling in and through other women's eyes. She experiences instead a *failure of identification*. As a result, she became, in her own words, "alien" and discovered a whole range of improper affects: "masks, mistrust, distrust, defence" or "[self-

]repression”. Those are the affects of the misrecognized subject: Suzette Triton is the “j/e” to the MLF’s “we”. By refusing to let her lesbian difference be vaporized or “melt” (to use Bonnet’s word from the previous chapter) in the MLF’s (heterocentric) crucible, Triton became a “blockage point” (Ahmed 2010a: 68) in the smooth circulation of feminist happiness and joy, hindering the successful completion of women’s fusion and revealing the MLF’s heterosexual norm.

If Wittig’s retreat to the US materializes the lesbian cut in women’s representation, in Triton’s narrative, lesbians’ liminal position is materialized as a “haunt[ing]” of feminist demonstrations and a waiting “to one side, on the lookout for anyone like [her]”. The melancholic space of the side of the road, while feminists are at the heart of the action, “allows for a beautiful deferral and [...] for the emergence of alternative forms of sociability” (Love 2007: 64): forms that would be hospitable to unassimilable ghosts like her. In contrast to the glorious position of heroic revolutionary, Triton has chosen passivity. However, this passivity is not “a lack of political commitment”, but the manifestation of a melancholic critical agency that “inhabits a ‘time of expectation’” (Nealon in Love 2007: 89). To borrow Heather Love’s eloquent expression, it is not “a refusal of politics but rather [...] a politics of refusal” (Love 2007: 58), silently challenging the community feminism has to offer. It is interlaced with the “desire for an ‘inaccessible future’, for forms of life and community that are impossible in their own historical moment” (Love 2007: 89): the desire for “anyone who is like [her]”.

Mirroring Triton’s melancholic feelings linked to disidentification, Nelly – also a former member of the Ligue communiste révolutionnaire and co-founder with Triton of the Groupe lesbiennes de Paris (and later a member of the Front des lesbiennes radicales) – provides a clear account of the unease that the MLF’s generalized homoeroticism produced in her:

I lived in a state of constant unease, loads of attitudes and words that often led me into self-repression. Starting with the ambiguity that prevailed in relationships between women in the group and in the movement in general. A latent desire of women for other women, which they displayed without necessarily accepting it; all the hugging and kissing reunions, holding hands, tender gestures [...]. An ambiguity which, for me, became dangerous; seduction-play-rejection, in which I sometimes got caught. [...] In the group I was not myself, I was only the image of what they expected me to be: a

lesbian, without expressing either the lived experience of that or the attitudes or the contradictions. The reassuring model that corresponded to their idealized theories of homosexuality (Nelly 1979a: 93–94, my translation).

Instead of the feelings of rebirth and wholeness to which the MLF's chaste homoeroticism is supposed to give rise, Nelly's experience (recounted from the standpoint of her lesbian difference) is one of self-repression and unease. As she makes clear, she simply could not *be* a lesbian in the MLF's framework of “women's love”, which denied the reality of lesbianism. In that regard, Nelly's testimony provides a more objective account of the social reality of homosexuality in the MLF than the (dominant) narratives of homosexual hegemony insofar as it reveals, from a lesbian perspective, the performative effects of the myth of the repression of heterosexuals: the actual proscription of lesbianism. It thus confirms that feminist happiness relied on (and produced) the excision of lesbian desire. Thus, the positive psychic effects of (heteronormative) sisterhood were fully reversed for Nelly, who experienced depression and psychic dissolution:

I threw myself into the construction of [an abortion centre] [...]. Who could have said then, listening to me speaking, that I was a lesbian? I completely forgot myself through the desire to be with the others, like the others, in the others' place. [...] I experienced a total loss of identity in being attentive to women. And then, suddenly, the inevitable big depression, a sense of having been cheated, without really being able to explain to myself by whom and how (Nelly 1979a: 93, my translation).

Nelly's narrative sheds light on the irrecoverable lesbian psychic losses that are constitutive of the heterocentric script of the “miracle of the mirror”: sisterhood, this “desire to be with the others”, instead of magically reassembling the shards of broken subjectivity into a new and healthy female body, prompted a “total loss of identity” for her. In other words, the mechanics of the MLF's assimilative crucible unravelled for Nelly. These are the lesbian psychic losses on which the heterocentric MLF plenitude of women's fusion was conditioned.

These testimonies reveal the affective and psychic underside of the MLF's erasure of women's differences (as a naturalizing technique of heterosexuality). While the MLF lesbian pioneers experienced assimilation as a healing of queer injuries (through erasure and amnesia), I suggest that some other lesbians instead experienced assimilation as a repetition of

queer traumas characterized in heteronormative societies by shame, isolation, secrecy and misrecognition (Butler 1997a; Love 2007; Muñoz 1999). Indeed, for Triton, who was already “in a depressive state of profound loneliness”, participating in a women’s group would have felt like “denying *once again* who [she] was” (Suzette 1979: 90, my emphasis). She adds: “[f]rom this silent past [...] I have retained a fundamental suspicion about what is implicit”.

Although lesbians’ improper affects are barely traceable in the MLF archive (those above were published in a homosexual magazine, which was arguably more hospitable to such voices), I realized after several months of research that there was a singular space where dissonant narratives had succeeded almost imperceptibly in manifesting themselves: the readers’ letters sections of MLF magazines. The readers’ letters section is a paradoxical space within the general organization of a magazine: it is at once external or even superfluous (it does not directly relate to the content and does not emanate from the editors) and indispensable insofar as it materially manifests the interaction between the magazine and its readers, without which the magazine would have no reason to exist. I would even suggest that the readers’ letters section is a melancholic space par excellence within the feminist archive that materializes lesbians’ haunting position in relation to feminism insofar as it is a liminal space where unsatisfied voices can manifest their presence and address those in control of the object they critique (while remaining in a sanitized position of externality). In *Histoires d’elles*, a feminist magazine created in 1977, an anonymous author complains in the readers’ letters section about the lack of lesbian representation:

I would like to raise one subject only: why such silence on homosexuality in *Histoires d’elles*? Every month I hope to read about women who experience somewhat the same joys and the same troubles as me, but nothing – complete silence. Unless this topic is not political, or about everyday life, or imaginary?? So no hard feelings but a little bit of sadness in my heart (Catherine 1979: 6, my translation).

This letter introduces “sadness” as another affective response to the MLF’s lie of lesbian assimilation. However, the author’s sadness is also bound up with a stubborn agency, a refusal to give up on her own inclusion in feminism’s community of women: “every month”, she says, she tries again, “hop[ing] to read about women” like her. And every month, she fails again: “but nothing – complete silence”. A similar trace of this lesbian critical agency can be found in the differentialist magazine *Des femmes en mouvements*:

I am a lesbian [...] and I miss the words of women like me. It is impossible for me to approach any publication on women without this desire for recognition... (Anon. 1978a: 9, my translation).

In this extract too, the reader addresses a loss – “the words of women like me” – all the while foregrounding the loss as unacceptable: every time she reads a women’s magazine, she cannot not want to find her lesbian difference reflected in it. Writing to the editors of the magazine is obviously a further instance of a refusal to mourn the loss of recognition, hoping that in so doing the situation might change. This melancholic critical agency is therefore one of stubborn optimism, despite the range of negative affects underpinning it.

However, despite lesbians’ nagging insistence, the editors’ condescending responses relentlessly repeat the very aphasia that the letters seek to dismantle. Below the letter in *Histoires d’elles*, the editors published the following response:

Thank you for this sign. Perhaps it is because what is imaginary for all women is everyday life or experience for only a few (N.D.L. rédactrice 1979: 6, my translation).

Similarly, in response to Suzette Triton, who in 1981 wrote a scathing opinion piece for the homosexual journal *Masques* to condemn the silence regarding lesbian activism in a special issue of the feminist magazine *Le temps des femmes* on the recent history of the women’s movement, the editors of *Le temps des femmes* explained that they could not “include the whole of reality in a spoonful” and suggested that “those forgotten in this issue” might be “the sole focus of a forthcoming issue” (*Le temps des femmes* 1981–1982: 5, my translation). These two responses hinge on three narrative strategies that confirm and enshrine the very externality that the lesbian critiques seek to denounce: particularization, derealization (or fetishization) and depoliticization. Particularization insofar as lesbianism, because it supposedly concerns a minority of women, should be granted either lesser (in fact non-existent) representation in the magazine or tokenized representation (in a special issue). Derealization (or fetishization) insofar as female homosexuality, rather than “something solidly in the world and enmeshed in its sociality” (Hesford 2005: 228), is condescendingly conceived as a phantasmatic outside: “what is imaginary for all women”, repeating the universalization of homosexuality by which lesbian difference is erased. Finally,

depoliticization insofar as the power relations between heterosexuality and homosexuality in the women's movement and society at large are entirely dismissed by addressing them as quantitative data: "experience for only a few", just one aspect of "the whole of reality". At the same time, publishing these instances of lesbian discontent enables the editors to neutralize the critiques: in so doing, they guard against accusations of censorship while offering them a harmless space that does not risk undermining the discourses' dominant shape. Thus, publishing the critiques and responding to them by justifying oneself in one way or another – rather than holding oneself accountable – is also a way of endlessly closing the case. It gives the impression that the problem has been not only addressed but also solved. As the editors of *Le temps des femmes* pithily add in their response to Triton: "[w]e won't open the debate now". In fact, the debate was closed before it could ever be opened, but pretending that it has been opened over and over again is a narrative strategy (akin to the narrative of homosexual hegemony in the MLF) that perpetually forecloses it as anachronistic. Hence, it endlessly prevents the conditions of the crisis from being addressed. These letters are a way of pointing to "the animated effectivity of the blind field" (Gordon 1997: 206), yet by preferring to ignore lesbians' melancholic damage to feminism's force field, feminists choose "blindness as [their] national pledge of allegiance" (207).

The melancholic lesbian structure of feeling to which the MLF's false promise of universal representation gave rise, one could say, is one of stubborn optimism *and* permanent frustration, constantly inciting hope of change (materially expressed through the letters sent to feminist magazines) while also relentlessly offering disillusionment in response (materially expressed through the editors' dismissive replies). It is a kind of feminist "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011) that exemplifies the epistemic violence of the MLF's liberal promise of inclusion. I argue that it was the endless repetition of this "cruel optimism" that over time led to lesbians' discovery of feminism's lie of assimilation, engendering their withdrawal from the feminist movement and the outbreak of anger and hate that characterized radical lesbians' affective repertoires in the early 1980s (see next chapter). Looking back on the withdrawal of many lesbians from the feminist movement in the late 1970s and early 1980s in favour of lesbian groups (see next chapter), Christiane Jouve, co-founder of the first lesbian monthly *Lesbia* in 1982, addresses "the bitter feeling of having been tricked":

Many [lesbians] took an active part in the women's movement, rightly thinking that nothing that concerned women was foreign to them, starting with contraception and

abortion, which they did not really need... The rub came when the activists realized that their own preoccupations were not on the agenda, and that solidarity was purely one-way. [...] Tired of talking to brick walls, many of them left a movement that was losing speed, with the bitter feeling of having been tricked (Jouve 1985: 14, my translation).

The belated realization of the systematicity of lesbians' exclusion from feminist reason, which Jouve vividly describes as a "talking to brick walls", is also exactly what Triton refers to in the biting piece mentioned above about the lack of lesbian representation in the feminist magazine *Le temps des femmes*: "[a]ll of this is even more appalling because it is neither deliberate nor overtly anti-lesbian, it is simply 'normal', as the saying goes" (Triton 1981: 136). Lesbians' break from feminism arose from their belated affective discovery that their exclusion from feminism's community of "women" was not a temporary forgetfulness which could be changed over time but a *structure* of feminism: something "normal", as Triton says.

Sadness, bitterness, disappointment and "exasperation" (Triton 1981: 136), I argue, sealed the affective discovery of feminism's lie and the mourning of "wounded attachments" (Brown 1993) to the MLF's cruel promise of inclusion. Indeed, Jouve's description of "the bitter feeling of having been tricked" strongly resonates with Nelly's "sense of having been cheated, without really being able to explain to [herself] by whom and how" and with Triton's feeling that she would have been "denying" herself "once again if she had joined a women's group: obstructing the flow of the MLF's "proper" affects, they all *felt as if* there was a lie. In other words, Wittig's 1980 aphorism "lesbians are not women", which explicitly unearthed the MLF's founding secret, was already *affectively* known by feminist lesbians who experienced "improper" affects in the context of the MLF's liberationist promise. These feelings spanned the years 1973–1979 as melancholic rem(a)inders of an original foreclosure. Against the affirmative MLF archive, they register the psychic costs of the MLF closet – of lesbians' forced assimilation into feminism's unacknowledged heterosexual norm. This affective or "sensuous" knowledge (Marx 1844 and 1888 in Gordon 1997: 205) of *not* being a woman is exactly what Triton refers to when she explains why she never wanted to join women's groups:

When local [women's] groups were created, I never went. If today, I try to analyse why I never wanted to do that, I can't say much about it. It was not a decision back

then, it was not thought through, it was a deep impression, the gut feeling that I would have been denying once more who I was (Triton 1979: 90–91).

Suzette Triton's feeling is not explicitly framed as the politics (and even less the theory) of not being a woman: as a melancholic she does not know what the lost object is (assimilation). Yet, Wittig's classic formulation was felt in its material reality, “in relatively isolated ways” (Williams 1977: 134), by lesbian activists. It was “embryonic”, not “fully articulate” (Williams 1977: 131): it registered the haunting life of the MLF's constitutive lesbian outside. It was exactly the counter-intuitive “[thinking] through” underlying Triton's “gut impression” that she would have been denying herself, Nelly's “sense of having been cheated” or Jouve's “bitter feeling of having been tricked” that Wittig unearthed in 1980: the MLF had indeed lied to them by making them believe that they were women. To conclude, we could say, following Avery Gordon's characterization of novelists Toni Morrison's and Luisa Valenzuela's gracious dialogues with ghosts, that Wittig's “lesbians are not women” was “a solution, a something to be done” that

emerge[d] from haunting and the *very edge of semantic availability* to manifest its inexorability to us. It [was] the precarious but motivated transition from being troubled, often inexplicably or by repetitively stuck explanations, to doing something else that [she] chart[ed] with exquisite fidelity (Gordon 1997: 202, emphasis Gordon's).

4. American Lesbians Are Not French Women

Before moving on to the next chapter, I will suggest that an additional form of epistemic violence against lesbians must be accounted for if we are to understand the tumultuous return of the lesbian figure in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Although it has often been said that French feminists admired American radical feminists, from whom they took much of their inspiration (Flamant 2007), I argue in this section that this is only one aspect of the story. In fact, at the same time as they celebrated the feminist movement overseas, French feminists used the spectre of lesbianism as an American idiosyncrasy to further evacuate the politicization of lesbianism in France.

French national identity has long pitted itself against the “American bogeyman” (Fabre and

Fassin 2003: 21, my translation) as the abject (and stabilizing) other that threatens to sabotage its foundations (Lacorne et al. 1990; Perreau 2016). In France, the abstract unity of the nation – which only recognizes citizens as individuals shorn of their social, sexual, religious or cultural attributes – is conceived as ensuring social harmony against the natural hostility of differences. Conversely, the “American” multiculturalist social contract is seen, from France, as anchoring the American nation in a permanent state of social warfare and division between communities – that is, as a paradigmatically ghettoized nation (Fassin 1993, 1994, 1999a, 2001, 2008, 2009; Mathy 1993; Schor 2001; Scott 1995, 1997, 2005, 2011).⁷⁵ Therefore, I argue in this section that insofar as the democratic imaginary of heterosexuality, conceived as the democratic crucible of sexual difference, was framed in 1970s feminist discourses as an effect of the pacifying French Republican social contract (through compulsory mixedness), its tyrannical and ghettoized lesbian other, conceived as entrenched in a separate sexual community, was constructed by implication as an American particularity. In short, the mythical time of the lesbian from “before the movement” (Anon. 1980a: 22; Deudon 1981: 83) was displaced, in the MLF’s colonial modernity of women, onto tribalist America. While France was conceived as the original land of (heterosexual) “rational and calm” women (de Beauvoir 1977: 7), lesbian hysteria was geographically exiled to the United States.⁷⁶

Responding to Delphy’s widely cited article “The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move”, in which she argues that what US academics call “French feminism” (by which they mean French differentialist feminism) is “not Feminism in France” but an American “invention” (Delphy 1995: 193), Cynthia Kraus (2005) highlights the performative function of Delphy’s speech act: that of constructing a French feminist tradition that is exclusively radical (or materialist) while establishing the *féminisme de la difference* as an American invention that is foreign to the “reality” of feminism in France. Following Kraus’ criticism, I demonstrate how radical and differentialist women alike who participated in the

⁷⁵ Following Eric Fassin, I deliberately use the hegemonic term “America” as a “rhetorical figure of public discourse in France that should be distinguished from the United States” (2009: 13, my translation).

⁷⁶ Fassin (1999a, 2001, 2009) and Scott (1995, 1997, 2004, 2007) argue that the transatlantic contrast between universalist France and segregationist America emerged as a core argument of conservative/Republican rhetoric in 1990s France to prevent the politicization of sexual and racial issues. As I show in this section, not only was this contrast already at play in the 1970s, but it also structured revolutionary feminist rhetoric. In that regard, I contend that the transatlantic contrast between harmonious France and fragmented America is not so much an anti-feminist as an anti-lesbian rhetorical weapon.

MLF constructed an “Anglo-American feminism made in France” whose singularity was to be *lesbian*, thereby implicitly producing in a similar gesture a “French Feminism made in France” (Kraus 2005: 169) that is devoid of the reality of lesbianism. The irony is double. With a view to disciplining the heterosexual borders of their subject, French feminists used the rhetorical spectre of an American sex war that was simultaneously being used in the media to discredit the emergence of the feminist movement itself (Bernheim 2010 [1983]: 80–83). Further, while French radical feminists fervently condemned the American conflation of 1970s French feminism with its differentialist branch (Costello 2016; de Beauvoir 1984; Delphy 1995; Moses 1998), they also actively created their own version of the American feminist movement in order to evacuate lesbian difference from French feminist reality.

Therefore, instead of examining, like feminist theorist Judith Ezekiel, the “political marriage of convenience” between “anti-feminism” and “anti-Americanism” (1996), I turn to the reciprocal constructions of anti-lesbianism and anti-Americanism in 1970s French feminist discourses. What happens when translations do not “preserve or even mark out differences”, as Anne E. Berger suggests in her work on the heterogeneous Franco-American genealogy of queer theory (Berger 2016: 20), but are meant to *erase* differences? What happens when translation, as “a neohumanist practice of transnational exchange and [...] an ethico-political task of resistant and transformative reception” (Berger 2016: 24), is turned into a reactionary tool to foreclose minoritarian presence, resist hospitality and hinder the expression of pluralism within feminism? In this section, I explore what happens when translation is not a tool for deconstruction that consists in “deconstructing, dislocating, displacing, disarticulating, disjoining, putting ‘out of joint’ the authority of the ‘is’” (Derrida 1995: 25), but a technology of power that serves to naturalize the “is” of national and feminist identities as white and heterosexual.

The French Women’s Movement and the American Lesbian Tribe

Although the feminist press ignored lesbian political and social issues as a whole (Eloit 2017), I was struck by the realization that when lesbianism was addressed it was most often in reference to American lesbian separatism and through deliberately shocking representations. In *La revue d’en face*, a radical feminist monthly created in 1977, the *only* article addressing lesbianism (prior to the 1980 clash) – *pace* the repression of heterosexuals in the MLF – is about lesbian separatist communes in Oregon. Entitled “A Tribe of Women”, the article looks

as if it provided – in continuity with MLF discourses on the lesbian “ghetto”, addressed in the previous chapter – a fantasy ethnography of feminism’s psychotic lesbian underworld, which proliferated outside the civilizing white male gaze and where bloodthirsty creatures celebrated the spoils of sex war in ecstatic dance. Thus, I argue that the anti-lesbian, nationalist and racist “political unconscious” (Jameson 1982) of feminist discourses, through which the lesbian was repudiated as a hysterical dyke, was explicitly unleashed by virtue of the act of transference that the transatlantic contrast enabled. Inhabiting a “wild land” (Bendl 1978: 34), these American lesbians are portrayed as primitive others, in direct lineage from the most blatant clichés of Western colonialism. Calling upon a *National Geographic* aesthetic, the pictures depict the lesbians as savage beings stuck in a state of nature: they live in remote woods, euphorically jump around naked in the forest as if losing control of their reason, lasciviously hold each other’s naked bodies as if endowed with an unfettered sexuality, and drum in jubilation while abandoning themselves to tribal rituals (see Figures 30–36).

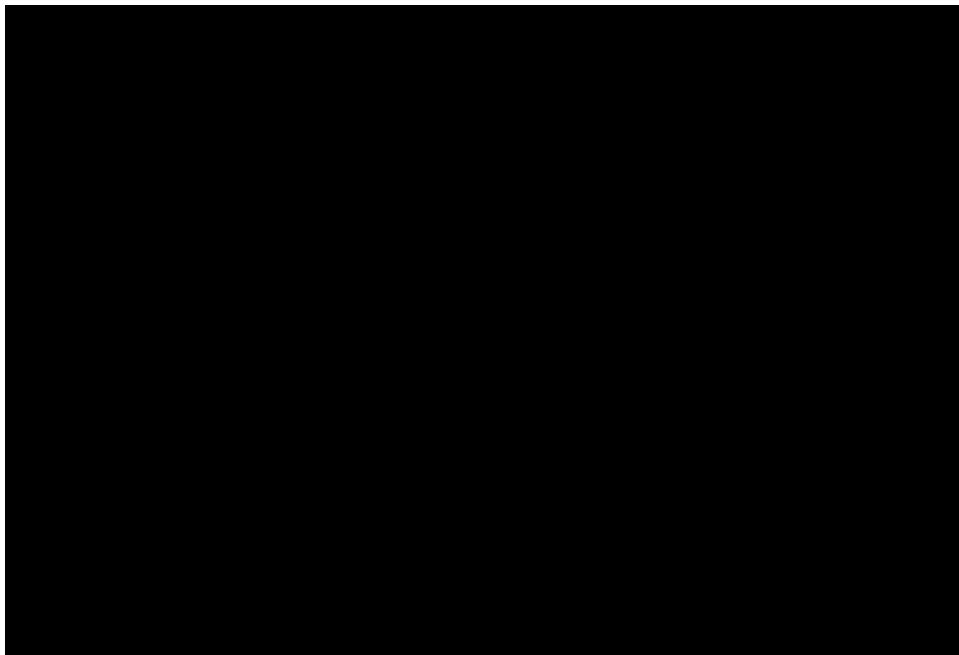


Figure 30. Illustration from Bendl, “A Tribe of Women” (*La revue d'en face*, 3, February 1978: 34).

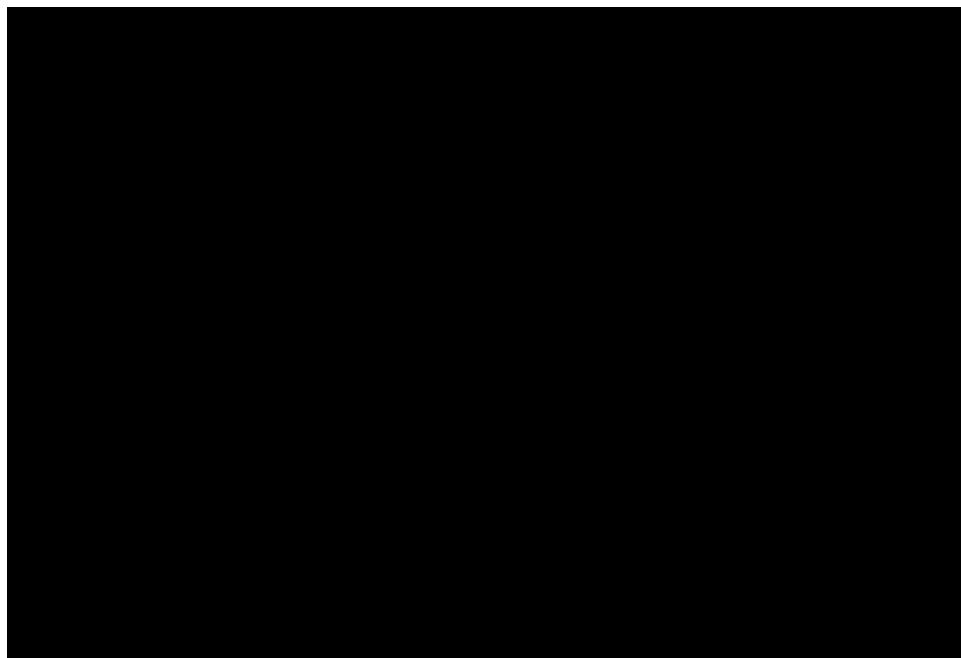


Figure 31. Illustration from Bendl, “A Tribe of Women” (*La revue d’en face*, 3, February 1978: 34).

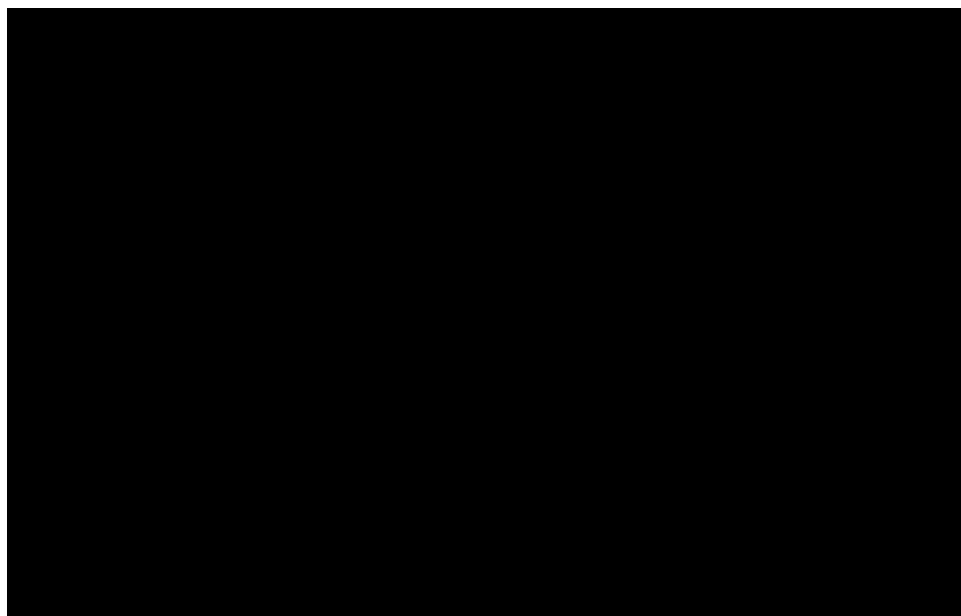


Figure 32. Illustration from Bendl, “A Tribe of Women” (*La revue d’en face*, 3, February 1978: 35).

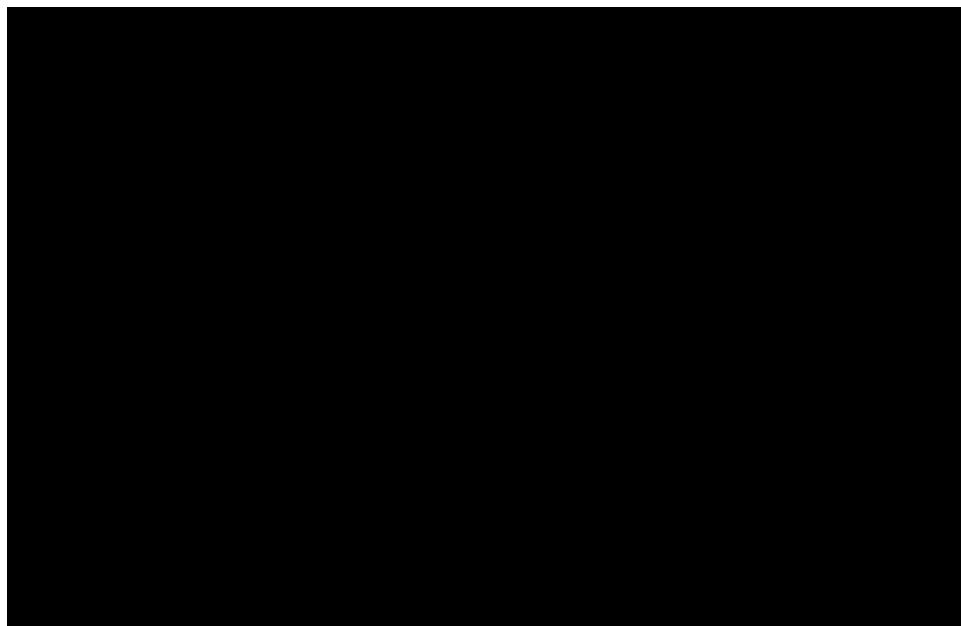


Figure 33. Illustration from Bendl, “A Tribe of Women” (*La revue d’en face*, 3, February 1978: 35).

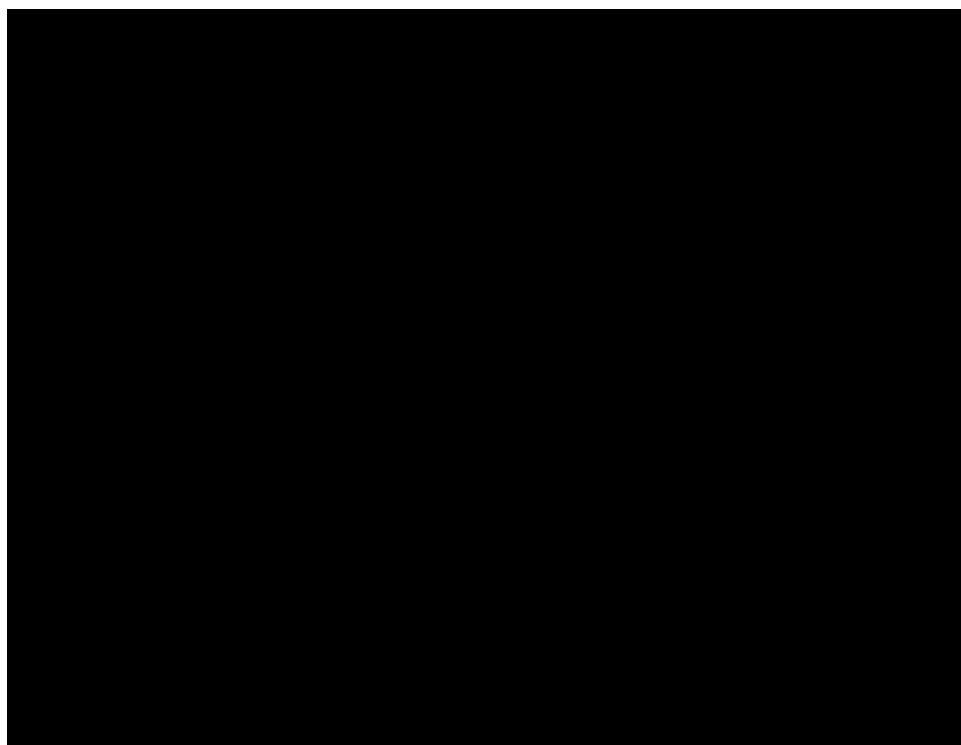


Figure 34. Illustration from Bendl, “A Tribe of Women” (*La revue d’en face*, 3, February 1978: 36).

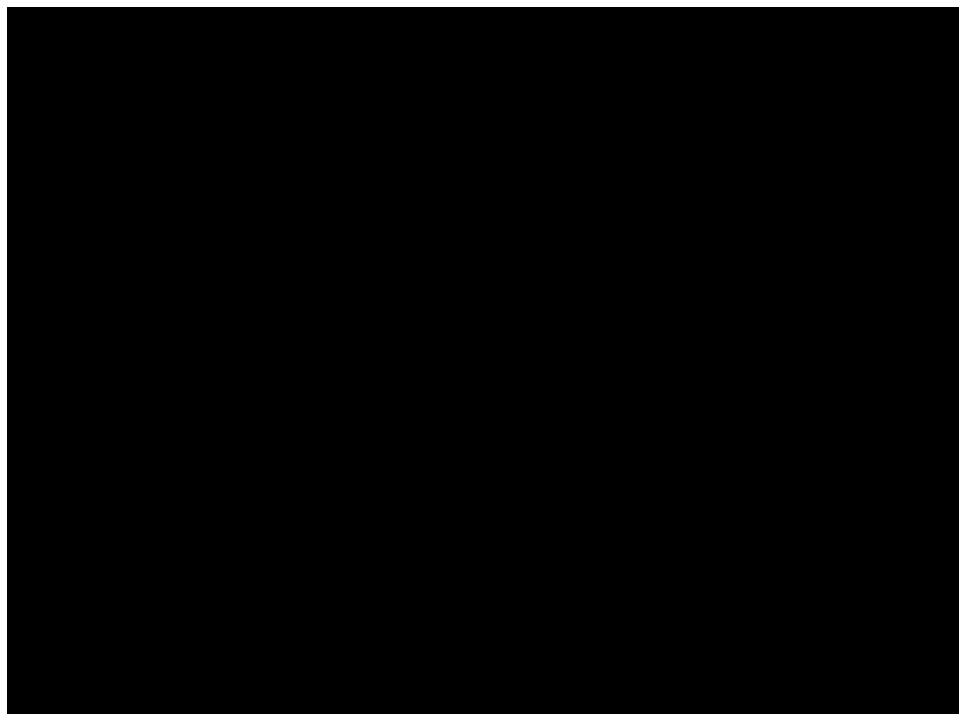


Figure 35. Illustration from Bendl, “A Tribe of Women” (*La revue d'en face*, 3, February 1978: 36).

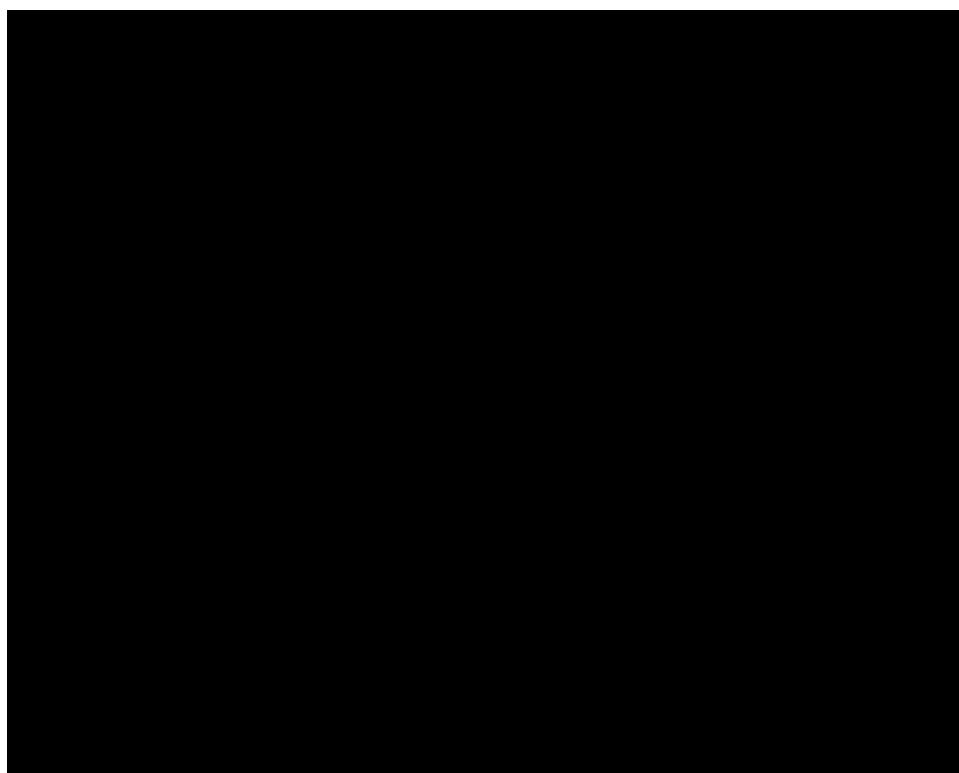


Figure 36. Illustration from Bendl, “A Tribe of Women” (*La revue d'en face*, 3, February 1978: 37).

The American lesbian “tribe” seems to be, in a sense, the original space from which the Parisian lesbian ghetto and its hysterical dyke derive as imported copies. In the article, American lesbian separatists are portrayed as tribal savages lacking all the symbolic and social attributes that the heterosexual traffic of women as “the general condition of culture” (Lévi-Strauss 1969 [1949]: 24) is said to authorize. Indeed, they appear to be stuck in a pre-modern state of nature whereby they can only communicate through prelinguistic attributes: in a section of the article evocatively entitled “Life, Habits and Customs of the Amazons”, it is said that they “sit in a circle, hold hands, sing or even remain silent and simply look at each other” and “have a great deal of physical contact, at night but also during the day. During [their] meetings [they] touch each other a lot”. The author remarks that instead of wearing “make-up” they “paint [their] faces”, and that they do not “sit around a table on chairs”. At night, “some women sleep right on the ground, others on mats, but the latter are always woven from natural fibres such as cotton or wool” (Bendl 1978: 35, my translation). The paradox is that although they are portrayed as stuck in an uncivilized state of nature, they are also represented at the same time as going *against* the natural law of gender: “the first thing women do when they join the tribe is to cut their hair very short” (35); “they reject their femininity, their maternal and reproductive functions” (37). This paradox is in direct harmony with the dialectic of heterosexuality I uncovered in the previous chapter: undemocratized by the happy medium between nature and culture provided by (French) heterosexuality, the American lesbian is at once entrenched in identity differentialism (a withdrawal into a state of natural sexual difference) and promotes radical individualism (aggressively waging a war against nature by seeking to imitate men). The Americanization of feminism’s abjected lesbian figure confirms the ways in which the heterosexual contract is a necessary condition for women to integrate into the (universalist) French nation. The lesbian “monster [...] aping the gestures of virile love” (Bernheim 2010 [1983]: 200, my translation) – the hysterical dyke – is so un-French that she has to be made American.

Undomesticated by the “direct and necessary relationship between the [heterosexual] familial and the social” postulated by French political culture (Robcis 2016: 93, my translation), the American lesbian separatist lacks the moderation and temperance that (French) acculturation is said to provide. She therefore suffers from psychical problems:

To combat anxiety, fear, we fill our bellies with food. So much so that after a couple of months, the women become fat. [...] We fast, it is a spiritual experience but also a way of controlling our excesses with food (Bendl 1978: 35, my translation).

Alcohol is also mentioned as one of the reasons why women join these “tribes”: “[y]ou see, women who join us have either left patriarchy voluntarily, or else they have been excluded from it, like this alcoholic woman” (36). These descriptions recall feminists’ pathologization of (French) lesbian spatialization as illustrative of a “damaged, tenuous, counterfeit, often neurotic [...] sense of collectivity” (Catherine 1974: 2090, my translation). The representation of American lesbians’ uncivilized follies culminates in the following extract:

No one uses tampons. We use a string tied around the waist with a cloth between the legs. In summer we bleed without using anything. Many of our rituals revolve around menstrual blood: some women eat it, lick it, it is about total acceptance of our bodies. Urine as well. [...] During these rituals women drink their urine because it is said that the spirit of [the god] Peyote comes through it and when you drink it, you’re drinking Peyote anew. Women cover their bodies and skin with their urine (Bendl 1978: 35, my translation).

The affects of repugnance that these representations are meant to induce are conditioned on the assumption of the reader’s colonial gaze. Indeed, these representations can work as techniques of subordination to the extent that they rely on centuries of sedimented discursive practices of colonial authority. The gaze by which the American separatist lesbian is racialized as a primitive irrational being is the horrified gaze of the European encountering indigenous peoples in South-East Asia, the Pacific, the Americas or the Caribbean (Ehrenreich 2007; Segal 2017: 61), and it is precisely the gaze by which the French lesbian roaming in her “ROTTEN” “LITTLE LESBIAN GHETTO” (Catherine 1974: 2090, my translation) is racially subordinated. The French feminist who reads the article has her own rationality and moral humanity confirmed against the dehumanization and dehistoricization of American lesbian separatists, in exactly the same way as the English settlers in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* are confirmed as “sane men” against the “madhouse” of indigenous peoples in the “prehistoric earth” of the Congo Free State (1902 in Segal 2017: 56). The expulsion of the lesbian from French reality into a primitive American territory also builds on the colonial thinking with which female homosexuality (among other sexual

deviations) was naturalized as endogenous to Africa in modern nineteenth-century medicine. It was located in a “faraway, unknown and exotic elsewhere” where the warm climate was said to increase the size of the clitoris and produce tribadism (Dorlin 2009: 73, my translation). In the colonial rationality of these 1970s French representations, America replaces Africa as the tribal land from which lesbian madness stems, leaving France untouched by this pathology. This displacement from Africa to America reaffirms how racialization works to subordinate lesbians to the extent that they are always already imagined as white.

Of course, these representations of US lesbian separatism are not simply interpretative: racial and cultural appropriation was common in US lesbian separatist communities, and by racializing their own attachments to the group, American lesbian separatists made themselves available to these French interpretations. Their essentialist re-enactment of racist and colonial stereotypes through their celebration of a return to women’s “authenticity” as “pure lust” (Daly 1984), the colonial underpinnings of their insistence on a wilderness to occupy, as well as their cultural appropriation of traditional festive practices of non-Western societies (Ehrenreich 2007; Segal 2017) were fervently condemned by lesbians of colour in the 1980s (de Lauretis 1990; Hull et al. 1982; Lorde 1984). Nevertheless, considering that French feminists (almost) exclusively addressed lesbianism via purposefully scandalous representations of American lesbian separatism, I suggest that these representations are not so much about what they see as the follies of American lesbian separatism (which is indeed questionable on many fronts) as it is about their mythical and racialized vision of lesbianism. In speaking about “one of the realities of the American women’s movement which has provoked unease and fascination” (Bendl 1978: 33), as they note in their introduction to the article on lesbian communes in Oregon, the editors of *La revue d’en face* in reality are addressing their *own* “unease” and “fascination” about *lesbianism* – the “repudiated identification” (Butler 1997a: 137) of their heterosexual melancholy.

Against the archaic divisions of American society, where “there are the Blacks, the Chicanos, the Indians... There is everything” (Bendl 1978: 36), and from which originates this “tribe” that is divided between “those who do not want dairy products, vegetarians, those who eat fruit” and whose members are therefore unable to “eat together like in France” (35), a counter-reality of the French feminist movement is of course being constructed. Indeed, more than being about a tyrannical American lesbian reality, this article is really about its liberal

and rational utopian other: the MLF, which is thereby negatively defined as *not* a racialized and hysterical “tribe” of American lesbians, that is, as not a movement of lesbians. Against the fantasy representation of a chaotic American society where primitive and psychotic lesbians are able to proliferate, women’s (heterosexual and white) “sameness” is implicitly portrayed as French and as providing ideal conditions for a civilized and democratic feminist movement. Thus, although women’s “impossible separation” from men – as the participants in the feminist collective FMA wrote in 1969 (Anon. 1969: 4) – is the invisible condition that sustains the myth of women’s sameness and temperance, it appears through this transatlantic contrast as the cornerstone safeguarding French feminism from a terrifying American lesbian dystopia.

In an article on sexual moralism and the puritan excesses of the women’s liberation movement, author Annick Houel, a feminist psychologist who participated in the MLF in Lyon, writes: “if [lesbianism] is so little apparent in the French feminist movement, one should be very happy at thus having avoided a kind of ghetto *made in USA*” (Houel 1978: 21–22, emphasis in English in the text, my translation). The stakes are clear: the spectre of a fragmented American society, characterized by divisive identity politics, works as a convenient discursive technology to endlessly maintain lesbians in the French feminist closet.

The Purloined Lesbienne

In a 1980 interview with US radical feminist Kate Millett, Antoinette Fouque responds to her interlocutor, who has just referred to her own lesbianism, in the following terms: “[s]o, neither mother, nor prostitute, nor dead... Kate would thus be independent, free, alive, a woman loving women, what you mean by lesbian” (Fouque 1980: 13, my translation). Correcting Kate Millett, Antoinette Fouque implies that what in the United States is called a “lesbian” linguistically and culturally translates into “a woman loving women” when she crosses the Atlantic and lands on French shores. If American lesbians become women on arrival in France, it is because they are moving from a cultural space where individuals are marked by their differences (lesbians) into a new cultural space – France – where differences no longer exist (women). Filtered through the democratizing utopia of the heterosexual contract, American lesbians are thereby upgraded into French women. Phew, that was a close call: the unfathomable and hysterical lesbian difference that had been so relentlessly evacuated from the universalist order of French feminist discourses almost reappeared by the

American back door. Luckily, Fouque's vigilant attention warded off the foreign threat and absorbed the obtrusion while freezing it as an exogenous American aberration. Indeed, by eradicating the "lesbian" signifier from the French language, Fouque altogether effaces the "thing" that is signified by the missing word: lesbians in France.

Reiterating Fouque's gesture, at a conference in New York on 27–29 September 1979 to mark the thirtieth anniversary of *The Second Sex*, Fouque's close friend Hélène Cixous publicly declared: "French women may love women, but don't use the word 'lesbian', which has negative connotations in France" (Douglas and Brooke 1979: 5). In the American feminist monthly *Off Our Backs*, Carol Ann Douglas recalled Monique Wittig's immediate and furious reaction to this statement, in front of the attendees: "'What France?' exclaimed Monique Wittig, jumping up from her seat in the back of the room. 'This is a scandal'" (Douglas and Brooke 1979: 5). By asking "what France?" Wittig turned herself into an untimely "Trojan Horse" attacking Cixous' mythologized France where the thing of the missing word was supposed to have disappeared altogether. By interrupting Cixous – a bodily materialization of her interruptive literary method of shock treatment – Wittig resisted the epistemic violence of repeated erasures and, suspending the well-rehearsed machinery of the distorting "American bogeyman" (Fabre and Fassin 2003: 21, my translation), she made room for the illegible, the buried, the suppressed – the lesbians in France who, *pace* Cixous, did use the word "lesbian".

An interview with Kate Millet in *La revue d'en face* is illustrated with a picture of a white activist holding a sign that reads *in English* "defend lesbian mothers!" (Yane, Judith et Corinne 1978: 55) Since the lesbian "thing" cannot exist if there is no lesbian "word" in France, the lesbian can only appear as the American Kate Millett – conveniently concealing the elimination of the exiled French Monique Wittig – and the signifier "lesbienne" can therefore only make its appearance in its untranslatable English version, as the Anglophone "lesbian" word (see Figure 37).

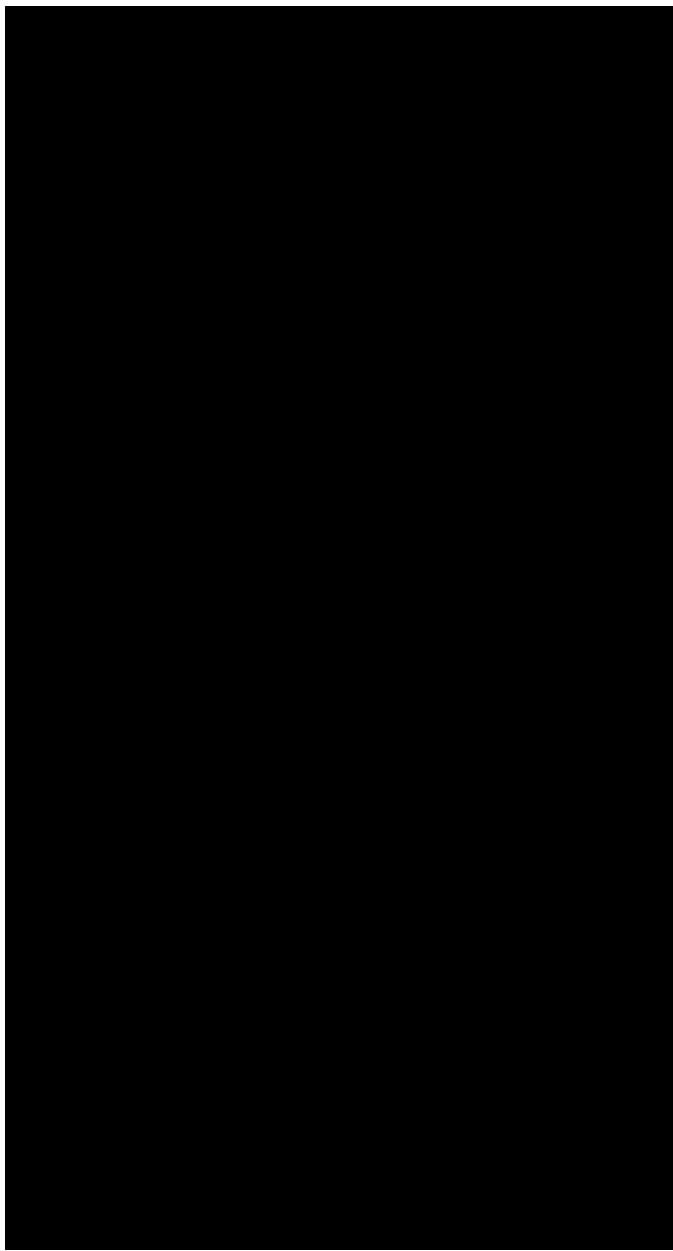


Figure 37. Illustration from Yane, Judith et Corinne, “With Kate Millett” (La revue d’en face, 4, November 1978: 55).

Monique Wittig first publicly uttered the paradigm-shifting phrase “lesbians are not women” in English and to an Anglophone audience in 1978, at the conclusion of a presentation of her paper “The Straight Mind” to the Modern Language Association in New York, two years after her departure from France. I would suggest that the phrase “lesbians are not women” and Wittig’s lesbian theoretical insights more broadly – like the English phrase “defend lesbian mothers!” – were made *unspeakable* in France and in French. We could even go so far as to suggest that if Wittig, a French writer, activist and theorist, was able to conceptualize lesbians as non-women, it was because lesbians had never been French women in the first place.

5. “At This Point, Monique Wittig Had to Leave”

I would like to conclude this chapter with a long extract from a conversation between Monique Wittig and Christine Delphy, held in September 1979 while they were in New York for the conference that marked thirty years of *The Second Sex*, and published in *Off Our Backs*. In this extract, Delphy and Wittig discuss the situation of lesbians in the French feminist movement. The radical incompatibility of their views is clearly laid out:

Wittig: I think the situation of lesbians in France is not very brilliant for the moment.

[...] It is an important problem. Why don't we have a strong lesbian group in Paris?

Delphy: It's a problem in the English movement, in the American movement...

Wittig: No, it's not a problem in the American movement. [...]

Delphy: The problem seemed to be decided [in 1971, 1972] because a lot of women became lesbians. But also there developed – but in a very informal, subtle way that was never made explicit – a lesbian ideology within the group. Women in that group [the Féministes révolutionnaires] were supposed to be lesbians, or they were expected not to have relationships with men. So what happened was that heterosexual women did not talk anymore about their heterosexual problems. So since they didn't talk about it, it was as if they didn't have relationships with men. But they dropped out, which is not necessarily a good thing. The conflict was not solved. But nobody talked about it, there was no discussion, it was through a very subtle imposition of the idea that there was no problem, there were no heterosexuals, heterosexuals didn't have a space, they didn't have a space as heterosexuals anymore.

Wittig: What are you saying? I think that many lesbians in Paris are being oppressed by this process, which came down from the general leaders of the movement. Many women, I was not the only one. Many lesbians have wanted to have lesbian groups, they couldn't do it. They've been prevented from doing it.

Delphy: Instead of being any kind of solution or transcendence, I think the problems were evaded. I'm not saying it was completely evaded – over the years there have been positive gains, but they have not been made explicit, but there's definitely been a change.

Wittig: What change?

Delphy: I think the atmosphere of the movement is not the same in '79 as it was in '72. Back then, the radical feminists were mostly lesbians and the socialist feminists

were mostly heterosexual, although that wasn't acknowledged. But I know radical feminists that I work with who are heterosexual women.

Wittig: I've met French lesbian women travelling in San Francisco who say the suppression of lesbians in French feminist groups is getting worse and worse. One is working in a rape crisis center, one is working on abortion. They say you cannot say you are a lesbian.

Delphy: You cannot generalize from that. That's not my feeling. I go to movement meetings too.

Wittig: They're not talking about general movement meetings, they're involved in specific projects.

Delphy: We have to get the other side of the story, too. We have to hear both sides.

Wittig: Oh, Christine. You don't want to listen. She said, "I felt oppressed". We have to listen to this oppression.

Delphy: I agree. I felt oppressed too. I'm saying it's changed, I'm not saying it's changed completely.

Wittig: The problem in Paris is huge. I don't understand why, because Paris is not a city where there are few lesbians.

(At this point, Monique Wittig had to leave) (Delphy, Wittig and Douglas 1980: 26–27).

In this extract, Wittig renarrativizes the history of the MLF from the standpoint of lesbians' exclusion (the standpoint I have adopted in this thesis) and refuses Delphy's narrative of progressive liberation thanks to feminism (which is also the narrative of the MLF historiography as a whole), making clear that there is an unacknowledged conflict at the heart of the MLF: "many lesbians have wanted to have lesbian groups, they couldn't do it. They've been prevented from doing it". However, as well as offering additional exemplification of radical feminists' lost opportunity to reckon with their repression of lesbianism, of which Wittig accuses Delphy ("Oh, Christine. You don't want to listen. [...] We have to listen to this oppression"), this tense discussion highlights very clearly the political, epistemic and affective battlefield between feminism and lesbianism in the MLF which I have sought to exhume so far. Delphy's dismissal of the structural exclusion of lesbianism rests on a political and epistemic inversion: for her, the problem is the repression of the heterosexuals who could not "talk anymore" and "did not have a space as heterosexual anymore" because of a "very informal, subtle [...] lesbian ideology". This narrative is an effect of what I have called the

MLF glass closet: the fantasy according to which heterosexuals were repressed in the MLF by the grand liberation of homosexuality after the tyrannical era of the “ghetto” endlessly secured and naturalized a heterosexual hegemony in the present (heterosexuals could endlessly claim to be “oppressed” by this alleged homosexual liberation). In her response, Wittig persistently tries to undermine Delphy’s discursive/epistemic rationality: “what are you saying?”, “what change?”, “they say you cannot say you are a lesbian”; “oh, Christine. You don’t want to listen”; “we have to listen to this oppression”.

The two structures of feeling pertaining to the MLF that I have unpacked so far – an affirmative/timely one specific to “women”, and a negative/melancholic one specific to “lesbians” – are also evident in this extract (this is even acknowledged in their exchange when Delphy tells Wittig “That’s not my feeling”). Delphy resorts to a liberal and optimistic narrative about the previous nine years, which she describes through feelings of success, progress and plenitude: “over the years there have been positive gains”, “there’s definitely been a change”, “it’s changed”. On the other hand, Wittig’s viewpoint on the MLF is one of failure, and her lesbian structure of feeling is characterized by dissatisfaction, exasperation, refusal and stubbornness: “the suppression of lesbians is getting worse and worse”, “many lesbians are being oppressed”, “the situation [...] is not very brilliant for the moment”, “it’s an important problem”, “[w]hy don’t we have a strong lesbian group in Paris?”, “[t]he problem [...] is huge”. Wittig’s attempts to address the ostracization of lesbianism in the MLF contrast with Delphy’s liberal perspective, which refuses to see the power relationship at stake and fantasizes a neutral starting point: “we have to get the other side of the story, too”, “we have to hear both sides”, she says. As such, Delphy embodies the position of the lesbian who has mourned (or introjected) feminism’s lesbian losses and can move on with no regrets, while Wittig has swallowed those losses whole, or incorporated them: fixated on feminism’s lesbian losses, she demands acknowledgment and reparation. Thus, unlike Delphy’s “homogeneous, empty time” (Benjamin 1968 in Butler 2008: 20) in which “over the years there have been positive gains” and which has supported the subject “women” as feminism’s modern achievement, Wittig, by virtue of her melancholic attachments to lesbian losses and her violation of amnesia, remains open to an alternative temporality and the advent of something different. Her temporality is Walter Benjamin’s messianic “time of the now” in which the past persists in the present: it is “about to make the continuum of history explode” (Benjamin 1968 in Butler 2008: 20) because it knows that the past, the repressed, the suppressed, the fantasy prehistoric lesbian from “before the movement” (Anon. 1980a: 22;

Deudon 1981: 83) or the tribalist American dyke live on in the present as a repudiated and transformative force seeking to undo injustice and to be granted hospitality. It was as a post hoc effect of this swallowing whole and this melancholic fixation, which were utterly incomprehensible to those (like Delphy) who had mourned feminism's lesbian losses, that the lesbian angrily returned in 1980 with a ten-year time lag as a deferred sense of impossible representation and assimilation.

It seems fair to me to assume that rather than heading off because she "had to leave", as the journalist notes, Wittig left because she had had enough. Her interruption of the discussion with Delphy can be seen as a striking repetition and *mise en abyme* of her withdrawal from the French feminist scene four years earlier after the failure of the Front lesbien international. If she left that room in the middle of the conversation, she perhaps did so for same reasons that made her leave France – and that by the end of the decade characterized the relationships to feminism of Christiane Jouve, Suzette Triton, Nelly, and the authors of all those anonymous letters scattered through the feminist press: a radical weariness and anger at "talking to brick walls" (Jouve 1985: 14). Although Delphy claims in the extract that heterosexuals "dropped out" of the feminist movement, it is Wittig's exit from the room (in direct lineage from her series of Trojan Horse-like interruptions across the decade) that ought to be inscribed in the (untold) genealogy of (unremarkable) gestures of lesbian withdrawal from the feminist movement.

Wittig's cutting short of the conversation with Delphy can therefore be read as the sign of a critical urgency. Her failure to renarrativize the history of the MLF from the standpoint of its lesbian ghost, and (we can imagine) her angry slamming of the door as she leaves the room, announces the end of lesbians' melancholic demands for inclusion within feminism. This tense discussion is in fact an extraterritorial rehearsal (or archaeological trace) of the violent schism that would occur within the French feminist movement nine months later between the radical feminists, who supported Delphy's views, and those who called themselves radical lesbians, who supported Wittig's views. The two pioneers of the MLF – who had gone together on the morning of 26 August 1970 to buy the famous wreath in honour of the wife of the Unknown Soldier – were about to separate definitively over the political issue of lesbianism. Wittig and Delphy were never reconciled after this argument (Delphy, interview, 20 March 2016). The fact that this discussion took place in New York and in English before belatedly hitting French shores a couple of months later should come as no surprise: if

America was the fantasy space where what could not be said about lesbians in France was said about imaginary lesbians “over there”, it was also the cultural and linguistic space where the exiled Wittig and what could not (yet) be said about feminism in France had found refuge.

“The problem in Paris is huge”, says Wittig right before leaving the room. Indeed, she is right: the clamour is already brewing, and the lesbian ghost can wait no longer. When Monique Wittig heads off, bringing her conversation with Delphy to an abrupt end, she closes feminism’s door once and for all – and is ready to open a new one. It was with much sound and fury that she crossed the Atlantic and returned to France five months later as a “lesbien”, as the angry remainder of an obscene and scandalous cut in representation, as a “lesbienne” who never was a woman and no longer had any intention of becoming one. And maybe, if you listen very carefully, you can hear the echoes of Wittig’s “absurdly sarcastic” (Wittig in Devarriaux 1999: iii) laughter, revitalizing the story of an old and forgotten ghost as she left the room in New York that day in September 1979, messianically asking: “[w]ho is the ghost from *limbo patrum*, returning to the world that has forgotten him?” (Joyce 1922 in Khanna 2003: 235).

As Jacques Derrida contends – in a passage in *Spectres of Marx* that echoes almost word-for-word Triton’s testimony about her spectral waiting “to one side on the lookout for anyone like [her]” (1979: 91) – the repressed ghost invariably returns with a demand for justice:

As in Hamlet, the Prince of a rotten State, everything begins by the apparition of a spectre. More precisely by the waiting for this apparition. The anticipation is at once impatient, anxious, and fascinated: this, the thing (“this thing”) will end up coming. The revenant is going to come. It won’t be long (Derrida 1994: 4).

“What France?” It is to *this* France, cette France-là, the France where – despite Hélène Cixous, despite Antoinette Fouque, and despite the editors of *La revue d’en face* – lesbians do use the revenant word lesbienne that – jumping up from my seat – I will take you now, in the last analytical chapter.

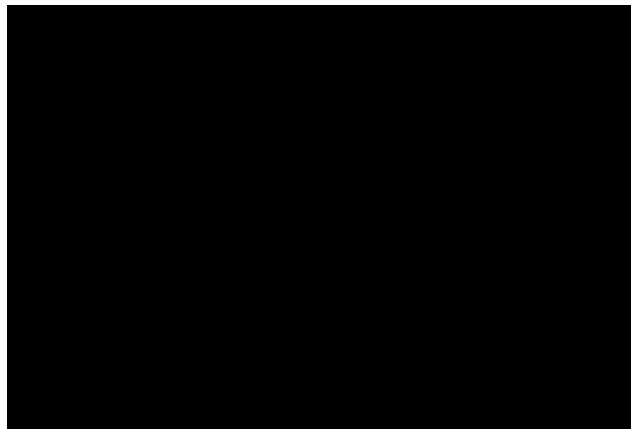


Figure 38. Illustration from Delphy, Wittig and Douglas, “International Interview: French Feminists’ Interview” (Off Our Backs, volume 10, number 1, January 1980: 26).

Chapter 4

À Contretemps: The Return of the Lesbian Repressed (1975–1981)

1. Lesbians' Minority Turn: A New Modernity

While the Gouines rouges' assimilative politics of "oscillation" (Anon. 1973f: 22) demanded inclusion in feminism in the name of a paradoxical lesbian difference that had to be invoked in order to be immediately dissolved in the universal "we" of "women", the mid-to-late 1970s saw the emergence of a new logic for lesbian politics. Indeed, lesbian groups that started to emerge outside the MLF posited lesbianism as a permanent identity in whose name they demanded integration into feminist and homosexual movements – that is, integration without assimilation. Thus, this era witnessed the return of lesbianism as a difference within feminist politics. Groups of lesbians championing this new strategy inaugurated a new paradigm for lesbian politics that invested in the subversive potential of minority politics rather than in the liberal promise of universalism, in the territorialization of lesbian difference rather than in the generalization of homosexual desire, and in state-oriented struggles against discrimination rather than in the grand narratives of liberation that had so easily dismissed their political difference. Three contextual elements explain the emergence of a properly lesbian activism in the second half of the decade: far-left lesbians' disinclination to universalism; the crisis of revolutionary grand narratives that encouraged the visibilization of minorities; and the arrival in these newly created groups of lesbians with no emotional or political investments in the feminist movement.

Although I have focused so far on MLF radical feminists and differentialist women, the lesbian movement of the mid-to-late 1970s emerged from neither of those currents. As I have shown, their universalist rhetoric made it impossible (or too paradoxical) for lesbians to create their own groups and politicize their position. I therefore argue that it was from the much lesser known and under-researched *Lutte de classes* (Class Struggle) current of the MLF that an autonomous lesbian activism emerged in France and an outspoken critique of lesbians' marginality in the feminist movement first came to the fore. This is important insofar as it refutes the historiographical consensus on the ways in which the "proper" MLF currents which spoke in the singular name of "women" – the Féministes révolutionnaires and Psychépo – supposedly provided homosexuality with "an opportunity to exist, meaning and legitimacy" (Lesselier 1991: 88, my translation). On 11 November 1977, a meeting in Orsay

of the women's groups connected to the MLF's Lutte de classe current in the Paris region brought together around 500 women and resulted in the creation of the Groupe lesbiennes de Paris (Lesbian Group from Paris) and of a rape commission that later became the Collectif femmes contre le viol (Women's Collective Against Rape). These two collectives, which in their own respective ways were among the first to formulate overtly critical stances on the feminist movement's heterocentric norm, are illustrative of the far-left origins of this lesbian movement.

Yet, this alternative genealogy of lesbian activism in France should come as no surprise. Indeed, Lutte de classes women, who had campaigned within far-left (often Trotskyist) organizations or political parties, had always refused political separation from men in the name of the singular subject "women" on which both the radical and differentialist currents were grounded.⁷⁷ For far-left feminists, patriarchal exploitation did not constitute "the common, specific, and main oppression of women" (Delphy 1980 [1970]: 37): it had no priority over the anti-capitalist struggle. Critical of the anti-organizational stances of the two other MLF currents, and forming a line of descent from Marxist-Leninist vanguardism, they considered that class and gender oppressions had to be fought together in a structured and mass anti-capitalist movement (Cercle Élisabeth Dimitriev du mouvement de libération des femmes 1975). Thus, in contrast to radical feminists and differentialist women, for whom the MLF had to take care of all of women's issues, far-left feminists developed the crucial idea of "dual activism" (double militance), also called "dual membership" (double appartenance). This concept was foundational for the articulation of their position at the intersection between feminist and anti-capitalist struggles. It meant simultaneously campaigning as anti-capitalist *and* feminist activists within mixed far-left organizations *and* within those organizations' non-

⁷⁷ The Lutte de classes current sprang from the creation in May 1971 of the Cercle Élisabeth Dimitriev by women from the Trotskyist organization Alliance marxiste révolutionnaire (Revolutionary Marxist Alliance). It later included groups such as Les pétroleuses, set up by women from the Trotskyist Ligue communiste révolutionnaire (LCR, Communist Revolutionary League); Femmes travailleuses en luttes! (Female Workers in Struggle!); and women's groups in organizations such as Révolution! (a dissident group from within the LCR), the Organisation communiste des travailleurs (Communist Workers' Organization) and the Gauche ouvrière et paysanne (Workers' and Peasants' Left). Lutte de classes women prioritized concrete political action in abortion centres or neighbourhood and workplace women's groups over Psychépo's collective therapy sessions and the Féministes révolutionnaires' spectacular happenings. On the "forgotten history" (Trat 2007a) of the MLF Lutte de classes current, see Gallot (2015), Gallot and Meuret-Campfort (2015), Picq (2011: 279–289) and Trat (2007, 2011).

mixed women's groups or women's neighbourhood groups and workplace groups as outreach to working-class women. I argue that it was under the aegis of this distinctive multisectorial logic that lesbians created lesbian groups in the second half of the 1970s (most of them came from these far-left organizations). Indeed, it was through the language of lesbians' "double oppression, as women and as homosexuals" (Anon. 1978b: 37, my translation), which was unmistakably indebted to the far-left notion of double activism, that they justified their political gatherings.⁷⁸ It was precisely because they lacked the *Lutte de classes* women's capacity to elaborate a territorial conception of politics (which today might be called "intersectional") – one where different sites of oppression could be articulated together, rather than privileging a specific site of oppression over others in a unified movement – that radical feminists and differentialist women were unable to welcome the expression of lesbian difference (and of other differences) among their ranks.⁷⁹ I would therefore suggest that, thanks to this distinctive political culture, lesbian far-left activists avoided the paradoxes between universality and difference in which the lesbian issue had become entangled within the two universalist branches of the MLF. In that respect, it also comes as no surprise that the first French collective of Black women, the *Coordination des femmes noires*, created in May 1976, sprang from activists in the *Lutte de classes* current who denounced the way that "Negresses" were "denied by the very women who claimed to struggle for the liberation of all

⁷⁸ Since this research examines the articulation of feminism and lesbianism, I do not look into the question of lesbians' integration into the mixed homosexual movement. Yet, it is worth noting that it was through the same multisectorial logic that most of these lesbian activists justified their participation in the homosexual movement, laying claim to their "dual membership" of "the women's movement and the GLH [Homosexual Liberation Group]" (Anon. 1977: 20). While radical feminists decided to withdraw from mixed homosexual struggle following their departure from the FHAR in 1971, the reappearance of homosexual mixedness in the mid-to-late 1970s was the doing of these far-left lesbian activists: never having agreed with permanent non-mixedness as feminists in the first place, they had fewer qualms about campaigning with men in homosexual collectives. This new lesbian activism put an end to lesbians' fusion with the MLF.

⁷⁹ Although critical of homogeneous political identities, the notion of "double oppression" or "dual membership" – regardless of whether it was addressing women's position between the feminist and anti-capitalist struggles or lesbians' position between the homosexual and women's movements – still implied the unthinkable of racial oppression and women of colour. Kimberlé Crenshaw has coined the concept of "intersectionality" to analyse the interlocking co-construction of racial and gender oppressions as mutually determining. She argues that the purified category of gender, conceived as independent from other forms of social power, has made the position of Black women within feminism invisible and unthinkable (1991). On intersectionality, see also Bassel and Emejulu (2014, 2018), Bassel and Lépinard (2014), Bilge (2009, 2010), Bilge and Denis (2010), Carastathis (2014), Collins and Bilge (2016), Evans (2015, 2016), Lépinard (2007a, 2014), Lewis (2013), McCall (2005), Nash (2008), Siim (2014) and Townsend-Bell (2014).

women” (Thiam 1978 in Vergès 2017: 208, my translation; see also Laroche and Larrouy 2009; Lesselier 2012; Schieweck 2011). Although under-researched in the MLF scholarship, the Lutte de classes current, and the ways it challenged the analysis of power along discrete lines of oppression, provides an important counter-genealogy to dominant MLF universalist/sovereign discourses.

Alongside far-left feminists’ scepticism towards universalism, the historical context of the mid-to-late 1970s must also be accounted for if we are to understand the visibilization of lesbianism. With the dramatic loss of impetus of revolutionary perspectives (Bourg 2007; Bourseiller 1996; Passerini 1996; Ross 2002) and the “crisis in the vision of society as historically situated in a trajectory connecting the present to the past and the future, as a social and political unity”, “the present time” emerged “as a space of action” for minorities (Prearo 2014: 155–156, my translation). Addressing the history of homosexual activism in the second half of the 1970s, political scientist Massimo Prearo argues that this new “regime of historicity” (Hartog 2003) impelled a transition from the FHAR’s grand narratives of revolution to a “politics in the present time” (2014: 155) characterized by a process of “homosexual territorialization in autonomous spaces of action and the affirmation of autonomous identity” (204). Hence, following the disintegration of the anarchist FHAR, a national and mixed homosexual movement began to be structured around regional Groupes de libération homosexuelle (GLHs, Homosexual Liberation Groups), which predominated over the homosexual activist landscape from 1974 to 1978, and around “the more moderate and pragmatic” (Scott 2009: 46) Comité d’urgence anti-répression homosexuelle (CUARH, Emergency Committee Against Homosexual Repression) from 1979 onwards. Unlike the FHAR’s polymorphous plurality and provocative tactics, the GLHs and CUARH aimed to organize the homosexual movement as a “strong and structured movement” (Anon. 1976 in Prearo 2014: 171, my translation) with a shift towards reformism and specific legal demands, such as the repeal of discriminatory laws against homosexuals and the criminalization of discrimination against homosexuals (Callwood 2017; Idier 2013; Martel 1999; Prearo 2014; Scott 2009).⁸⁰ It was in this favourable context for identity politics that lesbian activists

⁸⁰ GLHs flourished in many French cities after the disintegration of the FHAR in 1974, giving a new impetus to radical homosexual activism. GLHs progressively took on less subversive positions. By the end of the decade, the GLHs and the CUARH, an umbrella organization for homosexual collectives, promoted social acceptance and political efficacy via lobbying with institutions. On the history of the GLHs and the CUARH, see Boyer (1985), Girard (1981), Jackson (2009a, 2009b), Le Bitoux (1998), Le Bitoux et al. (2003), Marchant (2005), Martel

started to challenge the idea that lesbians were necessarily tied to the feminist movement as “women”. Further, following the success of the MLF’s unitary demand for the decriminalization of abortion in January 1975, the breakdown of master narratives (Lyotard 1979) also provided fertile ground for the flourishing of minority voices in the feminist movement. Hence, in addition to lesbian groups, the mid-1970s witnessed the creation of feminist groups of Black, migrant and Algerian women, middle-aged and older women, and sex workers (CLEF 1989; Mathieu 1999, 2001, 2003; Shepard 2017a), who all began to critically address the normative underpinnings of feminism’s master subject “women”.⁸¹

It must finally be said that many of the lesbians who participated in these early lesbian groups had never participated in feminist women’s groups before. As one of the founders of the *Groupe lesbiennes de Paris* recalls, if the collective had difficulties at first in “validating the rupture” with the feminist movement,

the problem solved itself with the arrival [...] of an increasing number of women who prioritized their experiences as lesbians, or did not recognize themselves in feminism, or who more simply, having never set foot in the [women’s] movement or any other activist space, came to meet other lesbians (Melo 1981b: 120, my translation).

Unaffected by the ungrieved loss of lesbians’ unassimilability to feminism, lesbians who did not care about the feminist movement were spared, I would suggest, the melancholic guilt

(1999), Prearo (2014), Quéré (2016) and Scott (2009). Alongside the construction of a national political movement, the late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed the flourishing of social and confessional homosexual groups, homosexual magazines, cultural events and commercial enterprises (Martel 1999; Pollak 1982; Prearo 2014).

⁸¹ Hundreds of *Lutte de classes* women quit their political organizations in 1977 during a general crisis of the left in France that is best exemplified by the breakdown in September 1977 of the Common Programme (or Union of the Left), a partnership formed in 1972 between the communist, socialist and centre-left parties. These women came together in a collective named *Les dissidentes* (The Dissidents) and fervently critiqued the difficulties they had faced in trying to integrate women’s issues within far-left organizations (Boons et al. 1983). After their departure from far-left organizations, they redeployed their activist energies in various political projects. The emergence of a lesbian and mixed homosexual movement in the mid-to-late 1970s was directly tied to these transformations of the far left and the redeployment of former far-left activists in new activist spheres (Pinhas 2016; Prearo 2014). On the history of the left and far left in 1970s France, see among others Becker and Candar (2005), Bourg (2007), Bourseiller (1996), Hamon and Rotman (1987, 1988), Ross (2002) and Touchard (1977).

which kept other feminist lesbians fixated on the MLF's cruel promise of assimilation, as I have shown in the previous chapter.

It was thus in this particular context that a lesbian political and cultural movement emerged in the mid-to-late 1970s. In the autumn of 1975, around ten women from far-left organizations, frustrated at far-left feminists' disregard of lesbian issues, created the *Groupe des lesbiennes féministes* (GLF, Group of Feminist Lesbians) in Paris. Although it defined itself as feminist, the group promoted for the first time – and unlike the *Gouines rouges* – the urgency of giving “weight” to a “lesbian movement” (*Des lesbiennes féministes* 1977: 62, my translation). At around the same time, at the Lyon Women's Centre – where women's homosexuality was “whispered, [...] like a rumour or a secret” (CLEF 1989: 107, my translation) and “the word lesbian [...] was never spoken” (Thérèse in CLEF 1989: 108), a lesbian group called the *Groupe de lesbiennes du Centre des femmes de Lyon* (Lyon Women's Centre Lesbians' Group) was launched in February 1976 and became “a dynamic mainspring in the construction of this national movement” (CLEF 1989: 114).⁸² On 21–22 May 1977, when the first national lesbian encounter was organized in Saint-Ay near Orléans, “fifty cities responded to the call, and the venue's facilities [could not] cope with such success” (Anon. 1977: 20, my translation). The participants in the Saint-Ay meeting were mostly activists from mixed GLHs (Paris, Orléans and Tours) and women's groups (Bordeaux, Lyon, Bourges, Paris and Orléans); symptomatically, however, at a lesbian coordination initiated by the *Groupe de lesbiennes du Centre des femmes de Lyon* a year and a half later on 11 November 1978, nine of the participating collectives were autonomous lesbian groups from Valence, Marseille, Rouen, Caen, Paris, Rennes, Tours, Angers and Paris' northern suburb. In this flourishing context, three lesbian summer retreats were organized in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The first, in July 1979 in Paussac, lasted one week and brought together around seventy participants; the following retreat, in Marcevol in July 1980, lasted for two weeks, and the number of participants rose to 250. The following year, in July 1981, the third retreat, organized in L'Euzière, drew 700 women across two weeks from various European countries (France, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland or Great Britain).

⁸² As with the *Gouines rouges* and the *Front lesbien international*, the creation of this lesbian group “triggered a controversy, even, [...] ‘reactions verging on hysteria’”: “some women had difficulties accepting that homosexuals could make a ‘separate group’; one of them did not understand why she could not participate in this group, since she had had ‘moments of great tenderness’ with a woman” (CLEF 1989: 107, my translation).

Alongside the development of lesbian groups, national encounters and summer retreats, several lesbian newspapers were created with a view to shaping an alternative “imagined community” (Anderson 1983) in which lesbians could recognize themselves. Following the creation of the *Journal des lesbiennes féministes* (Feminist Lesbians’ Newspaper) by the Groupe des lesbiennes féministes in 1976 (the first lesbian newspaper in France), in 1978 the Groupe de lesbiennes du Centre des femmes de Lyon created the newspaper *Quand les femmes s’aiment...* (When Women Love Each Other), which “constituted an essential vector in the construction of a Movement of Lesbians” by connecting “isolated lesbians” (CLEF 1989: 177). Several other newspapers were created in subsequent years, such as *Dire nos homosexualités* (Speaking Our Homosexualities) in Lille in 1979, *Désormais* (From Now On), the first lesbian monthly, in 1979, and *Paroles de lesbiennes féministes* (Feminist Lesbians’ Words) in 1980 (CLEF 1989; Eloit 2017; Laroche and Larrouy 2009; Robichon 2010). Unlike feminist magazines, which mostly focused on political issues and collective mobilizations, these lesbian newspapers were read by lesbians whose main concern was to break out of homosexual secrecy and loneliness.

Finally, this lesbian spring was characterized by the emergence of a lesbian literary culture. Fiction or autobiographies were published by overtly lesbian authors such as Elula Perrin, the charismatic owner of the Parisian lesbian club Le Katmandou (1977, 1978, 1980); Mireille Best (1980); Jocelyne François, who received the prestigious Femina Prize for her autobiography *Joue-nous “España”* (Play España) in 1980 (1978, 1980); and Geneviève Pastre (1977, 1980). When Elula Perrin was invited onto TV host Philippe Bouvard’s popular show *L’huile sur le feu* to discuss her latest book *Les femmes préfèrent les femmes* (Women Prefer Women) in 1977, she was the first out lesbian on French television (Constantin and Gonnard 2000). Although a TV debate on homosexuality had previously been organized on 21 January 1975 as part of the famous broadcast *Les dossiers de l’écran*, no lesbian had been invited to participate: Elula Perrin’s new visibility in 1977 is illustrative of the positive effects of lesbians’ recovery of their difference after the assimilative invisibilization of the MLF.⁸³

⁸³ Except for two articles specifically addressing 1970s lesbian activism (Bard 2004, Lesselier 1991) and a book on the MLF in Lyon (CLEF 1989), these lesbian developments are not included in “general” MLF historiography (Bard 2012; Garcia Guadilla 1981; Jenson 1989; Lasserre 2014; Picq 1993, 2011; Pipon 2013).

In that respect, it must be noted that MLF lesbians from the radical feminist current (who had opposed the Front lesbien international) continued to speak on behalf of “all” women and did not join these emerging lesbian groups. For example, when MLF radical feminists launched a protest on 25 June 1977 against American singer Anita Bryant’s homophobic campaign (their first action against homosexual repression since the sabotage of Ménie Grégoire’s radio show in 1971), their call for protests did not address the specificity of lesbian oppression. In accordance with their universalist doctrine, they spoke in the name of all women, claiming that homosexuality meant “the rejection of the family norm that grounds women’s oppression” (Des féministes [...] 1987 [1977]: 34). Thus, the lesbian discourses I analyse in this section did not constitute a sudden change of rhetoric, but rather the emergence of new logic of meaning that coexisted alongside the dominant universalist one. What interests me, therefore, is how lesbian activists who introduced a new lesbian rhetoric grounded in the expression of their difference and negotiated the constraints of abstract universalism to make their case heard by feminists. In other words, how did these lesbian activists manage to politicize what universalist feminists conceived as the pre-political difference against which feminism’s modernity had been naturalized?

Lesbians had been ensnared in an impossible quandary whereby speaking in the name of their difference in order to condemn its prior exclusion from the tacitly heterosexual community of women amounted to losing their legibility as rational female individuals. I argue that it was by performing a “minority turn”, through which they conceived of universalism as oppressive rather than emancipating, that lesbians managed to legitimize their gesture of community attachment with a view to repoliticizing what had been made unpoliticizable. In 1976, the GLF published a manifesto entitled “The GLF: A Ghetto Reclaimed” in the second issue of its newspaper, the *Journal des lesbiennes féministes* (Groupe des lesbiennes féministes 1987 [1976]: 21, my translation). This text marks a watershed in the history of lesbian politics in France insofar as it unabashedly discards the paradox of lesbians’ assimilation as “women” in favour of the politicization of their minority position as “lesbians”. In the text, the GLF conceives for the first time of lesbianism as “a minority oppressed by a stronger majority”, rather than as a divisive difference that must be absorbed into a political generality. From this new perspective, they conceive of the “lesbian ghetto” as “a place reclaimed by a minority” rather than a space of withdrawal from the unitary struggle. This “minoritarization” of lesbians pervades the GLF manifesto: “[t]he GLF is a minority looking for its identity”; “as individuals and a minority we have felt deeply despised, rejected from society”, they write

(21).

Whereas the Gouines rouges laid claim to their lesbian difference as a temporary gesture leading to inclusion in the universal “we” of “women”, the GLF’s articulation of a lesbian position in terms of a majority/minority divide was crucial in that it enabled lesbians to address relationships of power between the heterosexual majority and the lesbian minority *within* the feminist movement. Therefore, unlike the Gouines rouges, the GLF invested in the critical power of the lesbian minority position as a *permanent* site of epistemic critique from which to call into question and resist the exclusionary operations of universalism. Claiming from this new minoritarian position to have “accepted society’s rejection, which they reject in return [...] because today’s society is unacceptable” (21), the GLF’s “reclaimed ghetto”, rather than being a shameful site of withdrawal from the feminist struggle, is a site from which to lay bare and resist *a power relationship*, and is therefore the site of a new legitimate lesbian struggle. Through this minority turn, which rests on the acknowledgment of a power relationship between a political majority and a political minority, lesbians thus began to conceive of themselves as *oppressed* by a *heterosexual majority*. At a meeting of the Paris region Lutte de classes women’s groups on 11 November 1977, when a group of lesbians separated themselves from the Sexuality Commission to create the Groupe lesbiennes de Paris, it was under the aegis of this minority/majority logic that they critiqued the hegemony of the “majoritarian experience in [women’s] groups, that is to say, the heterosexual experience” (Anon. 1978b: 37, my translation). The Groupe lesbiennes de Paris, which was the first lesbian group to discard all references to feminism in its name, laid bare “the idea that a majority of women in the movement can oppress a minority [of other women]” and urged lesbians to “establish a power struggle between lesbians and other women in the movement” to “force them to listen” and “oblige them to truly question themselves” and “accept us” (Anon. 1978b: 37, my translation). Identifying a dominant heterosexual standpoint was exactly what the MLF’s politics of assimilation, hinging on the fantasy of women’s sameness (a homogeneous community of female individuals), had rendered impossible. From their new minority position, the GLF were thus able to demand the recognition of lesbian difference rather than its suppression: “[w]e want to exist and to make ourselves recognized by all feminists”, wrote the GLF in 1977 (Des lesbiennes féministes 1977: 62, my translation).

This new minority standpoint was conducive to a full revaluation of lesbians’ position in relation to the women’s movement. For example, the Groupe lesbiennes de Paris remark that

“the creation of an exclusively homosexual space for encounters [...] is obviously required if lesbians want to break out of the isolation that a women’s group does not break” (Anon. 1978b: 37, my translation): lesbians’ isolation has become a feature of women’s groups rather than an effect, as feminists contended, of the creation of autonomous lesbian collectives. And while laying claim to one’s lesbian difference was seen by MLF women as a feminist-corrupting illness, it became for the Groupe lesbiennes de Paris an empowering gesture that enabled lesbians to “rediscover solidarity among themselves” and gain the “strength to extend their struggle to women as a whole” (Melo 1981b: 120, my translation). Thus, this move towards particularity did not entail an abandonment of universalism but, interestingly, a universalization of the minority position as a means of struggle. For the Groupe des lesbiennes féministes, lesbianism was “revolutionary” because “it challenges society’s most fundamental features: family, children, reproduction, and [...] the economy. Which leads as a consequence to a wider challenging of culture”. As they concluded their manifesto: “[i]f it comes to the crunch, Lesbianism pushed to the extreme, having invaded the planet, is the strangulation of the race, the end of perpetual progress, that enormous illusion, it is more than revolutionary – it is the mirror given to the world to contemplate its own demise” (Groupe des lesbiennes féministes 1987 [1976]: 22). Here, the mirror has become not the MLF’s regenerative mirror of women’s sameness, but a tool to destroy the world from a minority position.

In addition to denouncing the way that discussions in women’s groups were “almost exclusively heterosexual” and that the “pseudo-acceptance [of homosexuality] [...] consisted in speaking about homosexuality once in a while from a careful distance” (Nelly 1979b: 4, my translation), lesbian activists unabashedly responded (with a certain time lag) to the feminist sanitization of lesbianism into a universal and chaste sororal relationship. For example, in a manifesto urging lesbians to “come out of the closet” distributed at the 8 March 1980 march, a lesbian collective from the northern suburb of Paris, whose members still “retained a bitter aftertaste of their passage through women’s groups”, states in capital letters:

WE DO NOT CARE ABOUT A BLISSFUL AND ARTIFICIAL RECOGNITION
OR THE ETERNAL “WE ARE ALL HOMOSEXUALS”! WE DO NOT ASK TO
BE TOLERATED BUT ACCEPTED IN OUR STRUGGLES FOR THE
RECOGNITION OF OUR SPECIFICITY (GLBN – Les baragouineuses 1987 [1980]:
47, my translation).

A plea for recognition replaces the assimilative tolerance that amounts to erasure. Exposing feminism's unacknowledged heterosexual symbolic economy, in which the only acceptable form of homosexuality is one which "does not call for any 'act'" (Anon. 1973d: 17), a report from the first lesbian encounter in Saint-Ay in 1977 condemns the MLF's celebration of women's homoerotic love as strategically banning lesbian desire:

The women's movement's latent homosexuality and the tenderness of the relationships between women [are] sometimes experienced as aggressive by lesbians insofar as they also serve as a mask for a latent homosexuality whose appearance can only be tolerated in this form (Anon. 1977: 20, my translation).

In a 1977 article resonantly entitled "Was the Women's Movement an Answer for Lesbians?" and published in a far-left newspaper, three lesbian feminists corroborate this experience. The repression is all the more ambivalent, they say, because instead of working through an explicit prohibition, it operates insidiously through a semblance of tolerance:

Of course the attitude is not repressive, the existence of a latent homosexuality in [women's] groups is often even recognized, but the question of patent homosexuality is itself evacuated, to the great detriment of the movement's lesbians and the movement itself (Guénolée, Nitrate, Stéphanie, Triton 1987 [1977]: 30, my translation).

In a sense, while lesbian sexuality was stigmatized in the MLF as a vain mimicry of the heterosexual libidinal economy – lesbians were "aping the gestures of virile love" (Bernheim 2010 [1983]: 200, my translation), and their "virility" was deemed "imaginary, a comedy and a fantasy" (Deudon 1971 in Bernheim et al. 2009: 220, my translation) – these lesbian activists accused feminists in return of mimicking lesbian desire. Feminism's "latent homosexuality" in a sense became an imitation of the real lesbian thing.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ On the prohibition of the "lesbian phallus" as operating through female-identified feminism, see Judith Butler's "The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary" (2011 [1993]: 28–57). Butler writes: "The phallus as signifier within lesbian sexuality will engage the spectre of shame and repudiation delivered by that feminist theory which would secure a feminine morphology in its radical distinctness from the masculine (a binarism that is secured through heterosexual presumption)" (2011 [1993]: 53).

Furthermore, critical of the heterocentric norm that supported the claim that abortion was a universal issue pertaining to all women, lesbians who gathered in Saint-Ay for the first national lesbian encounter defended the necessity of participating in mixed homosexual groups because “lesbians’ oppression is distinct from that of other women, especially by virtue of the fact that their sexuality is not ‘directly’ organized in relation to men’s: demands for abortion and contraception [...] are not their primary concern!” (Anon. 1977: 20). Thus, while the “specifically ‘feminine issues’” (Femmes en Lutte XIIIe n. d. in La Griffonne 1981: 34, my translation) addressed in the MLF were in fact issues that pertained to (white) heterosexual women (abortion, contraception, childcare centres, domestic violence and the domestic division of labour), these new lesbian spaces enabled the emergence of lesbian issues as distinctly lesbian issues. In one of its leaflets, the Groupe de lesbiennes du Centre des femmes de Lyon raised a series of questions pertaining to lesbian repression which had never been addressed in the MLF before:

In the lesbian group, there are no discussions of conjugal rape, contraception or abortion: we have different points of view: should we live openly? Is there a risk of being attacked, and if so, should we “go softly-softly” so as not to find ourselves suddenly unemployed or losing custody of our children [...]? Do we have the means or the desire to not reproduce the things that are alienating about straight relationships? (Groupe de lesbiennes du Centre des femmes de Lyon 1987 [circa 1977]: 38, my translation).

Several other topics had been raised in lesbian collectives by the end of the decade, such as artificial insemination for lesbian couples, legal protection of lesbian mothers in cases of divorce, or lesbians’ relationship to mixed homosexual activism. The return of lesbian difference in the feminist movement was made publicly visible on May Day 1977 when GLF participants marched with the women’s contingent under a banner that read “feminist lesbians”, “so that, they explained, our demands get inscribed into feminist struggles” (Des lesbiennes féministes 1981 [1977]: 118, my translation). Eight years after the upsurge of the MLF, the Groupe lesbiennes de Paris established lesbian blocks for the first time on the 8 March feminist marches in Paris in 1978, 1979 and 1980.

However – and this is crucial – although it was conducive to the exposure of feminism’s

heterosexual norm, this minority turn did not seek to embrace the negative connotations attached to lesbian difference, as most reverse discourses do (Butler 1993a; Foucault 1984 [1976]). Instead, I argue that it redefined lesbian difference positively as the site of a new healthy community of sovereign individuals, sufficiently free to “reclaim” their own “ghetto” and inaugurate a new modern lesbian temporality. After the 1980 summer retreat in Marcevol, two participants seemed to suggest the closing of lesbians’ deferred “time of expectation” (Nealon 2001 in Love 2007: 89) and the opening of a new active temporality *à contretemps* (belatedly):

We [lesbians] are becoming aware of our strength, we have to affirm it, and quickly! We have waited way too long. Locks were smashed open in Marcevol and together we opened the door wide (Claude de Marseille, Nicole d’Aix [...] 1981: 13, my translation).

The article states that it is time for lesbians who are active in “women’s spaces” “to do it as lesbians” and “say it”, and it seems that this new awareness of their own “strength” (11) performs a temporal adjustment by *catching up on* their ten-year delay in respect of MLF women’s modernity: “[r]ight now we are the driving force of the women’s liberation movement”, the article says. This sense of urgency exemplifies in my view both lesbians’ awareness of their belatedness with respect to feminism and their excitement about *finally* being able to lay claim to lesbian sovereignty: “[i]t’s now or never; a dynamic exists, born of long, patient activism [...]. Lesbians must become a political force, they must appear as such”, writes one lesbian activist in 1982 (Renaud 1981: 10, my translation). In other words: it is their turn to enter the spotlight of modern political subjectivity.

Yet, by “open[ing]” “the door wide” and becoming a “political force”, lesbian activists inevitably established their own claims of sovereignty through the same discursive strategies which had excluded them from the community of female individuals ten years earlier. Indeed, in the aforementioned GLF manifesto, the authors of the text *double* the definition of the ghetto in order to assert their own “reclaimed ghetto”:

Right now the ghetto is also the locality reserved for a minority that is oppressed by a stronger majority, as well as a place that is being reclaimed by a minority, the intentional gathering of a minority. [...] Consequently, the GLF is not a ghetto in the

original sense, it is a reclaimed ghetto (Groupe des lesbiennes féministes 1987 [1976]: 20–21, my translation).

Further deploying this dual definition, the manifesto continues:

The ghetto, in the eyes of society, is therefore linked to the concept of enclosure, whether an undesired confinement or conversely a voluntary gathering, a choice. This conception of the ghetto as enclosure is a concept heavily riddled with negative connotations. Nothing good can come out of a ghetto, only rottenness, whether it be an institutionalized ghetto or one reclaimed by a minority. It's all treated on the same level. Yet nuances are necessary (Groupe des lesbiennes féministes 1987 [1976]: 21, my translation).

Critically distancing themselves from the ghetto's "original sense" (22) as "an undesired confinement" out of which can come "nothing good, only rottenness", GLF participants define their "reclaimed ghetto" by crafting a new definition from within the original terms: "a voluntary gathering", "a choice", "the intentional gathering of a minority", "a gathering of individuals" (21). Thus, by upholding a "bad" definition of the ghetto in order to positively establish their own space, they fully redeploy – for the benefit of a new abstract lesbian individual – the very liberal epistemology that has disqualified lesbians in the MLF (and enabled the emergence of a sovereign subject "woman") through the pervasive contrast between the "lesbian ghetto" made of "SPACES FOR THE EXPLOITATION OF SUSTAINED MISERY" and the MLF's "collective spaces" as "THE EXPRESSION OF FREE WILLS STRUGGLING FOR THEIR LIBERATION" (Catherine 1974: 2091, my translation). Similarly, when a dozen lesbians from various cities (Strasbourg, Paris, Villeurbanne, Marseille and Rouen) who had met at the Marcevol summer retreat in 1980 set up an official organization to create a "village of feminist lesbians",⁸⁵ they defined this "permanent lesbian space" in relation to prohibitive feminist discursive practices as *not* a "space of withdrawal": "[f]or us, there is no question of making [this village] into a space of withdrawal, but rather of setting up possibilities for creation, for exchange, for a different life,

⁸⁵ This project was never realized, but it was widely discussed in the lesbian press. The idea was to buy a campsite of around five hectares where houses could be built. It was meant to be a permanent place of residence as well as a place where visitors could come whenever they wished.

for struggle" (Collectif de l'association pour la création d'un village de lesbiennes féministes 1980: 12, my translation). And for Claude and Nicole, who also participated in this project: "[t]here will always be good souls to cry foul against the danger of the ghetto. But ghettos are refuges organized by the oppressor to stifle the revolt of the oppressed. This does not concern us! [...] It is a means of struggle" (Claude de Marseille, Nicole d'Aix [...] 1981: 12, my translation). Urging lesbians to "take up [their] space" in both the feminist and homosexual movements in order to visibilize their difference, one lesbian activist writes that "[o]therwise [...] [i]t is working towards our confinement" (Renaud 1981: 10, my translation). In this statement, in a reversal of dominant feminist discursive practices, the absence of a distinctive lesbian territory within feminist and homosexual movements has become the sign of lesbians' "confinement". Therefore, in order to get out of their "confinement" – which is now associated with assimilation – and to politically establish a new and coherent lesbian community, lesbian activists redeploy the very discursive practices and positive semiology through which women's modernity has been supported and lesbian particularity repudiated.

In particular, the pervasive trope of mutual recognition – through which MLF women had contended that a universal and transparent subject was brought into being, despite having intrinsically excluded lesbians as the unrepresentable – was reiterated with a view to birthing a new lesbian subject. Regarding their desire to purchase a plot of land on which to establish their "village of feminist lesbians", the activists in charge of the project write:

We want a space for ourselves, feminist lesbians, a space where we can see each other, where we can fill ourselves with images of ourselves. We must have a place where we can touch each other, feel each other and hear each other (Collectif pour l'achat d'un terrain de camping 1981: 1, my translation).

Similarly, in Lyon, the Groupe de lesbiennes du Centre des femmes de Lyon "functioned as an identification" (Yolande in CLEF 1989: 119, my translation). Consequently, the production of a feminist structure of positive feeling through the fantasy of mutual recognition in the MLF (wholeness, pleasure, love, radical happiness etc.), which had simultaneously engendered a melancholic structure of lesbian feeling, was re-enacted among lesbians as a celebration of their new unity. For Suzette Triton, her first encounter with a lesbian group in Brussels triggered a "fantastic emotion": "I felt like myself, totally myself, and I realized that this was what I wanted, where I felt good. My joy was so deep that I was

overwhelmed” (Triton 1979: 91, my translation). Discussing her experience in the Groupe de lesbiennes du Centre des femmes de Lyon, an anonymous woman said that she “could almost say that [she] had been born there” (Michèle in CLEF 1989: 183, my translation). At the 8 March 1978 march, the Groupe de lesbiennes de Paris joyously declared on their banner that they were “Lesbians and happy to be so” (Robichon [Triton], interview, 16 August 2016). Inaugurating “happiness” as a new structure of lesbian feeling which had until then been the preserve of “women” raises a fundamental question: what were the new melancholic hauntings of this lesbian happiness and coherent sense of identity? On the backs of which other subjects, unthinkable as lesbian, was this abstract community of lesbian individuals made possible? If “the danger [...] of the ghetto [...] organized by the oppressor to stifle the revolt of the oppressed” “[does] not concern us”, then who is the implicit “them” which it necessarily concerns? In the politicization of lesbian difference as *not* a “reserved locality”, *not* an “undesired confinement”, *not* an “institutionalized ghetto”, *not* a “confinement”, and *not* a “ghetto” out of which can come “nothing good, but only rottenness” – in short, *not* “a ghetto in the original sense” – who remained inside the “ghetto in the original sense” in order for lesbians to be able to claim that it was *not* what they were? The answer to these questions appears surprisingly clearly in the very first line of the GLF’s manifesto:

Etymologically, according to the dictionary, “ghetto” is an Italian word; it was a compulsorily assigned district for the residence of Jews in Venice. In the figurative sense a ghetto is a place where one is held in quarantine. Historically, examples of ghettos are very numerous (jewish ghettos, black ghettos etc.). [...] How does [the GLF] distinguish itself from other existing ghettos? (Groupe des lesbiennes féministes 1987 [1976]: 21, my translation).

The GLF’s positive definition of itself as a “reclaimed ghetto” is explicitly distinguished from Black and Jewish ghettos. If, as the GLF says, “it’s all treated on the same level” even though “nuances are necessary” (21), that is because lesbians must not be conflated with Jews or Black people. It is as such – as *not* racial minorities – that they can claim to be modern and emancipated. Although lesbians had been produced as feminism’s racialized “dark continent”, this new emancipated community of lesbians – fully replicating the language through which the MLF’s national-colonial community of abstract female individuals repudiated ghettoized lesbians – was founded in turn on the burial of *new* unspeakable continents: racial minorities that were thenceforth unthinkable as political or as inclusive of lesbians. In other words, this

new community of lesbians – defined as a “gathering of individuals” (Groupe des lesbiennes féministes 1987 [1976]: 21) – was foundationally white: whiteness was the condition of possibility of this community’s sense of self. Defining the GLF’s “ghetto” as not a “ghetto in the original sense” meant, as it were, whitewashing the notion of the ghetto for the purposes of lesbian self-legitimization: the racialized ghetto was a political resource that made itself available to lesbian co-optation while performing an erasure of the racial history of ghettoization (including its violence, and white lesbians’ participation in the denial of that violence). The condition of the politicization of lesbianism as a new site of resistance against a heterosexual majority rested upon the obliteration of white lesbians’ racial privilege, and upon the epistemic repudiation of racial-minority lesbians. Foundationally defining the lesbian community as *not* a “ghetto in the original sense”, these lesbian discourses thus also laid the groundwork for the more recent naturalization of homophobia as located either outside France or on the outskirts of the nation among non-European and Muslim migrants (where the ghetto in the original sense supposedly lies) (Butler 2008; Fassin 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2012).⁸⁶ The name of the iconic 1970s Parisian lesbian club “Le Katmandou” (The Kathmandu) exemplifies the ways in which race hovers over the French lesbian community as a spectre that makes itself available for cultural reappropriation and orientalism.

A “contrapuntal reading” (Said 1993: 66) of the emergence of this lesbian political subjectivity highlights even more clearly the ways in which lesbians’ lack of consideration for racial oppression was not simply unfortunate forgetfulness but was discursively foundational to the internal coherence of the community. Indeed, the historical moment when feminist lesbians laid claim to their own emancipated spaces was also the moment when the Muslim woman and the Muslim homosexual emerged as explicit new figures of radical confinement in feminist, lesbian and homosexual communities. In the wake of the “the dangerous ‘Islamic revolution’”, 1979 was the year when “the question of Islam [...] made a strong comeback in French debates” (Shepard 2017b: 312, my translation). In March 1979, a protest was held in Paris against the repression of women’s and homosexuals’ freedoms in Iran. The front cover of the gay magazine *Gai pied* announced: “[a]bout 700 women and 300 homosexuals sought [...] to protest against ‘the new Islamic law’ that sends women back into their ancestral oppression and homosexuals into religious condemnation” (1979 in Shepard 2017b: 314). As

⁸⁶ On the naturalization of homophobia as non-Western for the purposes of legitimizing the modernity of the West, see also Binnie (2004), Hoad (2000), Puar (2007), Rao (2014) and Sabsay (2016).

the American historian of French colonialism Todd Shepard explains, “the time had [...] come for feminists, gay liberationists and their allies to teach the Iranians” (Shepard 2017b: 314) and “‘Muslims and ‘Arabs’ more broadly”, and to reject “what came from Iran, Algeria and the Muslim world in general as backwards and dangerous to sexual freedoms and women’s rights” (Shepard in Créois 2017, my translation). In the feminist press, the trope of the alienated Muslim woman “confined by tradition, in perpetual contravention” (Des femmes maghrébines de Lyon 1978: 45, my translation) became omnipresent. Numberless testimonies like the following can be found in the MLF press from the late 1970s and early 1980s:

I am an Algerian immigrant: I have lived in France since the age of three. We have always lived, my sisters and I, secluded from the outside world, always within a very united family that is closed in on itself and its traditions (Ghani 1978: 48, my translation).

Like the 1970s “ghettoized” lesbian, the Muslim woman is portrayed as trapped in a pre-modern culture. Withdrawn from the world, she has sacrificed her individuality on the altar of an outmoded “allegiance to communal standards” (Scott 2007: 149). Thus, by the late 1970s, the national-colonial language of confinement, concealment, morbidity and withdrawal, through which lesbians had been foreclosed from 1970s feminist individuality, prominently referred in feminist and homosexual discourses to the Muslim woman (drawing on a long history of racial subordination). If MLF women declared their refusal of “the victimization in which, often, we are confined”, they could become the “driving force of [their] own lives” (Roussopoulos 1970 in Pipon 2013: 84, my translation), and hence emancipated subjects, by redeploying the trope of victimization against ghettoized/racialized lesbians – and by the end of the decade, in concert with newly modern lesbians, against alienated Muslim women, “the primary victims” of the Iranian revolution (Le temps des femmes 1979: 9, my translation).⁸⁷ I therefore argue that the lesbian liberationist discourses and sense of autonomy that arose in the late 1970s were discursively dependent, albeit unwittingly, on the emergence into representation of the newly predominant ghettoized figure of the Muslim woman. At exactly the moment when lesbians were seeking to “get out of the confinement into which [they] had

⁸⁷ On the ways in which Western gender equality became a marker of progress from the 1980s onwards, positing non-Western cultures as backwards, see Ang (2001), Chow (1994), Grewal and Kaplan (1994), Hemmings (2011), Kapur (2001), Mohanty (1988), Narayan (1997), Puri (2006), Puwar (2005), Spivak (1988, 1999), Suleri (1992) and Trinh (1989).

been locked” (Lesbiennes de Jussieu 1987 [1980]: 50, my translation), the Muslim woman was taking stepping into the spotlight in feminist, lesbian and homosexual discourses as their primary primitive subject, locked in her turn into a new Islamic “ghetto” and in need of help from her modern Western allies. In the most illustrative way, radical lesbians from the Front des lesbiennes radicales defined themselves in the early 1980s as resisting women’s appropriation by men even though they were “neither circumcised, nor veiled, nor in a harem” (Claudie et al. 2010a [1981]: 10, my translation).⁸⁸

After a national conference of Jewish lesbians was held in London on 22 May 1983, one white lesbian wrote in the radical lesbian monthly *Espaces* that it constituted a “division of the movement” and “imprisonment into small groups”. She continued as follows:

In the series “let’s divide the lesbian movement”, here is a new episode of the “identity/culture/nature” offensive... [...] In the United States these types of gatherings abound, in Canada they’re on their way [...], in England they’re thriving... In France, we are spared for now (Irène 1983: 3–4, my translation).

If lesbians had carried the burden of sexual difference’s essentialism in 1970s heteronormative feminist rhetoric, for this activist, and in the context of a new assimilative lesbian modernity, insurmountable essentialism was now attributable to racial difference as an “‘identity/culture/nature’ offensive”, that is, as the lesbian community’s new irreducible difference, “so primary, so rooted in nature, so visible that it could not be subsumed by [lesbian] abstraction” (J. Scott 2004: 35).

Interestingly, in relation to this individualist lesbian frame, racial melancholic spectres haunt the readers’ letters pages of the 1980s lesbian press, repeating almost word for word the (white) lesbian melancholic hauntings of the 1970s feminist press. Where an anonymous lesbian reader of *Des femmes en mouvements* wondered about “women like me” in 1978 (Anon. 1978a: 9), in 1990 a twenty-five-year-old Algerian lesbian named Souad published a

⁸⁸ It was in direct descent from this rhetorical opposition between Western modernity and Islam as a site of primitivism and radical confinement that public controversies over the prohibition of the Islamic headscarf emerged in France from 1989 onwards (Scott 2007; Shepard 2017a). A large number of universalist feminists and lesbians supported laws banning the veil in schools and public spaces in 2004 and 2010 (Delphy 2015a, 2015b; Jasser 2006; Roux et al. 2006; Scott 2007; Touati 2006).

letter in *Lesbia* (a widely distributed lesbian monthly created in 1982) in the hope of encountering, as she says, “women like me” (Souad 1990: 42, my translation). In the gay magazine *Homophonies*, a “group of North African lesbians” posted an advertisement “with a view to founding an organization” (Anon. 1983: 32, my translation), although I found no further information about any such group in subsequent issues. Finally, a Jewish lesbian wrote in the biannual journal issued by the Paris lesbian archive about the ways in which “one remains silent about other minorities” in the lesbian community. Unable to find her place either in the Jewish community as a lesbian or in the lesbian community as a Jew, she adds: “in one way or another, it’s about split personality and alienation” (Rosenfeld 1987: 20, my translation).

What appears to be clear is that, in order to consolidate lesbian subjective formations, white French lesbians reproduced the very white mind through which they themselves had been made illegible in 1970s feminist thinking. Thus, in the name of assimilation, they refused to engage with the issue of interlocking oppressions or to acknowledge their own exclusions.⁸⁹ In 1999, a violent schism occurred within the Coordination lesbienne nationale (National Lesbian Coordination), an umbrella organization for lesbian collectives, when a group of lesbians “descended from colonialism, slavery and migration” (Groupe du 6 novembre 2001: 3, my translation) who named themselves the Groupe du 6 novembre (6 November Group) officially withdrew from an encounter, condemning “the continuation of colonial vision in the thinking and analyses of French lesbians” (Kaddour 2001, my translation; see also Bacchetta 2009). A series of anti-racist groups of lesbians of colour were later created in the 2000s: a group of Arab lesbians named “Les N'DéeSses”, Les négresses saphiques (Sapphic Negresses), Lesbiennes contre les discriminations et le racisme (Lesbians Against Discriminations and Racism), and more recently in 2009 the group Espace d'expression lesbiennes of color (Space of Expression of Lesbians of Color), which condemns the “invisibility” of lesbians of colour and the indifference towards racism in “French feminist lesbian space” (Lesbiennes of color 2012, my translation; see also Amaouche 2015). As we can see, this issue of the whiteness of French lesbian political subjectivity is coextensive with the birth of a lesbian subject in the mid-to-late 1970s.

⁸⁹ In stark contrast to France, the issue of imbricated oppressions was thoroughly addressed in 1980s US lesbian communities. See Beck (1982), Bulkin et al. (1984), Lorde (1984, 1985), Moraga (1983), Moraga and Anzaldúa (1981), Nestle (1992) and Smith (1983).

If MLF women produced the racialized figure of the ghettoized lesbian in order to be worlded as transcendental, liberated, happy and healthy, ten years later lesbians could assert their own claims to sovereignty on the backs of all those who were – unlike them – trapped in “the ghetto in the original sense”. In that respect, lesbian liberationist discourses, like feminist discourses ten years earlier, were the effect of a Western sense of superiority and of the French Republic’s paradoxes of assimilation. Replacing melancholia with a new lesbian liberal frame, as in Ernest Renan’s national ideal of mourning, lesbians “remembered to forget” (1882 in Khanna 2008: 143) the coerciveness of assimilationism. They forgot that they had been made, not so long ago, into “hysterical dykes” for feminism, and they asserted their claims to sovereignty through the very strategies that had previously made them into illegible subjects for feminism. Judith Butler perfectly summarizes this tragic repetition of structures of abjection:

[T]here is some risk that in making the articulation of a subject-position into *the* political task, some of the strategies of abjection wielded through and by hegemonic subject-positions have come to structure and contain the articulatory struggles of those in subordinate or erased possibilities (Butler 2011 [1993]: 75, emphasis Butler’s).

If this (white) feminist lesbian moment in the history of the MLF enabled the politicization of the heterosexual majority in the feminist movement, the issue was mostly addressed as an unfortunate quantitative imbalance between majoritarian and minoritarian sexual preferences that demanded appropriate readjustment (in the sense of a call for diversity), rather than as a regime of power and privilege: “[t]he women’s movement too often deals with women’s oppression only from the standpoint of the more numerous”, writes an anonymous group of lesbian activists in 1977 (Des lesbiennes du GLH-PQ 1987 [1977]: 29, my translation). To understand how the “other existing ghettos” (Groupe des lesbiennes féministes 1987 [1976]: 21) with which these lesbian groups fervently disidentified eventually came to include the “hetero ghetto” (Denise in Chroniques aiguës et graves 1983: 4) in which feminism became “confined” in turn (and in return), I shall now turn to the history of the anti-rape campaign and the ways in which it introduced a new temporality of civil war, opening a breach for the return of the “hysterical dyke” in the order of feminism’s heterosexual democracy.

2. “War Exists and We Have Not Declared It”: The Politicization of Rape and the Return of the Hysterical Dyke

On 17 September 1975 there began in Marseille the trial of three men accused of the rape of two young Belgian women, Anne Tonglet and Aracelli Castellano, while they were camping in Calanque de Morgiou, between Cassis and Marseille. One of the plaintiffs’ lawyers was Gisèle Halimi, a widely renowned feminist lawyer, who in 1972 had used the trial of Marie-Claire Chevalier for illegal abortion (known as the Bobigny trial) to make a larger political statement about abortion rights. Halimi now sought to turn this rape trial into a political platform to raise public awareness of rape. Thus, following the successful fight for the decriminalization of abortion, which was achieved in January 1975, the Marseille trial inaugurated the MLF’s anti-rape campaign as the second unitary feminist battle of the 1970s.⁹⁰

Reflecting upon the acquittal of the police officers who brutally beat Rodney King in Los Angeles in 1992, Butler underlines the “racially saturated field of intelligibility” (1993b: 15) that enabled the jury to regard Rodney King’s gestures of self-protection as gestures of aggression against the officers. She asks:

How do we account for this *reversal* of gesture and intention in terms of a racial schematization of the visible field? Is this a specific transvaluation of agency proper to a racialized episteme? Or does the possibility of such a reversal call into question whether what is “seen” is not always already in part a question of what a certain racist episteme produces as the visible? (Butler 1993b: 16, emphasis Butler’s).

Drawing upon Butler’s analysis of the Rodney King trial in terms of a “*reversal* of gesture

⁹⁰ The defendants in the Marseille trial were at first only charged with assault, and they were judged by a civil court on 17 September 1975. On 15 October 1975, the lower court recognized that it lacked jurisdiction and sent the rapists to criminal court. On 3 May 1978, two of them were sentenced to four years in prison, and one of them to six years. The MLF anti-rape campaign advocated the adjudication of rape cases in criminal rather than civil court, and a legal redefinition of rape was eventually obtained on 19 November 1980. On the history of the 1970s feminist politicization of rape in France, see Bérard (2013, 2016), Bordeaux et al. (1990), Bourg (2007), Choisir-La cause des femmes (1978), CLEF (1989), Delage (2016, 2017), Gallot (2016), Picq (1993, 2011), Shepard (2017a), Tristan and de Pisan (1977) and Vigarello (1998). The history of the grassroots anti-rape collectives I examine in this section does not appear in any of the scholarship on the politicization of rape.

and intention”, feminist philosopher Elsa Dorlin notes in her recent book on the history and philosophy of self-defence that the more Rodney King defended himself against police brutality, the more he was read as the perpetrator of violence and “the more he became *indefensible*” (2017: 14, emphasis Dorlin’s, my translation). For Dorlin, this racist episteme constructs a reality in which some bodies are always “legitimated to defend themselves” and others always “without defence” (15), “always already guilty” (29). It is within this apparatus of power, which she calls a “defensive apparatus” (14), that Dorlin locates the emergence of subaltern practices of self-defence as the only way left for these “bodies without defence” (61) to gain access to the “indispensable resources for *self-defence*” (Dorlin 2017: 19, emphasis Dorlin’s).

This discussion is very useful for understanding the sexually saturated field of intelligibility in which the Marseille trial took place in 1975. If in Rodney King’s case the racist trope of the Black man’s aggressiveness “structure[d] the horizon of white perception” (Butler 1993b: 16), in the case of the Marseille trial it was the irrevocability of the plaintiffs’ consent that structured the defence’s perception of the crime. As the official report of the trial asserts, the judge asked:

Since the two women stopped struggling as soon as they were threatened with death, couldn’t they have given the impression that they were consenting? (Le Naour and Condon 2013: 12 mins 30 sec, my translation).

The rapists’ defence team and the judge read the two women’s gestures of survival – ceasing to struggle – as the potential sign of their consent. In other words, while the more Rodney King defended himself, “the more he became *indefensible*”, in the case of the two women’s rapes, the more they stopped resisting in order to survive, the more they were read as consenting, and the more they too became indefensible. Consequently, the women were left with two options: either to be raped and guilty, or to be recognized as victims but dead. Addressing the violence of this conundrum, one feminist slogan observed in 1976: “[l]iving women are in danger of death” (Larrouy 2010: 58, my translation).

By problematizing gender relations from the standpoint of their ultimate negation of women’s lives, I argue, the anti-rape campaign opened up a breach for the emergence of a belligerent conception of the social that legitimized martial practices of resistance against rapists. Before

I further examine this turn to violence, it must be noted that feminists who promoted direct action against rapists constituted a minority of MLF activists. The promotion of violence occurred in the context of divisive debates between feminists and (mostly male) far-left activists, with the latter condemning the former for calling upon repressive methods against rapists in order to achieve more freedom for women by resorting to the judicial system, which the far left considered bourgeois and racially biased (Bérard 2016; Bourg 2007; CLEF 1989; Gallot 2016; Picq 1993, 2011; Shepard 2017a). Further, the judicial institution's lax attitude towards rapists (who were most frequently charged with assault and battery instead of rape) and its humiliation of rape victims (who were required to undergo psychiatric examination before trial) reinforced the impression that nothing good could come out of the judicial system and that women would do better to resort to their own means by “together tak[ing] charge of the struggle against rape and rapists”, as feminists from Lyon proclaimed in 1978 (Centre des femmes de Lyon 1978 in CLEF 1989: 147, my translation). Women who supported direct action mostly came from far-left, anarchist, Maoist and libertarian currents: although they agreed with the resort to the judiciary in cases where the women's movement was “too weak to organize mass campaigns”, at the same time they also defended “forms of self-organization and collective self-defence for women, to find the rapist, denounce him in his neighbourhood, etc.” (Femmes en lutte n. d. in La Griffonne 1981: 45, my translation). Since the scholarship on the MLF anti-rape campaign mostly focuses on the judicial battle and on debates between feminists and far-left activists about the use of judicial institutions (Bérard 2013, 2016; Bourg 2007; Delage 2016; Gallot 2016; Picq 1993, 2011; Shepard 2017a), it barely pays attention to the turn to violence I examine in this section. I argue that a closer look at this radical fringe is crucial for understanding the emergence of a lesbian critical discourse on heterosexuality in the feminist movement.⁹¹

⁹¹ This feminist turn to violence, which occurred in the mid-to-late 1970s, was synchronic with a brutal rise of anti-state violence in France (Bugnon 2015) and with the rise of “revolutionary violence” (Sommier 2008) in Italy and the Federal Republic of Germany. The rise of violence coincided with heightened disillusionment over post-May '68 revolutionary aspirations and overall gloom. At the same time, the media-sponsored “new philosophers” (Bernard-Henri Lévy, Alain Finkielkraut, André Glucksmann, Luc Ferry etc.) erupted from 1977 onwards; they embarked upon the demolition of the Sartrean “philosophy of engagement” and – condemning what they saw as the inherent totalitarian excesses of revolutions – championed liberal democracy (Bourg 2007; Ross 2002). Late-1970s violence can thus also be seen as a final agonizing surge of the radicalism of May '68, “a drying up and a diversion of the subjective force, which no longer succeeds in conferring objectivity on the world and in intervening to change it” (Passerini 2004 [1988]: 140).

In 1976, Annie Cohen, one of the few feminists who had supported the Front lesbien international, published a manifesto in the far-left newspaper *Libération* entitled “In What State of War Are We Living?” which “sparked many controversies” among feminists (CLEF 1989: 143). In the text, she promotes the “bearing of arms [...] for women” against “the death that men can inflict upon us” in the context of what she frames as “a state of war”:

In what state of war are we living that we creep along walls, bow our heads, spend all our lives in fear of getting home, going out, walking around, going for a stroll? In what state of war are we living that we barricade ourselves, at all ages, behind triple locks and a spyhole? In what state of war are we living that we see a potential rapist behind every man? War exists and we have not declared it. It’s our turn now to defend ourselves and to respond to it. [...] Yet, the taboo on women’s violence is immense. Who dares to lay claim to it? Who dares to use it? What is this infinite fear that prevents us from clearly pointing at the enemy? (Cohen 1977 [1976]: 18–19, my translation).

Envisioning the social as a “state of war” in which men, as “potential rapists”, are “the enemy”, Annie Cohen operates a crucial change of rhetoric: she replaces the liberal conception of the social, in which violence is conceived as an archaic rule surpassed by the state of law, with a critical conception that sees violence as the reified heart of the social. Through this change of perspective, and as Cohen’s text attests, the utopian temporality of progress, which supported the (heteronormative) feminist goal of reconciliation between men and women, is cancelled in favour of a new state of emergency in which women fight for their survival. I make the important argument that it was in the breach opened up by this new belligerent conception of the social that a critique of heterosexuality as a regime of power – rather than as the utopian and democratic horizon of men and women’s reconciliation – could finally take root in the feminist movement. Indeed, how could the (heterosexual) myth of natural comradeship between men and women (which euphemized men’s violence in many ways) resist the politicization of rape and of women’s systemic danger of death?

Although this new approach to the feminist struggle was far from being supported by all feminists, it nevertheless introduced what could be called a “negative” turn in the history of 1970s feminism. While early MLF activism was characterized by a “desire for subversion at once radical and happy” (Lesselier 1991: 91, my translation), on 11 May 1978, at a “heavy”

protest against rape in Lyon, “for the first time, protesters were roused to violence”: pornographic cinemas and wedding boutiques were spray-bombed, posters for the sensationalist true crime magazine *DéTECTIVE* were “ripped apart, brandished, flipped over before being burned” (CLEF 1989: 153, my translation), and motorcycle helmets were used to smash sex shops’ and pornographic cinemas’ windows as “permanent incitements to rape” (L’information des femmes 1976: 10, my translation). “Popular justice against rapists” (CLEF 1989: 155), carried out by feminist commandos who favoured direct retaliation and attacks against sex shops and pornographic cinemas became relatively common by the late 1970s.⁹² During a night march organized against the official march on 8 March 1978, an anonymous feminist collective named “Les allumeuses de réverbères” (The Lamplighters) deployed lethal weapons for the first time in the history of 1970s French feminism: they used plastic explosives to bomb the headquarters of the reformist feminist magazine *F magazine*, which they regarded as an “emblem of the co-optation of our struggles”, and a pornographic cinema in the thirteenth arrondissement of Paris: “[w]e wish a happy birthday to all women, and we offer them, on this occasion, a few fireworks”, they declared (Coulmont 2007, my translation). Two anti-rape collectives in particular openly promoted direct action against rapists: the Paris-based Collectif femmes contre le viol (Women’s Collective Against Rape), created in November 1977, and the Saint-Denis collective Quand les femmes s’en mêlent (When Women Get Involved).

This belligerent version of the MLF’s humanist subject asserted itself by operating an important shift in the mythological references that presided over the feminist struggle: in place of the democratic mythology of the French Revolution, these activists favoured the mythology of the French Resistance against the Nazi invasion during World War II. In other words, instead of seeking enfranchisement, they were now resisting a fascist threat. Rapists became “the militias of the patriarchy” (a reference to the French Militia, the paramilitary organization of the Vichy regime instituted to fight against the Resistance) and rape “unrecognized fascism” (see Figures 39 and 40).

⁹² I have identified feminist vigilante protests in Lyon, Pau, Strasbourg, Reims, Paris, Saint-Denis, Vienne and Bordeaux, during which sex shops and pornographic cinemas were invaded and vandalized, pornographic books and inflatable dolls burnt, and anti-rape slogans graffitied in the streets. Popular justice against rapists involved publicly denouncing them in their local neighbourhoods or workplaces by sticking leaflets to walls or handing them out in the streets, spray-bombing their houses or workplaces, and (rarely) assaulting them (CLEF 1989: 141–163; Michèle Larrouy, interview, 29 April 2016; archive of the Collectif femmes contre le viol, box “Dossier viol 1973–1982”, ARCL (lesbian archive), Paris).

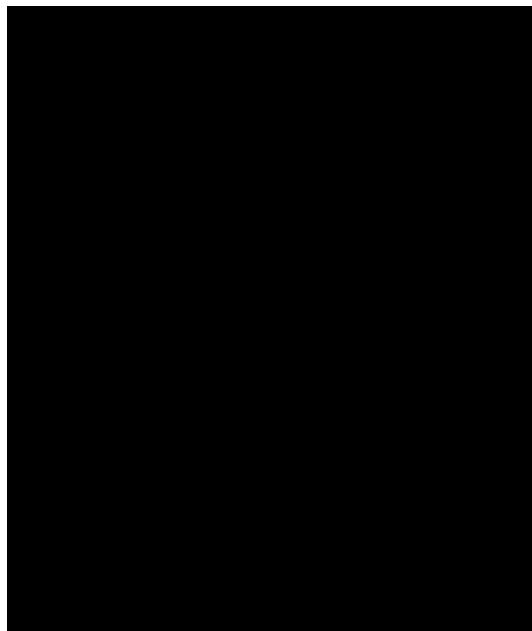


Figure 39. Photograph of a billboard with the inscription: “rapists are the militias of the patriarchy” (Le temps des femmes, 2, April–May 1978: 27).



Figure 40. Photograph of the May Day protest. One of the protesters holds a sign that reads: “rape is unrecognized fascism”. Paris, 1 May 1978. Photographer: Catherine Deudon (Le temps des femmes, 12, Summer 1981: 37).⁹³

⁹³ The women in the picture are ululating. Ululations are traditional Arab and Native American cries of festivity and war. They were used in particular as a resistant cry during the Algerian war. MLF women drew on these cries while protesting during the 1970s with a view to comparing women’s liberation to Native American and Algerian struggles against settler colonialism (Shepard 2017a). This practice underlines the ways in which race hovered over the feminist movement as a spectre that was available for co-optation and that also reinforced,

Addressing this turn to violence, the authors of a book on the history of the MLF in Lyon laconically remark: “[t]he atmosphere was no longer festive” (CLEF 1989: 153, my translation). Indeed, if in 1970 women were basking in bliss “like in a romantic passion”, a “kind of magic” (Delphy in *Le temps des femmes* 1981: 19), by 1978 the atmosphere had become extremely dark: “[w]e felt like crying when girls told us about their rapes”, recounts a member of the Collective femmes contre le viol (Anon. 1978c: 9, my translation). In a manifesto calling for night-time vigilante protests against the traditional women’s march on 8 March 1978, an anonymous group of feminists laid claim to “rage” as a new feminist public feeling: “[a]gainst the repression that is being internationalized, against women’s daily control by cops, rapists, lechers, husbands, protectors and other pimps, we want to express our rage differently” (Anon. 1978d: 26, my translation).

Between the early and late 1970s, feminism’s revolutionary drive moved from an “overdose of ‘happiness’” (Bernheim 2003 [1991]: 17), pleasure and radical joy to public rage, sadness, “fear”, “anxiety” (Annie 1979: 3), “general pessimism” (Annie, Lydie 1981: 45) and “gloom” (Julien 2003: 56), its subjective drive from love between women to violence and self-defence, its praxis from spectacular spontaneist actions to martial resistance, its desired outcome from grand emancipation to the immediate saving of one’s own life, and its atmosphere from passionate sisterhood to civil war. In a sense, the late 1970s appear as the affective underside of the birth of the MLF. I suggest that this “negative” turn in the history of the MLF moves away from the early heteronormative structure of women’s happy feelings and closer to the repressed lesbian structure of backwards feelings, announcing the return of a long-standing anger that would eventually be directed against feminism itself. If it was in and through the outpouring of love, pleasure and happiness that women had been *made* in 1970, it was through those affects’ negative underside – anger, hate and rage – that lesbians *unbecame* women ten years later.

Indeed, the temporal acceleration performed by the transition from a liberal state of civil law to an emergency state of war enacted, I suggest, a literalization of the MLF’s political concepts and praxis. Whereas “patriarchy” (or the class of men) was defined in 1970 as “The Main Enemy” (Dupont [Delphy] 1970), in this new state of civil war, “all men” became

through the use of analogies between feminism and anti-colonialism, the epistemic whiteness of the feminist struggle.

“enemies” – a conceptual leap which the following quote from the Collectif femmes contre le viol neatly performs: “[w]e say yes, there is a class of men, men are our enemies” (Christine et al. 1979: 9, my translation). Similarly, the “extraordinary symbolic efficacy of the movement” (Kandel in Maruani and Mosconi 2010: 10, my translation), from Brigitte Boucheron’s joyfully pouring water over her sexist classmate in 1968 to the MLF’s humorous happenings, gave way to the claiming of women’s literal violence. Thus, while in 1971 the MLF anthem metaphorically enjoined women to “know [their] strength” in a collective movement (Anon. 1971 in Fouque 2008: 456, my translation), by the end of the decade the aim of feminist self-defence classes was to become aware of one’s “individual strength” (Bendl et al. 1978: 69, my translation). I would suggest that this negative turn, operating through the literalization of MLF culture, was the way in which a lesbian criticality started to manifest itself within the feminist movement.

Indeed, in accordance with this new martial logic, on the women’s march of 8 March 1980 the (mostly lesbian) members of a support committee for Marie-Andrée Marion, a sixteen-year-old-lesbian who had survived a rape, walked through the streets of Paris holding posters that represented a man with his face covered by the phrase: “this man is a rapist, this man is a man” (see Figure 41).

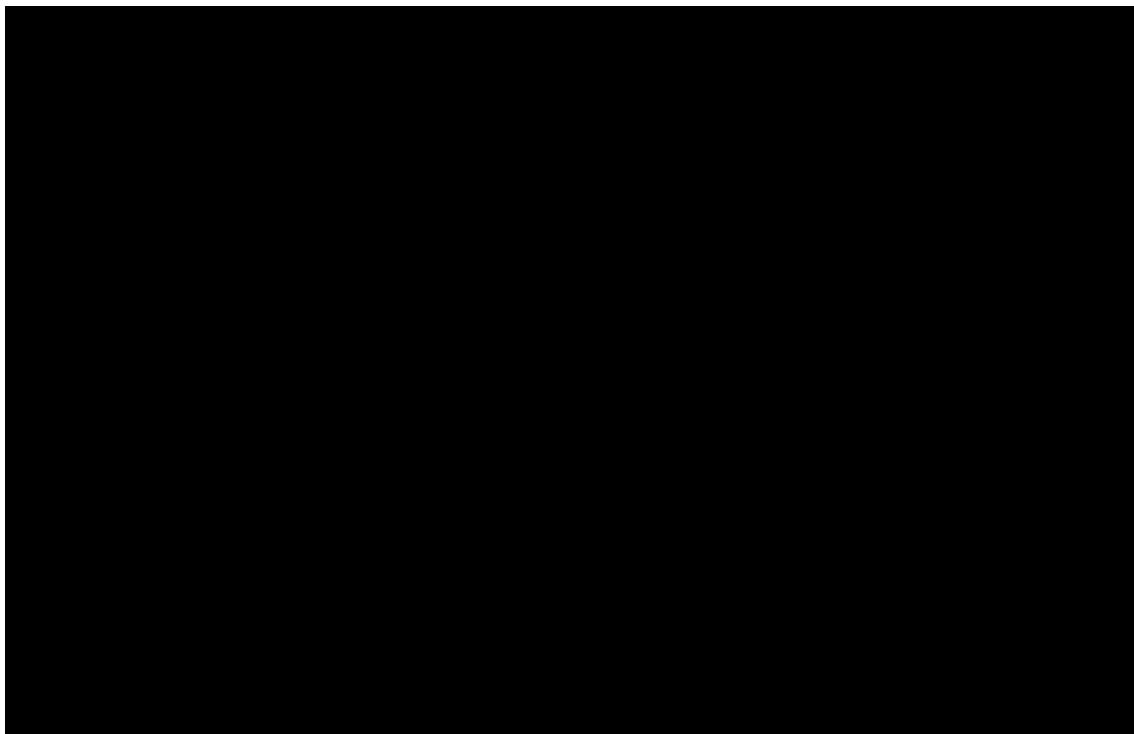


Figure 41. Protester holding a poster that reads “this man is rapist, this man is a man” at the first autonomously organized lesbian march. Paris, 21 June 1980. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1980.htm>. Last accessed: 25 June 2018.

This poster sparked such turmoil in the women’s movement that thirty years later, speaking about her experience in the MLF, radical feminist pioneer Liliane Kandel remarked: “yes, I defend [everything], including the ‘excesses’ – except one, perhaps, the poster that said ‘this man is a rapist, this man is a man’” (Kandel in Maruani and Mosconi 2010: 20, my translation). Martine Laroche, who had visited Wittig in the summer of 1979 in California and was one of the founders of the Marie-Andrée Marion support committee, remembers the outraged reactions:

We showed this poster everywhere, which caused and continues to cause a scandal. [...] It was a scandal in the streets. We walked in the street with it... It made waves [...] in feminist [groups]... And still today! It reappeared I don’t know how, or we talked about it again, and the girls were scandalized... (interview, 15 April 2016, my translation).

The activists who carried the poster, as the lesbian feminist Michèle Larrouy recalled, were

“called naturalists, essentialists, fascists, it was terrible...” (interview, 29 April 2017). In my view, this is absolutely crucial, insofar as the language of fascism, essentialism and naturalism was of course the very language through which the politicization of lesbianism had been relentlessly disqualified throughout the decade. In fact, I argue that the outcry in the feminist movement against the slogan “this man is a rapist, this man is a man” was directed not so much at the essentialization of men that it entailed (as feminists claimed) as towards the intolerable lesbian critique of heterosexuality it performed after ten years of continuous silencing. Indeed, by enacting a transition from “patriarchy” as the “main enemy” to “all men” as “enemies”, feminism’s new temporality of emergency cancelled the liberal progress narrative that supported feminism’s heterosexual democracy: as the slogan implies, if in feminism’s new state of war all men are rapists, then heterosexuality shifts from being the most cherished gift of French feminism to an act of collaboration with the enemy – hence, a regime of power.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ These radical anti-rape collectives were not solely composed of lesbians, and this disqualification of all men as rapists was far from being a consensus. In my browsing of the archive of the Collectif femmes contre le viol at the Paris lesbian archive, I observed that from 1978 onwards important discussions took place within the collective regarding the definition of rape, during which the idea of a continuum between heterosexuality and rape was opposed by several members. We can see how controversial the issue was within the collective, before it became a public stance in 1980, in the following extract from a discussion held in June 1978:

- It seems to me to be difficult to speak about rape as such without speaking about violence as a whole.
- But, in making this analysis, we can’t skip over rape the way we treat it now, because it really is a destructive and horrible experience. [...]
- It seems to me to be important to explain to a woman who comes and sees us where her rape really came from. It’s a concentrated form, but all that, she has experienced it before without being aware of it. [...]
- There is always an interval, an escalation; we can start from our sexuality and try to identify the process leading towards rape, but *we can’t remove all of the steps there are in between. Getting chatted up in the street is not getting raped.*
- Let’s distinguish between rape and sexual violence.
- Is rape a qualitative or quantitative difference from what you have called sexual violence? For me, it is far from obvious. For me, *getting chatted up in the street is rape and for me the difference is quantitative and not one of quality, it is the same thing but in a concentrated form at a given moment.* With chatting up and most hetero relationships, there is a destruction of the other and not only a negation.
- Chatting up in the street is just symbolic rape. Rape itself is the acting out. [...]
- This raises the problem of sexuality in general, and *we’re getting to the point of saying all men are rapists.*
- No, there is a difference between saying all men are rapists, which I do not think, and saying that potentially their entire conditioning in society makes it possible for them to be so, which does not mean they will all be so.

As Claudie Lesselier, one of the founders of both the Collectif femmes contre le viol and the Front des lesbiennes radicales in 1981, remarked when I asked her why the Collectif femmes contre le viol had disintegrated in the early 1980: “[t]he idea was that if all heterosexual relationships were rape, there was no longer any reason for a collective against rape!” (interview, 16 September 2016).⁹⁵ Surely, if there was no longer any reason for a collective against rape, it was because “women against rape” were about to transmute into a new heroic political subject: the radical lesbian. When Monique Wittig published “La pensée straight” in February 1980 and defined lesbians as non-women, a significant number of French feminists – most of whom had no ties to Wittig – were already fully ready to reverse the mechanics of the MLF’s assimilative crucible and to transmute back into lesbians in order to wage a “sex war” against men as irreconcilable enemies. I thus argue that it was the collusion between the actualization of feminism’s warlike pre-modern temporality – fostered in the context of the anti-rape campaign – and Wittig’s exhumation of feminism’s pre-modern subject – the lesbian

- [...] All men have exploited this power, even in cases where he does not use it that does not change the facts.
- When you said that we could assimilate sexuality to relations of oppression [...] One should raise the question: *is penetration itself rape?*
- Now we can’t get beyond sexuality.
- Because in fact you only see sexuality as heterosexual.
- No, no, here of course I’m speaking about heterosexuality, homosexuality is another issue but I don’t think it is the solution to all issues; *I’m speaking about heterosexuality experienced as rape.*
- *Personally, I reject the phrase “penetration is rape”* (Anon. 1978e: 14-18, my emphases and my translation).

It seems that the more the idea of a continuum between heterosexuality and rape became predominant in the collective, the more those (mostly heterosexuals) who did not share these views – and who appear in the extract above – withdrew from it. Claudie Lesselier, one of the collective’s founders, confirmed in an interview that “a certain number of heterosexuals [...] stopped campaigning in the collective” when the idea of a continuum between rape and heterosexuality became dominant (Akopian 1985: 42). By 1980, it seems that it was mostly lesbians that remained in the collective.

⁹⁵ These radical lesbian activists were influenced by the French translation in 1976 of Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* and later by the UK-based collection *Love Your Enemy? Debate Between Heterosexual Feminism and Political Lesbianism* (Onlywomen Press Collective 1981). Their positions were similar to those of anti-pornography scholars and activists such as Catharine MacKinnon (1985, 1987, 1989, 1993) and Andrea Dworkin (1981, 1987; see also Dworkin and MacKinnon 1988), who considered sexual violence to be the norm in men’s sexual behaviour and for whom heterosexuality was “the structure of the oppression of women” (MacKinnon 1987: 60). For critical accounts of these positions, see Brown (1990, 1995, 1997), Butler (1997b), de Lauretis (1990), Duggan and Hunter (1995), Snitow et al. (1983) and Vance (1984).

who has not become a woman through the democratic promise of feminism – that enabled the politicization of heterosexuality through the *return* in the feminist enunciative present of its own progeny: the “hysterical dyke”.

In February 1980, Monique Wittig published the French translation of her paper “The Straight Mind” in the seventh issue of the materialist feminist journal *Questions féministes*. By addressing heterosexuality as an epistemic and economic-political regime of domination rather than an individual sexual preference among others (see also “The Category of Sex”, Wittig 1992 [1976]: 1–8), Wittig enacted a shattering return in France of what had been unspeakable in French for ten years.⁹⁶ In her piece, Wittig famously linked women’s oppression to the institution of heterosexuality, thereby defining lesbians as outside sexual difference:

[I]t would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, live with women, for “woman” has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems. Lesbians are not women (1992: 32).

Wittig’s “La pensée straight” was published alongside Emmanuèle de Lesseps’ opposing piece “Hétérosexualité et féminisme” (Heterosexuality and Feminism). In her article, de Lesseps conceives of “women’s homosexuality and heterosexuality” as “inscribed in a similar oppressive structure” (1980a: 68) (*pace* Wittig) and declares:

[J]ust as oppression works through heterosexual couple relationships, the struggle against oppression must also be situated at this level [...]. We who have stated that “the personal is political”, especially affective and sexual relationships between men and women, we cannot advocate the active desertion of those relationships, in which global social relationships are concretized and confronted individually (1980a: 63, my translation).

⁹⁶ “La pensée straight” was published in French with the following postscript, which did not appear in the original paper presented at the Modern Language Association in 1978: “Nor, incidentally, is any woman a woman if she is not in a relationship of personal dependence on a man” (Wittig 1980a: 53, my translation). This postscript was added at the request of the *Questions féministes* editorial collective. Monique Wittig removed it from *The Straight Mind* (1992). The postscript can be read as an attempt to tame Wittig’s contention by standing in the way of her political re legitimization of lesbianism.

By implicitly associating lesbianism with an “active desertion” of relationships with men, de Lesseps reiterates the Hegelian heteronormative conception of feminism according to which heterosexuality is the inevitable locus of the feminist struggle – which she dubs “daily guerrilla warfare” (63) in which “global social relationships are concretized individually” – and lesbianism a depoliticized withdrawal.⁹⁷ Indeed, in her piece, de Lesseps reproduces all the discursive strategies I have unpacked so far by which lesbian difference was made illegible for feminism: in particular, she reiterates the “repressive hypothesis” (Foucault 1984 [1976]: 15) of an “unspoken censorship” (56) against heterosexuality in the MLF because of “the establishment of a kind of political hierarchy between feminist lesbians and heterosexuals” (55). Thus, although Wittig’s conceptualization of lesbians as “escapees” (1992: 20) from their sexual class in “On ne naît pas femme” has been seen as presupposing a “classic liberal and existential model of freedom” in which power is conceived as an “operation of volition” (Butler 1999 [1990]: 158), I would suggest instead that Wittig sought to repoliticize escapism (potentially drawing on her own exile to the US). French feminists had secured the hegemony of heterosexuality by repudiating lesbianism as a shameful site of hostile withdrawal from the feminist struggle; Wittig fully reversed this logic by conceiving instead of lesbian escapism (or “desertion”) as a new resistant gesture against heterosexual power. Indeed, it was by building on this reversal of perspective that a radical lesbian activist could write a few years later in 1983:

Some lesbians think that radical lesbianism leads to the ghetto... I don't feel like I'm in the ghetto... Never in my life have I felt so free... And it is lesbianism which enabled me to *escape* from the hetero ghetto... (Denise in *Chroniques aiguës et graves* 1983: 4, my emphasis and my translation).

By politicizing lesbian difference (or escapism) as a site of resistance rather than a despicable site of withdrawal, Wittig provided French lesbians with the theoretical tools that had been lacking for ten years, in order to “frame the [...] framer” (Minh-ha 1992 in Butler 2009: 8), or more accurately, to ghettoize the ghettoizer: heterosexuality and what radical lesbians in 1980

⁹⁷ If lesbians were repudiated as waging a tyrannical war against men from the site of their difference (as a hostile withdrawal from heterosexual mixedness), it is worth noting how, when it comes to heterosexual relationships, the concept of war (“daily guerrilla warfare”) suddenly becomes political and feminist.

started calling “heterofeminism”. In that sense, she enacted a “revolution of standpoint” (Turcotte 2001: 22) through which feminism’s internal “problem” switched from lesbian difference to heterosexuality. From this perspective, rather than being a form of “separatist prescriptivism” (Butler 1999 [1990]: 162) or an ideal essentialism in which “the category ‘lesbian’ remains intact” (Fuss 1989: 43; Dorlin 2008: 76–78; Suleiman 1985), Wittig’s lesbian “fugitive” can be read as a reverse discourse that draws on the reversibility of feminism’s Hegelian heteronormative logic as a political resource to invert a relation of power.⁹⁸ In a similar vein, when in June 1980 radical lesbians claimed that “all women” had to “become lesbian, that is to say, united, resistant, not collaborators” (Monique [Plaza] 1981 [1980]: 79, my translation), instead of seeing it as a tyrannical “repression of women’s heterosexual desires” (de Lesseps 1980a: 58), I suggest that this political statement should be read as a reverse discourse on the logic of the MLF’s assimilationist crucible, which for ten years had forced lesbians to become (heterosexual) women. Similarly, with the claim that “hetero-‘feminism’ divides the class of women” (LFR/CQFD 1982 [1981]: 35, my translation), radical lesbians were not tyrannically shaming heterosexual women, as feminists (as well as MLF historians) contended, but were reversing the feminist accusation of divisiveness that had been relentlessly directed against visible lesbians in the MLF for a decade to prevent the politicization of heterosexuality. The “arrogance” of these statements “[arises] within the context of a previous, systemically embedded arrogance: that of the institution of heterosexuality” (Epps and Katz 2007: 450).

On 22 June 1980 a national encounter of lesbians was organized in Paris by the Groupe lesbiennes de Jussieu (named after Jussieu University, where they had their meetings). Created in December 1979, and very much inspired by Wittig’s two articles of February and May 1980, the Groupe lesbiennes de Jussieu was the first lesbian group to define itself as radical lesbian in the sense of resisting heterosexuality as the primary regime of women’s oppression. Many of the collective’s participants had been active in some of the most radical collectives of the aforementioned anti-rape campaign, or had ended up leaving the feminist movement because they had not “found a lesbian reflection of [their] experience” (Anon. 1987 [1980]: 48, my translation). Making explicit the underlying assumptions behind the

⁹⁸ Critical approaches to the contention that Wittig’s lesbian figure is essentialist or idealist (because it conceives of lesbian identity as an autonomous formation liberated from the constraints of heterosociality) include Butler (2007), Crowder (1993, 2005, 2007), de Lauretis (1990, 2005), Epps and Katz (2007), Henderson (2017) and Zerilli (2005).

slogan “this man is a rapist, this man is man”, the Lesbiennes de Jussieu conceived of women’s heterosexuality as a form of collaboration with men – the enemy class. From these premises, a few members of the collective posted the following statements on the walls of the meeting room at the 22 June 1980 meeting:

A woman who loves her oppressor, that’s oppression. A “feminist” who loves her oppressor, that’s collaboration.

In time of sex war, hetero-feminism is class collaboration.

Hetero-“feminists” = patriarchy’s kapos (in LFR/CQFD 1982 [1981]: 35, my translation) (see Figures 42 and 43).

Drawing on the mythology of the French Resistance against the Nazis, which had been reactivated in the crucible of the anti-rape campaign, the Lesbiennes de Jussieu posited lesbians as permanent resistors against male power, and heterosexual women as collaborators (or “kapos”, prisoners in Nazi concentration camps who supervised other prisoners).

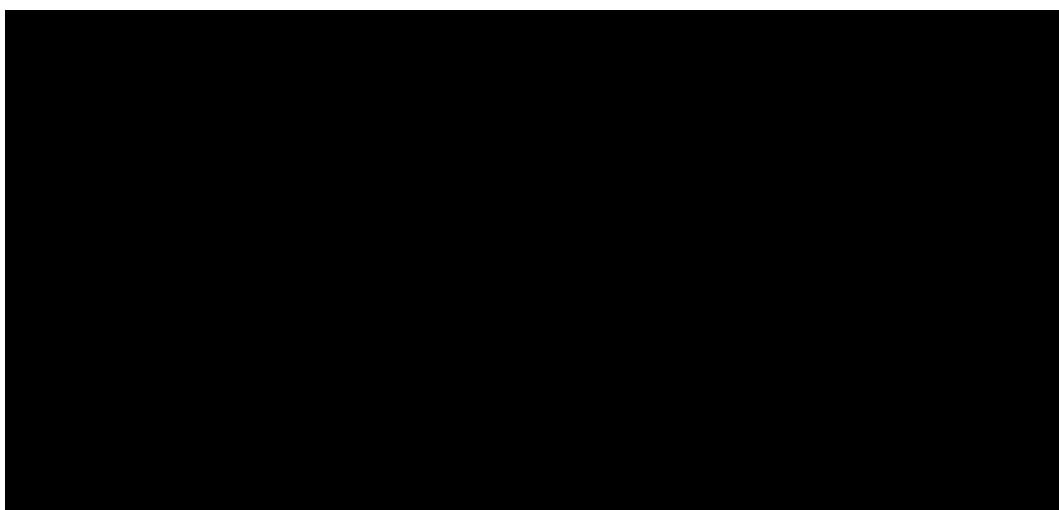


Figure 42. Lesbian national encounter organized by the Groupe lesbiennes de Jussieu. Posters bearing handwritten inscriptions: “dykes in the closet, don’t be ashamed of your sexuality. That’s not what it’s about”; “homosexuals, don’t be ashamed of your lesbianism. That’s what it’s about”; “hetero-‘feminism’ divides the class of women. Lesbianism in the closet betrays it”; “hetero-‘feminists’ = patriarchy’s kapos”; “in time of sex war, hetero-feminism is class collaboration”. Paris, 22 June 1980. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1980.htm>. Last accessed: 27 June 2018.

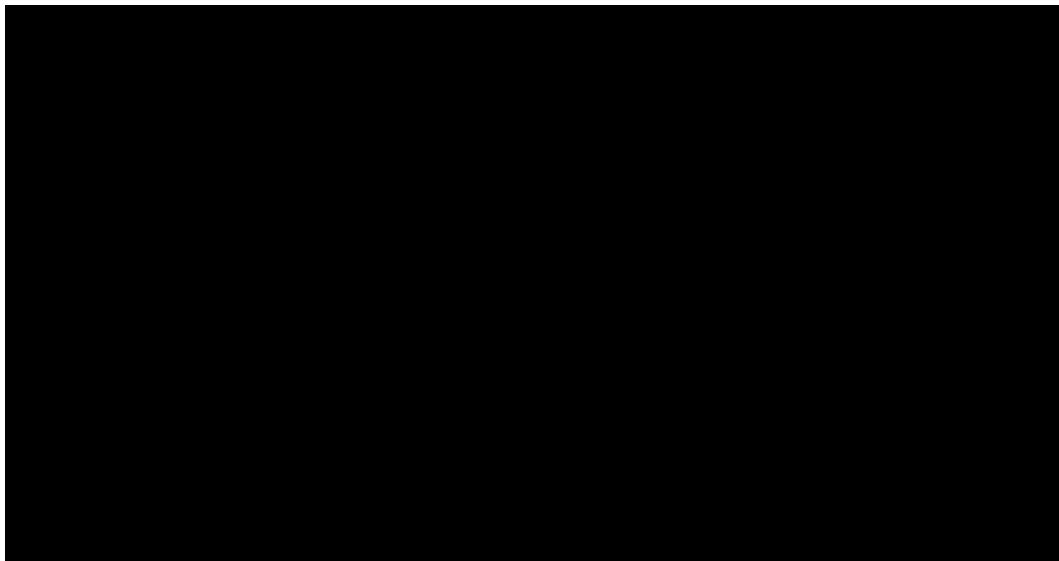


Figure 43. Lesbian national encounter organized by the Groupe lesbiennes de Jussieu. Posters bearing handwritten inscriptions: “hetero-‘feminists’ = patriarchy’s kapos” and “in time of sex war, hetero-feminism is class collaboration”. Paris, 22 June 1980. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1980.htm>. Last accessed: 27 June 2018.

The conceptualization of the social as a “sex war” in which two classes were enemies culminated in a poster that mimicked the French Republic’s orders for general mobilization during World War I and World War II, created by the Front des lesbiennes radicales in 1982. Replacing French flags with lesbian flags (three intertwined Venus signs and the labrys), the poster’s introductory lines read in clear letters: “[g]eneral mobilization against all men. They assault, humiliate, rape and kill women every day: they don’t call it war. We do. And we are ready to wage it to the end”. Below these lines, newspaper reports on male crimes against women are reproduced, stamped with the words “state of emergency”. The poster is signed in clear capital letters with the credit: “[r]adical and offensive lesbians”. As if they were orders for wartime mobilization, activists pasted the posters onto billboards and shop windows along the route of the 8 March 1982 women’s march in the streets of Paris (see Figures 44–52).



Figure 44. Poster made by the Front des lesbiennes radicales: “general mobilization against all men”. Paris, March 1982. Anne-Marie Charles papers (38 AF), box “38 AF 12-62 Affiches”, folder “38 AF 29-35 Archives et culture lesbienne Paris”. Centre des Archives du féminisme, University of Angers Library.

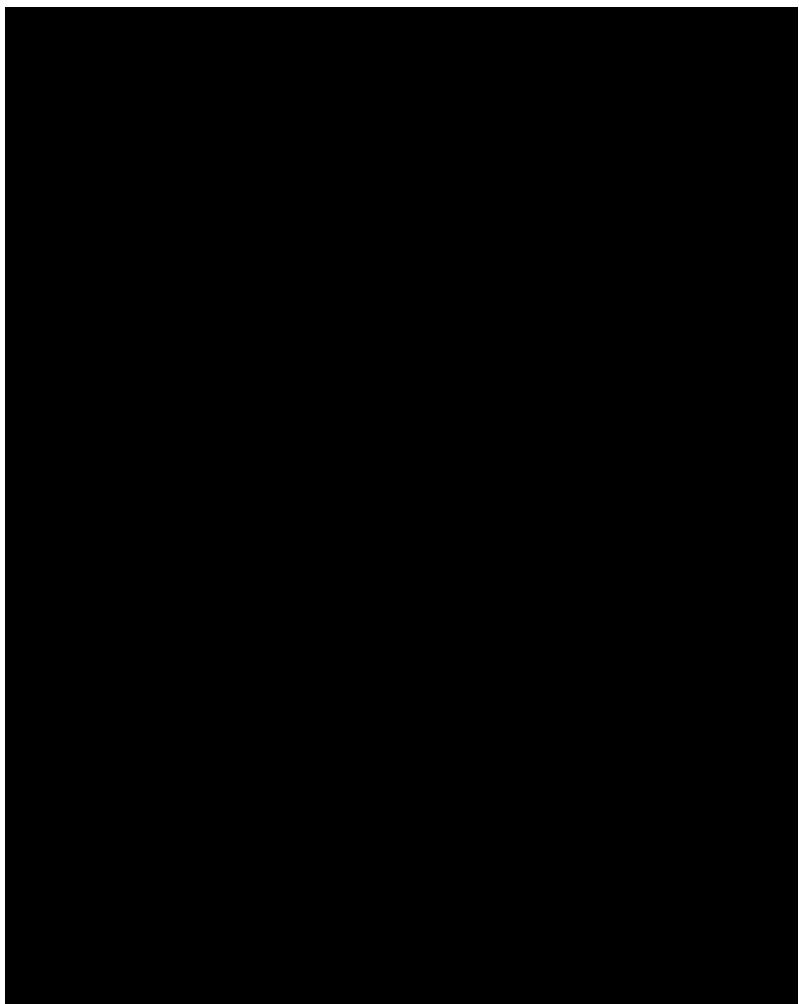


Figure 45. Order for general mobilization after Germany's invasion of Poland. France, 2 September 1939. Archives de la Vendée, La Roche-sur-Yon. Reference: (Fi) E Depot 123 8 H 7-6.

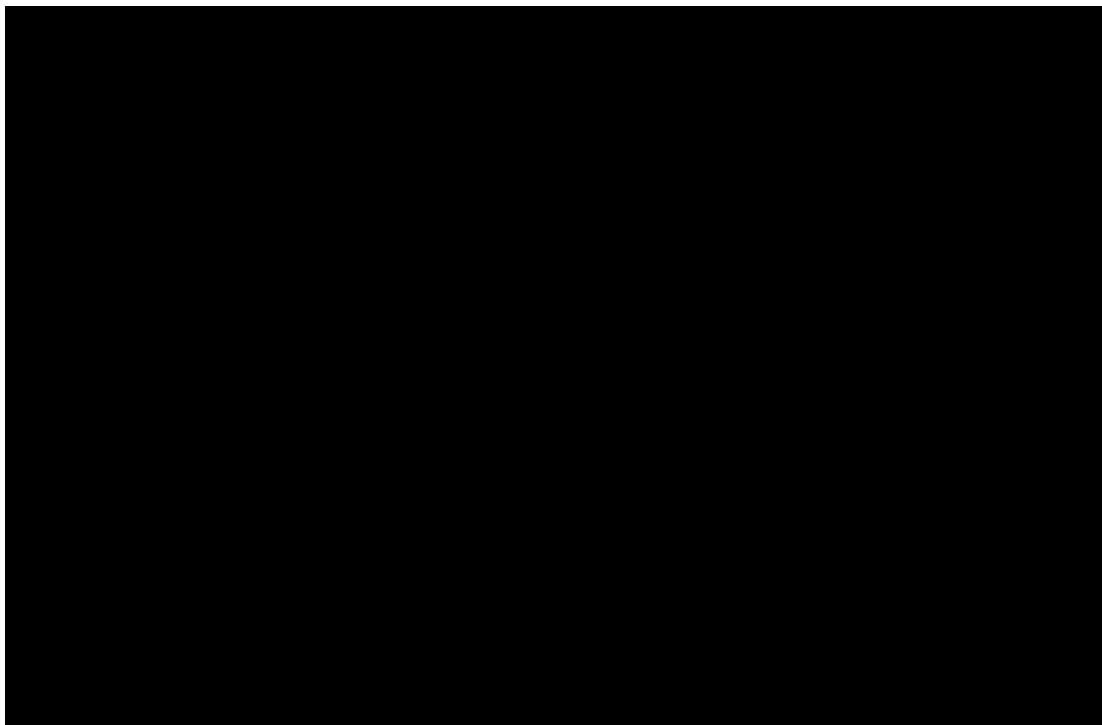


Figure 46. Radical lesbians from the Front des lesbiennes radicales pasting up the “general mobilization against all men” posters in the streets. Paris, 6 March 1982. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1982.htm>. Last accessed: 27 June 2018.

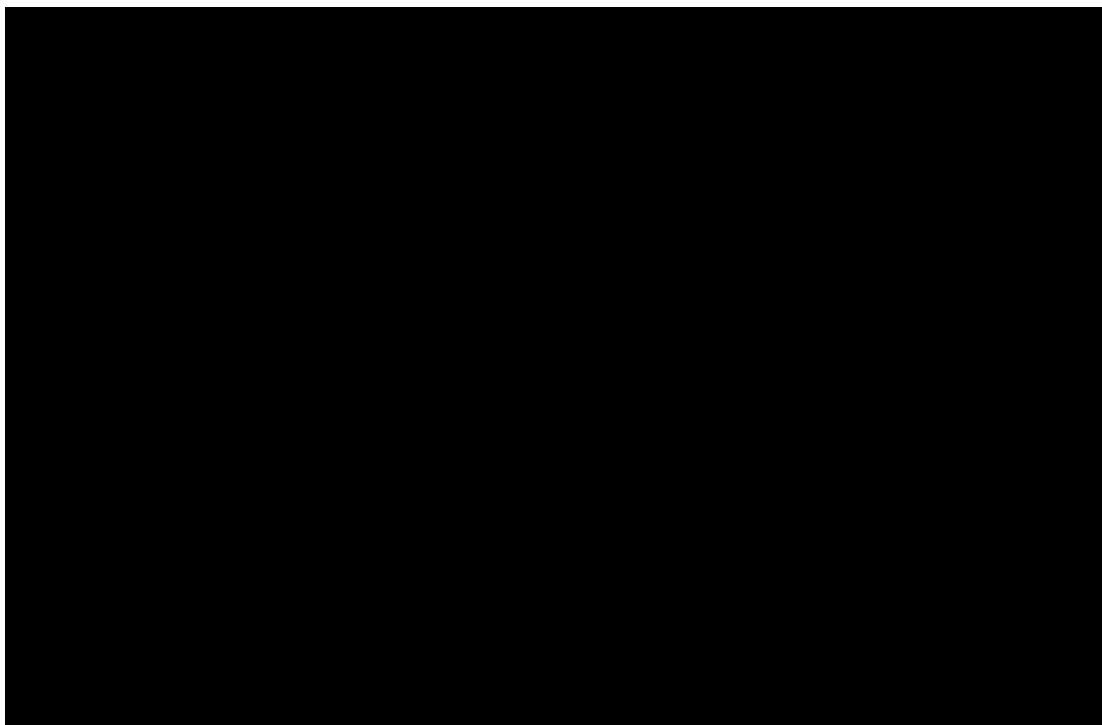


Figure 47. Radical lesbians from the Front des lesbiennes radicales pasting up the “general mobilization against all men” posters in the streets. Paris, 6 March 1982. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1982.htm>. Last accessed: 27 June 2018.



Figure 48. Radical lesbians from the Front des lesbiennes radicales pasting up the "general mobilization against all men" posters in the streets. Paris, 6 March 1982. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1982.htm>. Last accessed: 27 June 2018.

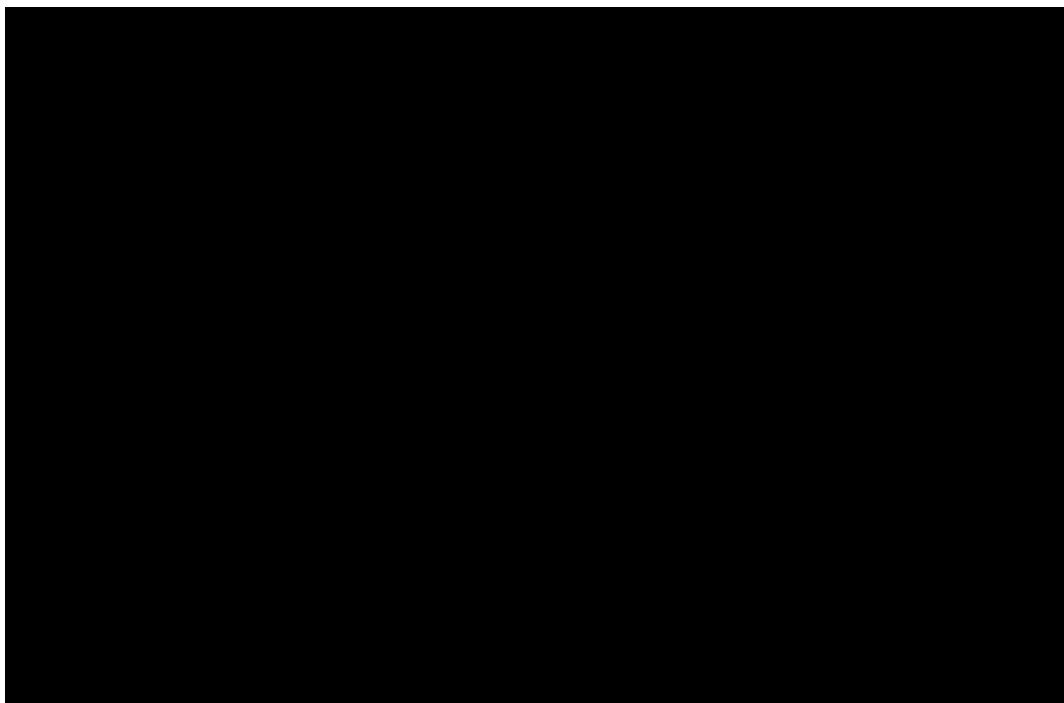


Figure 49. Radical lesbians from the Front des lesbiennes radicales pasting up the “general mobilization against all men” posters in the streets. Paris, 6 March 1982. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1982.htm>. Last accessed: 27 June 2018.

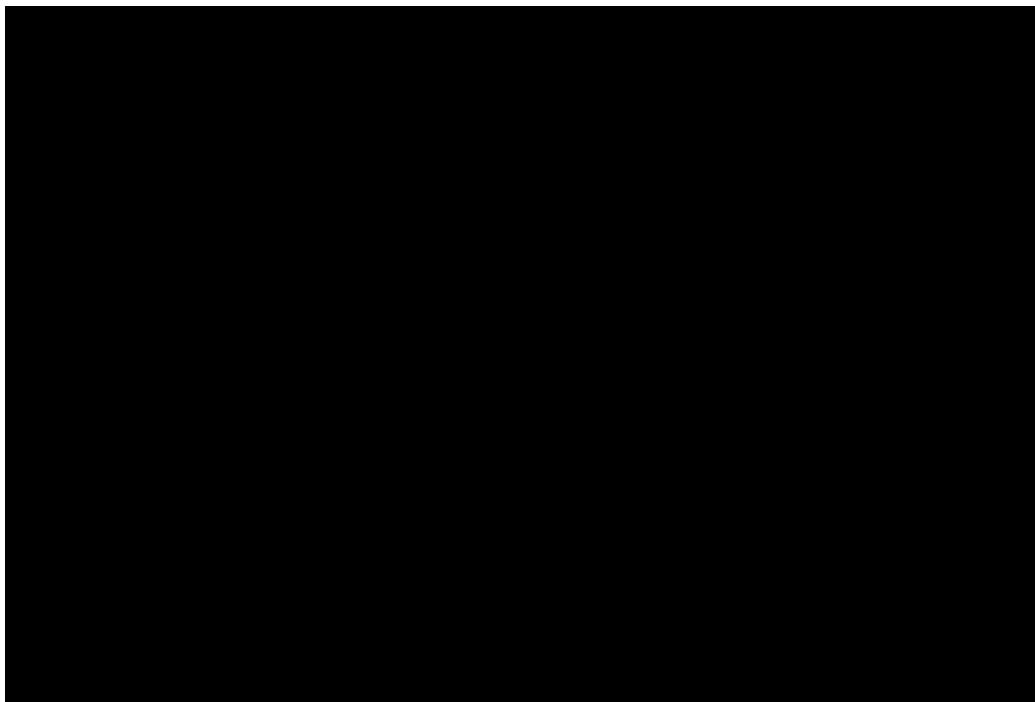


Figure 50. “General mobilization against all men” poster stuck to an advertisement for the left-wing weekly *Le nouvel observateur* with the title “Misogynist France”. Paris, 6 March 1982. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1982.htm>. Last accessed: 27 June 2018.

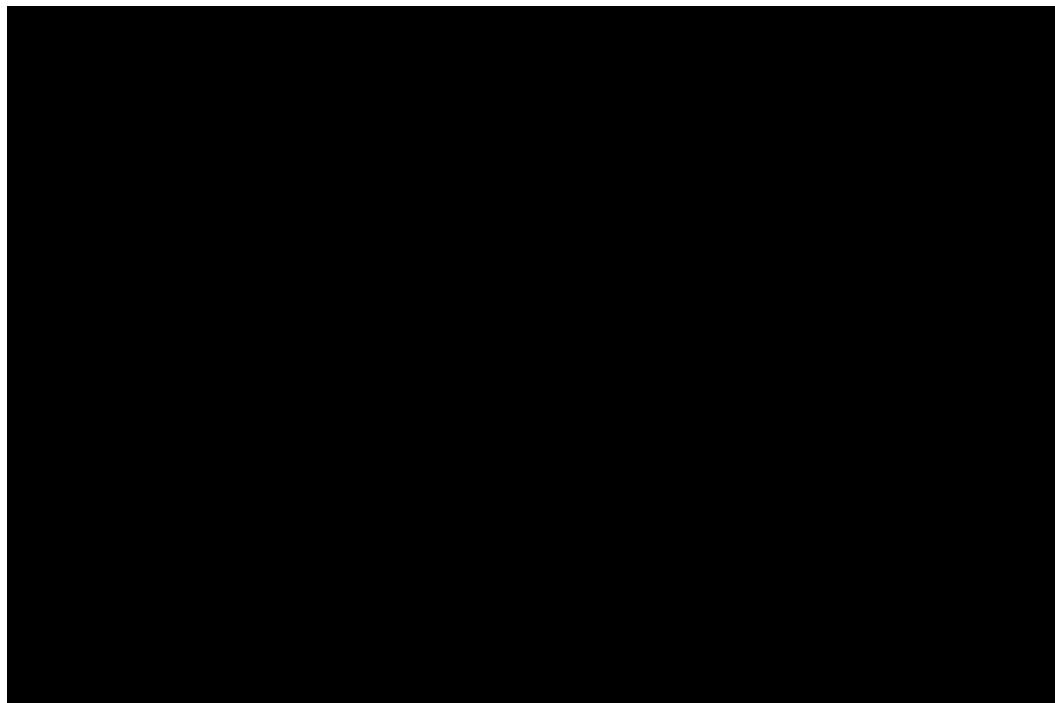


Figure 51. “General mobilization against all men” poster pasted up in the street. Paris, 6 March 1982. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1982.htm>. Last accessed: 27 June 2018.

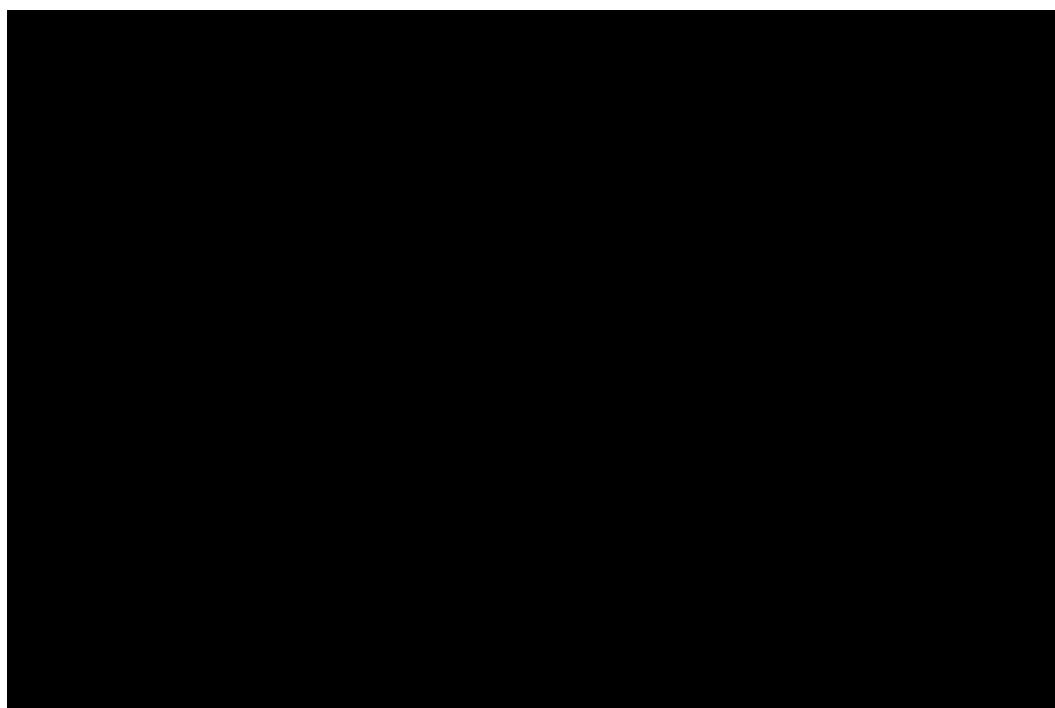


Figure 52. “General mobilization against all men” poster stuck to a billboard in the street. Paris, 6 March 1982. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1982.htm>. Last accessed: 27 June 2018.

From the point of view of a “sex war”, radical lesbians elaborated an unprecedented critique of heterosexual social systems and of the MLF’s heterosexual norm: “a whole unsaid came out into the open (painfully)”, remarked one feminist (*La revue d’en face* 1981: 66, my translation). Contending that “[radical] feminist theories are insufficient because they do not integrate the oppressive dimension of the heterosocial system (the power of Difference operating through what one calls heterosexuality)” (*Des lesbiennes radicales de Jussieu du mouvement de lesbiennes radicales* 1982 [1980]: 22, my translation), they argued that heterosexuality was a social “constraint” (LFR/CQFD 1982 [1981]: 38, my translation), “an oppressive norm for all women” (39) and “a strategy of patriarchy” (Monique [Plaza] 1981 [1980]: 78, my translation). Overturning the anti-lesbian epistemology that read heterosexuality as feminist “daily guerrilla warfare”, they stated that “reclaiming [heterosexuality] as a terrain of individual struggle” was “dangerous”, and they explicitly defined this argument as “heterofeminist” because it “legitimizes and defends what is socially dominant and oppressive: the heterosexual norm, hetero-power” (*Collectif pour un front lesbien* 1981: 13, my translation). Thus, they defined the feminist movement as “heterofeminist” and “anti-lesbian” “because it envisages women’s liberation within the heterosexual institution” (Monique [Plaza] 2010 [1981]: 26). Exhuming the social and political difference between heterosexuality and lesbianism that the MLF’s heterosexual iron law of women’s sameness had forced into repression, they addressed the “privileged status” of heterosexual women with regard to the “social repression” which lesbians “undergo on a daily basis” (LFR/CQFD 1982 [1981]: 34). In doing so, they unabashedly responded to what I have framed as the epistemology of the MLF glass closet, the inverted perception which read heterosexuality as repressed by lesbianism in the movement:

Within the movement, we must recall, there is no repression of the poor heteros by terrorist lesbians. Socially, the “heteros” enjoy an objective advantage, that of conformity. We cannot speak of heterosexuality without addressing the relationship conformity/repression (Anon. 1981 [1980]: 84–85, my translation).

They thus defined lesbianism as a “political position” rather than as “psychological determinism” or a “different ‘sexuality’” (LFR/CQFD 1982 [1981]: 33). The texts in which radical lesbians developed their ideas were distributed at the 22 June 1980 meeting, and as one feminist recalled, they had “the impact of a bomb” in the feminist movement (Fauquet 1981: 69, my translation). The day before the meeting, on 21 June 1980, the Groupe

lesbiennes de Jussieu organized the first autonomous lesbian protest, holding up signs that read “lesbians *guérillères* against the class of men” (referring to Wittig’s novel), “let’s tear up our silence, let’s take back our violence” (Lesselier 1991: 96), “mobilization against all men”, “this man is a rapist, this man is a man”, “lesbians radical, offensive and united to the end” and “heterosexuality is to patriarchy as the wheel is to the bicycle” (see figures 54–56).



Figure 53. Poster announcement for the 21–22 June 1980 national lesbian encounter in Paris organized by the Groupe lesbiennes de Jussieu. Poster created by Michèle Larrouy. Box “Posters”, ARCL (lesbian archive), Paris.

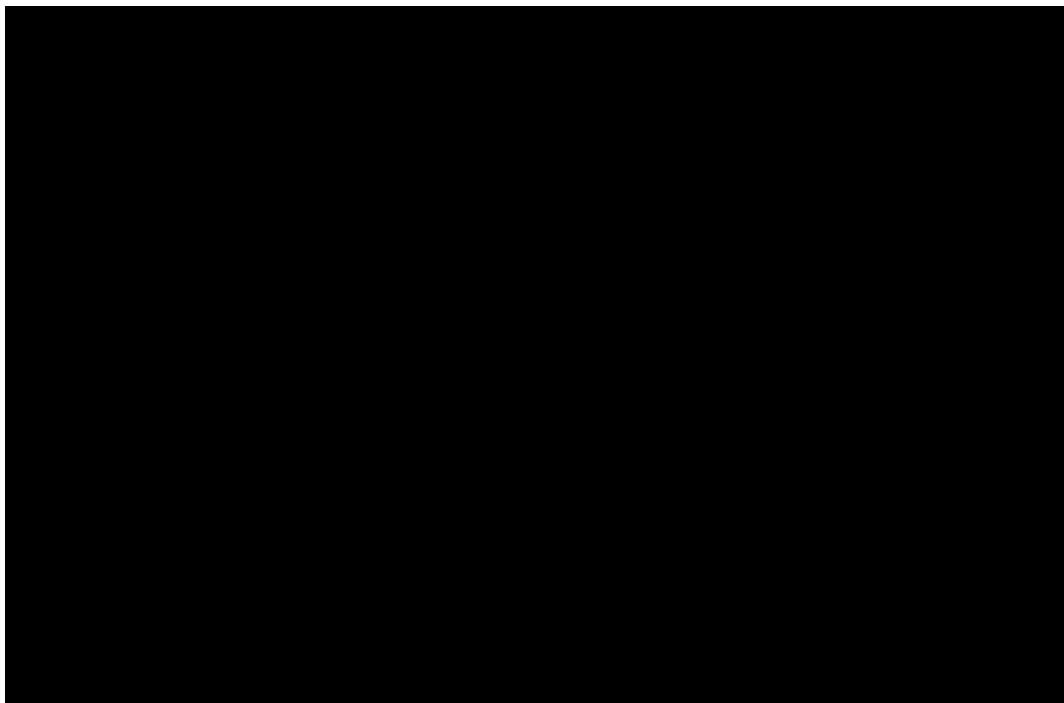


Figure 54. First autonomous lesbian protest. On the banner: “lesbians guérillères against the class of men”. Paris, 21 June 1980. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1980.htm>. Last accessed: 23 July 2018.

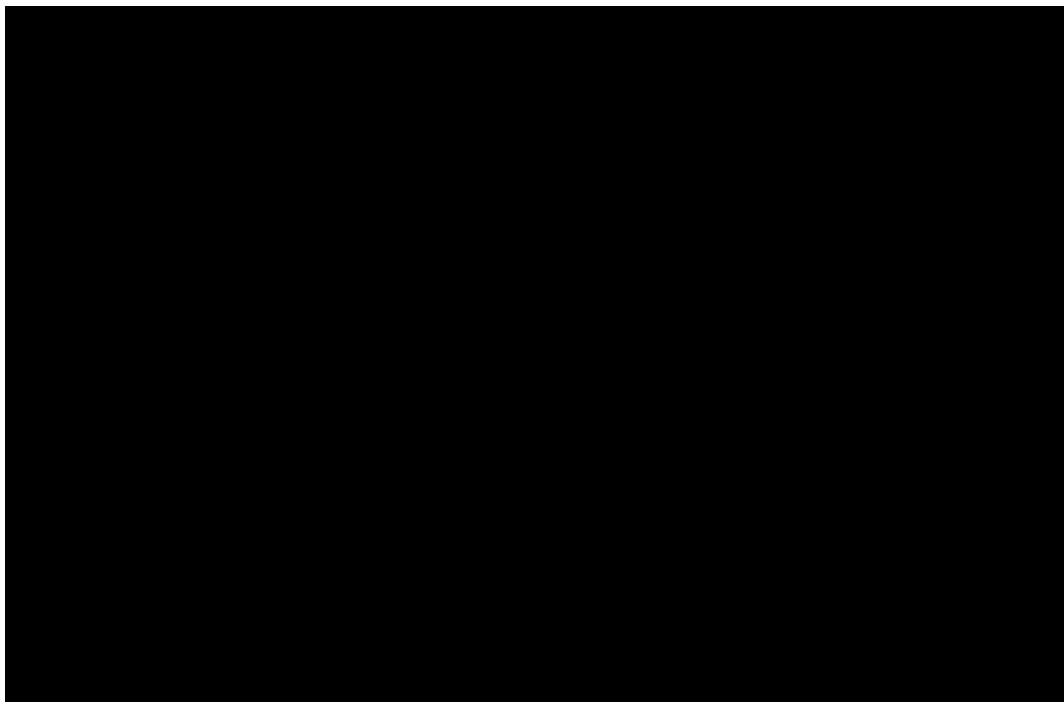


Figure 55. First autonomous lesbian protest. On the banner: “heterosexuality is to patriarchy as the wheel is to the bicycle”. Paris, 21 June 1980. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1980.htm>. Last accessed: 23 July 2018.

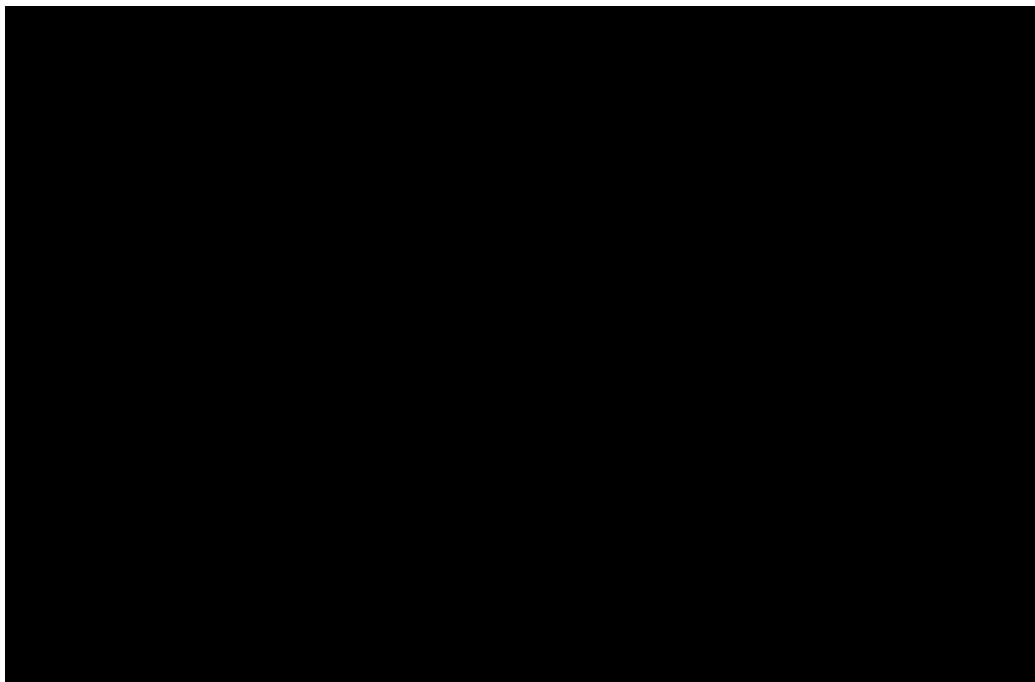


Figure 56. First autonomous lesbian protest. On the banner: “lesbians radical, offensive and united to the end”. Paris, 21 June 1980. Photographer: Martine Laroche. Source: <http://caminare.free.fr/1980.htm>. Last accessed: 23 July 2018.

Yet, feminists fervently resisted these critiques. When lesbians raised the question of the “stifling [in the MLF] of a lesbian political orientation” at a feminist meeting on 6 June 1980 and demanded “clarifications regarding past and *silenced* conflicts [...] that seemed to be sharply resurfacing”, “the very stormy debate culminated in insults” (LFR/CQFD 1982 [1981]: 34, emphasis LFR/CQFD’s, my translation). The (certainly problematic) comparison of heterosexual women to Nazi-era collaborators and kapos two weeks later sparked a storm of protest in the feminist movement, which entirely turned against radical lesbians, calling them “sectarian” (de Beauvoir 1982 [1981]: 111; Claudio et al. 2010a [1981]: 16; Deudon 1981: 83), “chauvinistic” (Deudon 1981: 83), “Stalinist” (Claudie et al. 2010b [1981]: 16), “totalitarian”, “terrorist” (Nouvelles questions féministes 1981: 7) and “crazy” (Monique [Plaza] 2010 [1981]: 27). Radical lesbians were eventually excluded from a radical feminist encounter held in Caen from 31 October to 2 November 1980, on the grounds of their “division” of the movement, their “dogmatism and [...] their practice as a monolithic group” (in Des lesbiennes radicales de Jussieu du mouvement de lesbiennes radicales 1982 [1980]: 20, my translation).

Importantly, it must be noted that if the history of the French Resistance against fascist

violence enabled radical lesbians to signify the violence of heterosexual power, this (problematic) strategy also drew on feminism's own unthinkable whiteness (which had operationalized the subjugation of lesbians through racialization). Just as the lesbian discourses analysed in the previous section claimed that lesbians were emancipated to the extent that they were not confined in the “original [Jewish and Black] ghetto” (Groupe des lesbiennes féministes 1987 [1976]: 21), so the metaphorization of the history of racial oppression through the association of heterosexual women with the perpetuation of racialized violence repeated the unthinkable of racial oppression as a condition for the establishment of (white) political subjectivities. Further, the homogenization of all men as enemies and rapists was also a direct effect of this structural whiteness and inattentiveness to the history of racial violence (Carby 1982; Davis 1982; Hull et al. 1982), foreclosing lesbians of colour from the lesbian community at the very moment a lesbian political subjectivity was brought into being.

The few works on MLF history which address this radical lesbian movement consistently repeat the terms within which feminists discredited radical lesbians in the early 1980s (Lasserre 2014; Martel 1999; Picq 1993, 2011; Pipon 2013). In particular, historian Colette Pipon argues that radical lesbians, whom she calls an “aggressive minority” (2013: 205, my translation) whose “hatred [of men] prevented any sort of dialogue and [...] progress” (201), exemplified a “misandrist fundamentalism” into which they had “fallen” (184): “[t]hese women could not bear any relationships with men; for them, everything that had to do with men was somehow compromised, and thus heterosexuals were so as well” (184). Against this normalized contempt for radical lesbianism (which has led to their erasure from the French feminist legacy), I propose an alternative reading of their “civil war” – one that builds on a theory of citationality and melancholia rather than depoliticizing psychologism, arguing that radical lesbians embodied the angry return of feminism’s repressed ghost.

“How can we organize our offensive against the class of men without an expectation of better days to come?” (Des lesbiennes radicales [...] 1982 [1980]: 21, my translation) radical lesbians asked in 1980. As the question attests, the actualization of a temporality of emergency *within* the enunciative present of women’s heteronormative liberal temporality enabled lesbians to finally politicize lesbianism as a feminist position. “[Because] we are in a state of sex war”, they said, “we have concrete obligations to meet” (LFR/CQFD 1982 [1981]: 35, my translation): in other words, in a state of sex war, one *must* be a lesbian in

order to be a resistant (and hence feminist) subject. I argue that the actualization of a temporality of emergency, which supported the postulation of a sex war against the class of men, was the *only* way for lesbians to counter the MLF's liberal temporality of “better days to come” in which women were *necessarily* framed as ultimately becoming reconciled with men through heterosexuality. If, in the civil temporality of women's liberation, the lesbian was inevitably framed as a backwards subject, it was therefore only through the establishment of a belligerent temporality that she could become political and overturn heterosexuality as a regime of power rather than the most cherished gift of French democracy. In other words, “war” is the time and space of the politicization of lesbianism in the context of French feminism's heterosexual democracy. Hence, the radicality of expressions such as “this man is a rapist, this man is a man” or “hetero-collabo” can be read not (only) as a sign of lesbian extremism, but (also) as the outcome of the impossibility of critiquing heterosexuality within the terms of French feminism's (heteronormative) liberal and democratic order.

Of course, the 1980 French radical lesbian who was waging a sex war against men in a new temporality of emergency had not come out of nowhere (particularly not out of hysteria, misandry or madness): she was feminism's own progeny. By means of their melancholic attachments to feminism's lesbian losses, radical lesbians *occupied* the “temporality of the ‘synchronous in the structure of the ‘splitting of modernity’’” (Bhabha 2004 [1994]: 345): the temporality of the pre-modern “hysterical dyke”, which had been produced by feminists themselves as a self-legitimizing technique of women's (heteronormative and colonial) modernity. Since the MLF's democratic order endlessly naturalized the heterosexual norm through the myth of lesbian tyranny (as opposed to heterosexual reconciliation), by occupying the space-time of lesbian tyranny, radical lesbians could point instead to the (invisibilized) violence of feminism's heterosexual norm. From the position of their undemocratic space-time, radical lesbians turned the logic of feminism's democratic heterosexuality upside down: they displaced onto heterosexuality and men the tyrannical violence which feminism's heterosexual contract had attributed to lesbians.

In so doing, radical lesbians performed the return of the “hysterical dykes” (Anon 1973c: 2) from “before the movement” (Anon. 1980a: 22; Deudon 1981: 83) *within* the MLF's modernity. Feminists who became enraged when radical lesbians used the expression “hetero-collabo” forgot that for the previous ten years lesbians had been epistemically defined as fascist and extremist separatists waging a tyrannical war against society, and did not see that

the lesbians, from that very site of unassimilability, were hurling the accusation of fascism back at the system that had defined them as such. In that sense, the radical lesbian originated from the MLF's assimilationist doctrine (and drew on its racialized logic). She had been there all along as an impossible ghost who eventually turned feminism's own violence against it to politicize what had been made unpoliticizable. She *is* the deferred return (*Nachträglichkeit* in Freud's terminology) of the buried and prohibited "hysterical and lesbian [shrew]" (de Beauvoir 1977: 7) waging "a 'sex war' between separate communities" (Anon. 1969: 4) upon whom the MLF's subject "women" was self-legitimized as modern and political. She is, in other words, a figure of resistance that takes the MLF's abject political signifier "hysterical dyke" (the irrational lesbian who wages war against men) as a performative. Since women's (heterosexual) modernity in the MLF was dependent upon the iteration of a lesbian pre-modern temporality for its own success, it was always susceptible to breakage by this interruptive temporality and its hysterical subject.

The radical lesbian is a discursive effect and subversive repetition of the MLF's prohibition of lesbianism within the terms of discursive legitimacy. From this perspective, radical lesbians' melancholic agency is neither an ontology nor an essentialism, but an undoing that "penetrates, occupies, and redeploys [...] the paternal language itself" (Butler 2011 [1993]: 19), "an insubordination that appears to take place within the very terms of the original" (18). Radical lesbians' theatricalization of the "hysterical dyke" in the streets of Paris in 1982 (see Figures 46–52 above), like the 1990s reappropriation of the performative "queer", "[f]ar from [being] an essentialist joke, [...] mimes and exposes both the binding power of the heterosexualizing law *and its expropriability*" (Butler 2011 [1993]: 177, emphasis Butler's) *within* the terms of French feminism. As a citational rearticulation of feminism's heterosexual order, perhaps, the radical lesbian can be retrieved from the condescension with which she has been treated in the history of the MLF, and instead can be conceived as a critical resource in the process of exposing, denaturalizing and disrupting heterosexuality's self-grounding democratic presumptions and symbolic legitimacy in the French universalist regime.

When Wittig wrote that "lesbians are not women", she was not, in my view, promoting a "hierarchy among women" (Picq 2011: 377) as feminists contended. I suggest instead that she was unearthing the MLF's unspeakable secret: that for feminists, lesbians had never been women. In that regard, she was not promoting lesbian separatism but describing the original feminist heterosexual separatism for which lesbians were not women. She exhumed and

enlivened the traumatic “lesbien” who had haunted feminist discourses all along. If melancholia, as Freud explains (1957 [1917]), stems from the impossibility of recognizing a loss and hence of mourning it, then by exposing feminism’s secret (or lie of assimilation), Wittig made possible the recognition and mourning of feminism’s lesbian losses. Thus, Wittig’s “lesbien” is a “narcissistic scar” (Freud 1957 [1917]: 253) that bears the vivid memory of feminist injuries and lets the pain of the abandonment of the ideal of assimilation remain as an “irrefutable mark” (Khanna 2008: 27). Like her “absurdly sarcastic” (Devarrieux 1999: iii) laughter when she thought up the title *Le corps lesbien*, Wittig’s exhumation of feminism’s “lesbien” manifests the recovery in the here and now of feminist politics of an abject residue which had been brought to life as a prohibition and condemned to live on as the sign of a perpetual feminist anachronism.

Thus, in staunch disagreement with Pipon, who argues that the demise of the MLF in the early 1980s was due to the “deadlock” of radical lesbians’ “hatred” towards men (2013: 175, my translation), I contend that the MLF did not survive the re-entry into symbolization of its traumatic, unrepresentable and psychotic lesbian signifier, its “obscene underside” (Žižek 2000: 220) or “impossible within the possible” (Butler 2011 [1993]: 180). In other words, the truth according to which lesbians were not women *had* to remain secret for the MLF’s woman identification to (precariously) succeed. If the emergence of a movement of radical lesbians “devastated the [feminist] movement” (La revue d’en face 1981: 66, my translation), it was because it manifested the melancholic re-emergence of “the ghost of assimilation” (Khanna 2008: 145), triggering a narcissistic crisis in the ideal of feminism’s community of “women”. Thus, the radical lesbian figure can also be retrieved from the dustbin of history in which she has been held captive, as an alternative model for feminist politics: one where “the lie of the assimilationist model that has turned difference into a phantom is reconstituted [...] as a lived political memory” (Khanna 2008: 166). This model would take lesbian melancholia as a resistance to the amnesiac French feminist mourning of differences, as a historical consciousness that keeps faith with the traumas of erasure by demanding reparations in the present: “[i]n this way we do not simply remember to forget, but we take remembering seriously as an imaginative and a political act” (Khanna 2008: 166).

Although Wittig’s startling and counter-intuitive contention that “lesbians are not women” presented itself to radical feminists as a complete non-sense – if not as proof of her alleged paranoiac tendencies – by unearthing the lost object of lesbian melancholia, Wittig’s phrase

inaugurated a new hospitable logic of meaning in which lesbians who clung to their lesbian difference could finally recognize themselves: “total agreement at first reading” (Robichon, interview, 16 August 2016); “for me, it illuminated everything, it made sense” (Wolman, interview, 8 April 2016). If, for most of the lesbians who had founded the MLF, it was their transmutation from “dirty dykes” into “women in revolt” (Anon. 1971c: 3) that had instilled affects of relief and happiness, by undoing women Wittig authorized another kind of relief, one which had been prohibited by feminism’s compulsory woman identification: the lesbian joy of not having to become a woman. For a young lesbian activist like Barbara Wolman, who marched in her first Gay Pride in 1983 at the age of eighteen, and who never felt like joining feminist groups:

I have never felt like a woman [...]. When you don’t identify with this image of a woman and a girl... Perhaps it is as simple as that... You like this sentence by Wittig. [...] Because I think it is not all about big political ideas, there are also things as simple as, I don’t know, affinities, or things that make more sense... [...] I think I did not define myself as a feminist because I did not feel like a woman (Wolman, interview, 8 April 2016, my translation).

It was this counter-relief, I suggest, which enabled lesbians to finally grieve for feminism’s lesbian losses and detach themselves from feminism as a lost object of love. Wittig’s commitment to negativity and unintelligibility, which her lesbian figure paradigmatically exemplifies, was forged through the painful ten-year history of lesbians’ failure to become women in the MLF. Wittig’s “lesbien” bears witness to that failed history while transforming the suffering into a new utopian consciousness for feminism – a “shadow feminism” “grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence, and silence [...] which has nestled in more positivist accounts and unravelled their logics from within” (Halberstam 2011: 124). The transformation of the trauma of unassimilability into unpredictable hospitality, perhaps, is a way of reading the following extract from Wittig’s *Paris-la-politique*:

I watch the pile of manure on which I have resided for years being transformed into roses, as in Genet’s Miracle. [...] The detritus I collect in my hands is filled with fragrance and secretly transformed into so many petals torn from thousands of flowers (1985: 34, my translation).

It is of course no coincidence that the language with which radical lesbians were discredited as “crazy”, “terrorist” or “totalitarian” was the exact same language with which Wittig’s Front lesbien had been nipped in the bud only six years earlier as a “kind of radical violence” (interview) which did not make any rational sense. Feminists who fervently attacked radical lesbians in 1980 were not defending themselves against terrorist lesbians who “could not bear any relationships with men” (Pipon 2013: 184), but were preserving their position of power in the MLF by displacing – as in 1974 – the violence of their own heterosexual separatism onto those who were exposing it. As one radical lesbian remarked at the time of the controversy:

Of course some radical lesbians were violent: one does emerge from years of silence in groups with heterofeminist ideology without screaming. [...] [The feminists] were the conductors of the cacophony that followed: they had to demonstrate fast that there was no fundamental debate, that it was simply a problem of craziness (“radical paranoiacs” as [one of them] said), of disturbed personalities, political missteps. [...] All of our attempts to speak have ended in failure. I despise these feminists who make use of one of the worst forms of power: the disqualification of a person with the adjective “crazy” (Monique [Plaza] 2010 [1981]: 27, my translation).

In the French heteronormative episteme, lesbians who denounced the naturalized heterosexual norm on which feminism was established could only be read as paranoiac and crazy – while the (dare I say paranoiac?) fantasy of the repression of heterosexuals by hegemonic lesbians remained the “truth” of the MLF. Even when radical lesbians made the issue of heterosexual power inescapable after ten years of repression, thereby inaugurating a “critical analytical moment” (Gordon 2011: 3), French feminists persisted in their national allegiance to blindness. As they rightly noted: “[i]t is easier to point the finger at a few people than *to answer the questions that radical lesbianism raises*” (Des lesbiennes radicales [...] 1982 [1980]: 25, emphasis Des lesbiennes radicales’, my translation). With the exception of the recent rediscovery in France of Wittig’s theoretical writings (see conclusion), the legacy of this movement of radical lesbians is non-existent.

3. The *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* Trial: The Final Eradication of Lesbian Theory

The explosion of the latent antagonism between heterosexuality and lesbianism in the MLF took a dramatic turn when, in the context of the emergence of a movement of radical lesbians,

a violent schism occurred within the eight-member editorial collective of the materialist feminist journal *Questions féministes* (Feminist Issues), in which Wittig's contentious articles "La pensée straight" and "On ne naît pas femme" were published in February and May 1980. In the summer of 1980, the editorial collective split into two irreconcilable groups. One group, composed of Monique Wittig (from the US), the sociologists Noëlle Bisserset and Colette Guillaumin, the anthropologist Nicole-Claude Mathieu and the psychology researcher Monique Plaza, conceived of lesbians as non-women, according to the now-famous definition laid out by Wittig in "One Is Not Born a Woman":

Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex (woman and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, [...] a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual (Wittig 1992: 20, emphasis Wittig's).

Since the lesbian eschews the heterosexual institution in which sexual categories are produced, she is, according to Wittig, Bisserset, Guillaumin, Mathieu and Plaza, a conceptually more coherent subject position for materialist feminism, whose aim is precisely the eradication of sexual difference. Hence, from 1980 onwards, they identified as lesbians instead of women.

The other group, composed of the sociologists Christine Delphy and Claude Hennequin and the writer Emmanuèle de Lesseps, fervently refused this epistemological rupture and continued to support the coherence of feminism's universal subject "women". They condemned political lesbians for betraying the original feminist solidarity between all women by refusing to "think community and difference together" in a "common conceptual framework for all situations of conflict" (Nouvelles questions féministes 1981: 12, my translation). Their positions were based on de Lesseps' response to "La pensée straight", "Hétérosexualité et féminisme", in which she defended the (heteronormative) necessity of "daily guerrilla warfare" (1980a: 63) on the terrain of heterosexuality and defined lesbianism as "voluntary desertion" of this "global" struggle (63). Although it was the effect of a naturalized heterosexual hegemony that reiterated all the techniques by which lesbianism had been made unpoliticizable throughout the 1970s, this text was universalist (rather than anti-lesbian), according to Delphy, Hennequin and de Lesseps, while lesbian positions were

“terrorist and totalitarian” (*Nouvelles questions féministes* 1981: 7, my translation) because they allegedly sought to “eliminate heterosexual women from feminist ranks” (8) (rather than politicizing lesbianism in the context of an unnameable heterosexual separatism). The entire radical feminist movement (made up of lesbians and heterosexuals) also supported de Lesseps’ text as universalist and feminist, against (selfish, anti-feminist and paranoiac) lesbian “separatists”.

Unable to find any common ground – especially after the 22 June 1980 radical lesbian encounter during which heterosexual women were accused of “collaborating” with the enemy – on 24 October 1980 the editorial collective signed an agreement to terminate the journal. In the agreement, all members agreed “not to publish in future another journal bearing the title ‘Questions féministes’” (LFR/CQFD 1982 [1981]: 37, my translation). However, a few months later, in February 1981 – and this is when the story took a dramatic turn – despite this agreement, Christine Delphy, Claude Hennequin and Emmanuèle de Lesseps – who had rejected the other members’ suggestion of publishing a final issue in which to publicly air their ideological debate – announced the creation of a new journal with the barely altered name *Nouvelles questions féministes* (New Feminist Issues), of which Simone de Beauvoir was the renewed director of publications. Immediately after the announcement, Wittig, Bisserset, Guillaumin, Mathieu and Plaza, who at that point were calling themselves “radical feminist lesbians of the former QF collective” (LFR/CQFD 1982 [1981]: 32), “DEMAND[ED] THE IMMEDIATE REMOVAL OF THE DESIGNATION ‘NOUVELLES QUESTIONS FEMINISTES’” (*Les lesbiennes de l’ex-collectif Questions féministes* 1981 [1982]: 27, my translation). As they explained in a long letter addressed to the feminist movement on 1 March 1981, the reshaping of *Questions féministes* into *Nouvelles questions féministes*, whereby the latter was incorrectly assumed to be a continuation of the former, was an “appropriation of the journal” (LFR/CQFD 1982 [1981]: 37) by those who rejected lesbian theory. Indeed, both the “radical feminists” (Delphy, de Lesseps and Hennequin) and the “lesbians” (Bisserset, Guillaumin, Mathieu, Plaza and Wittig) claimed that they were continuing the journal’s original radical feminist line. While the former argued that radical lesbianism was “incompatible with a radical feminist perspective” (*Nouvelles questions féministes* 1981: 3) insofar as it sought, in their view, to establish hierarchies among women, the latter argued instead that the “political lesbian current” they were developing, “far from contradicting [radical feminism], enabled its deepening” (LFR/CQFD 1982 [1981]: 36). Thus, to the extent that both groups laid claim to radical feminism, the fact that *one* of the groups

had created a journal which gave the impression of being a continuation of *Questions féministes* was indeed a “COUP DE FORCE” (Les lesbiennes de l'ex-collectif *Questions féministes* 1981 [1982]: 26) with a view to denying the antagonism and thus expelling those who held a recently defined lesbian position from the only space where radical feminist theory was produced. As Bisseret, Guillaumin, Mathieu, Plaza and Wittig explain:

[T]he two parts of the collective continue to lay claim to [Questions féministes]’ editorial and its political project. To reclaim the title, as do those who claim to be called “Nouvelles questions féministes” today, it is thus to posit oneself as the only holder of the [Questions féministes] “line” (LFR/CQFD 1982 [1981]: 32, my translation).

In a private letter sent to Simone de Beauvoir in February 1981, Monique Wittig, who was actively participating in the heated discussions from the US, implored her to stay away from this “dishonest operation” that was seeking to “[eliminate] five lesbians from a space where feminist theory is elaborated”:

Dear Simone de Beauvoir,

I ask you in all justice not to give your name to this dishonest operation: the continuation of *Questions féministes* at the cost of a purge of five people out of seven, under cover of a “new” journal, with the same editor, the same subscribers, the same director of publications (you) and an almost unchanged title. [...] [F]acts are facts: eliminating five lesbians from a space where feminist theory is elaborated on the pretext that *their* lesbianism is not in keeping can hardly be taken for a pro-lesbian practice (Wittig 1981b: 1, emphasis Wittig’s, my translation).

In a similar tone of alarm, Monique Wittig “begged” her allies from *Questions féministes*’ former editorial collective to form a “united front to save [lesbianism and feminism]” by not abandoning the fight against Delphy, de Lesseps and Hennequin’s expropriation of political lesbians of feminist theory:

[T]he reason I write all of this to you is to beg you not to surrender [Questions féministes] into the hands of this ‘tendency’ [the radical feminists] which for me (believe my sad experience and my current exile) is no better than Psychépo. The

problem for feminists is not Psychépo, it is [radical] feminists. [...] [A]bove all, it is not only detrimental to lesbianism to abandon [*Questions féministes*] to them, it is also detrimental to feminism. That is why I beg you in both their names to form among the four of you a united front to save them in [*Questions féministes*] – and elsewhere. [...] And all of you, you must absolutely forget your differences [...], use my voice as much as you can (Wittig 1981a: 9–10, my translation).

In the letters to both Beauvoir and her *Questions féministes* allies, Wittig's pleas are accompanied by detailed archaeological renarrativizations of her experience in the MLF from the standpoint of her political elimination. Wittig's poignant supplications appear to me like the messianic cries of an ostracized subject who *knows* exactly what is happening from the standpoint of her exile – because it happened to her before, when no one was paying attention. In her scathing letter to Simone de Beauvoir, she continues in this vein:

For ages in the “movement” in Paris it has been lesbians who have purged other lesbians – as feminists [...] (homosexuals in the closet of feminism). I myself was the object of one of these purges – so interesting from a sociological perspective – in 1974. And should we try to politically form a lesbian front, here they come, screaming bloody murder: “It’s obsolete”. “It was solved ages ago” (certainly since the Gouines rouges). “You are trying to cut feminists off from ‘other’ women” (“other” women: dumb-bells who cannot understand). And also: “there is no need for a lesbian front in France since all feminists are lesbians”. Which basically means: we will do everything we can to prevent you from existing. And they do, as the current [*Questions féministes*] affair testifies. And finally, among the feminists in Paris it’s they who are the legitimate ones, and as for us, we’re crazies (Wittig 1981b: 1–2, my translation).

Wittig knows the truth on which the MLF was founded: that (heterosexual) women were always already “rational and calm” (Beauvoir 1977: 7), “the legitimate ones”, and lesbians “crazies”. She knows that the MLF’s epistemology is the smartest and most insidious lesbian closet ever invented – it is, as she says, “the closet of feminism”, which under cover of the “women” sign does “everything [it] can to prevent [lesbians] from existing”. She also knows the tragedy: that seeking to dismantle the epistemology of the closet can only confirm the truth on which it is built – that “women” are the “legitimate ones”, while “lesbians” can only be “crazies”. In these alarming letters, Wittig renarrativizes her experience in the MLF from

the standpoint of her “purge” because she knows history is repeating itself. And as such, she knows (unlike most feminists at the time) that the controversy has nothing to do with a clash of personalities, hatred, irrationality, sectarianism or extremism, but that it is the public manifestation of a political antagonism at the heart of the French feminist movement. She also knows this is either the last chance to save feminism from the straight mind’s ideology or the straight mind’s very last victory over French feminism. Wittig is aware that this is a historic moment to reckon with a ten-year-old lesbian ghost. She is fighting to provide hospitality to the ghost; she is fighting for the possibility of a lesbian and non-heteronormative future for feminism in France. It is, as she says, “in both their names” – feminism and lesbianism – that she is begging Bisserset, Guillaumin, Mathieu and Plaza not to surrender.

Yet, if Wittig saw this conflict as the very last opportunity to grant hospitality to lesbianism within French feminism, this was certainly not the case for the other feminists, who decided to turn away once and for all from the demand that was being pressed upon them. Beauvoir, in particular, categorically refused to engage with the lesbian ghost manifested to her in Wittig’s letter. Faced with the refusal of *Nouvelles questions féministes*’ editors to change the name of the journal, Bisserset, Guillaumin, Mathieu, Plaza and Wittig ended up taking legal action in September 1981 against Delphy, Hennequin and de Lesseps over their infringement of the 24 October 1980 agreement. On the day of the trial, on 14 October 1981, Simone de Beauvoir testified in court in support of the defendants. Martine Laroche, a former radical lesbian and close friend of Wittig, vividly remembers Beauvoir’s testimony as “awful”, “shameful” and “disgraceful” (interview, 15 April 2016). Some other radical lesbians called it “hair-raising” (Monique [Plaza] 2010 [1981]: 25).

Beauvoir’s testimony relies on two rhetorical strategies by which she crushes the legitimacy of lesbian theory (strategies upheld as a whole by Parisian feminists against political lesbians). The first consists in upholding the universalist idea of an “*oppression common to all women*” (de Beauvoir 1982 [1981]: 110, emphasis Beauvoir’s, my translation): taking this positivist approach, which fantasizes a neutral starting point where all women are equal, Beauvoir finds it “scandalous” that the lesbian plaintiffs “prioritized their sectarian interests” in the journal over the “general feminist interest” (111). In so doing, Beauvoir reiterates the myth of women’s sameness with which the visibilization of lesbian difference was prohibited throughout the 1970s as an inevitable egotistical fragmentation of abstract feminist unity. Since they dared to speak in the name of their lesbian “particularity”, and as such refused to

remain in the subaltern position to which the MLF's heterosexual universality assigned them, Beauvoir describes them as “self-important”, “arrogant” and “dishonest” (111). Their positions, “in formal contradiction with the principles of a common destiny and solidarity among all women”, are “unacceptable”, “revolting”, even “anti-feminist” (111), and she is “outraged at [their] attitude” (112). In fact, as Wittig makes perfectly clear in an incandescent article in which she returns to this whole affair, published in 1983 and astutely entitled “Feminist Issues Are Not Lesbian Issues” (*Les questions féministes ne sont pas des questions lesbiennes*): “[a]nd here we are, we lesbians, forbidden to aim for universality from a theoretical standpoint, to which we are as entitled as any feminist” (Wittig 1983: 10, my translation).

A similar line was taken in the feminist journal *La revue d'en face* (where the article on American lesbian “tribes” had previously been published), which in early 1981 devoted a special issue to “heterosexuality and lesbianism”. All the contributions to the issue stood against Wittig, whom they accused of promoting a “separatist argument” (Dhavernas 1981: 93). And yet none of the *Questions féministes* lesbians considered themselves separatist. Wittig herself refused the epithet. In a letter to Adrienne Rich, she writes: “[a]s you can see [...] I was not yet aware that the new label used against us was ‘lesbian separatists’ (none of us is)” (n. d. [circa 1981c]: 3). By accusing Wittig of separatism, French feminists concealed and renaturalized their own unthinkable heterosexual separatism. As Wittig compellingly responded to these “heterofeminist” accusations of lesbian separatism: “it was not the fact of *calling* ourselves lesbians that ‘separated’ us from other women, but *being so without saying so* (cf. the movement’s closet)” (Wittig 1980d: 2, emphases Wittig’s).

The second rhetorical strategy on which Beauvoir’s delegitimization of lesbian theory hinges is her outright denial of the rupture of intelligibility produced by the appearance of lesbian theory (it was on the basis of the same denial that *Nouvelles questions féministes*’ editors claimed to be continuing *Questions féministes*). Beauvoir contends that Bisserset, Guillaumin, Mathieu, Plaza and Wittig sought to “change the political orientations of the journal” while Delphy, Hennequin and de Lesseps guaranteed instead a “political continuity between the two journals” (de Beauvoir 1982 [1981]: 111). Laying claim to a “political continuity” against a “change” of “political orientation”, she conceives of the “event” of lesbian theory as a “birth, in the plenitude of its presence” (Fassin 2009: 195, my translation) – “it is *another* line”, writes Emmanuèle de Lesseps (de Lesseps 1980b: 5, emphasis de Lesseps’, my translation) –

rather than as revealing a “malfunction” or “fault” (Fassin 2009: 197) in the previous regime of intelligibility. In fact, the editors of *Nouvelles questions féministes* could not claim to be continuing the original line, for the simple reason that there was no original any more: it *had become*, for some, “heterofeminist” *in the meantime*. As Fassin explains, when a new “logic of sense” (Deleuze 1990 [1969]) arises, new rules of intelligibility are supposed to be progressively established so that people can speak the same language again (2009: 189–226). Claiming “continuity” with an original line, Beauvoir and the editors of *Nouvelles questions féministes* prevented any such accommodation to the “new cultural language” (Fassin 2009: 199) from taking place. In other words, they refused to recognize the rupture of intelligibility performed by lesbian theory (which would not have meant agreeing with it), and they thereby precluded its inclusion within feminist theory. By “evok[ing] a direct line of descent between the two journals” and unabashedly laying claim to “[their] inalienable right to seek to continue [...] a work undertaken since 1977, way before most of the plaintiffs joined the editorial collective” (de Beauvoir 1982 [1981]: 112), they buried lesbian theory as if it had never come into existence – as if the plaintiffs had never been part of the collective.

On 8 December 1981, the Paris high court dismissed Wittig, Bisserset, Guillaumin, Mathieu and Plaza’s demands. While it seems that the conditions for reckoning with the lesbian spectre had manifested themselves in 1980 in the mode of a critical urgency as an *après-coup* effect, the reshaping of *Questions féministes* into *Nouvelles questions féministes* eradicated lesbian theory from the domain of French feminism once and for all, with the pivotal complicity of Simone de Beauvoir and the support of the entire French feminist movement. Monique Wittig barely published in France after that. Thus, it sealed the final victory of “heterofeminism”, of which Wittig gave the following definition in 1983 – explicitly referring to de Lesseps’ article “Hétérosexualité et féminisme”:

The primary meaning of [the] word [heterofeminism] [...] is: a feminist (it can be a female homosexual) who, for reasons of fear or interest, rejects lesbianism as theory, politics and practice, excludes it from feminism, about which she asserts the heterosexual line (“heterofeminism”: strange to her ears). A heterofeminist can only define herself as such in order to exclude lesbians from feminism. And so the theoretical meaning of this word is, indeed [...]: a feminist who campaigns for heterosexuality (Wittig 1983: 13, my translation).

The conceptual vacancy of lesbian theory haunts contemporary feminist debates in France on many fronts (see conclusion). The journal *Nouvelles questions féministes* still exists, and Christine Delphy remains its editorial director to this day.

As clearly appears in the special issue of *La revue d'en face* on “heterosexuality and lesbianism”, both strategies – considering lesbian theory as separatist, and dismissing the rupture of intelligibility it performed with regard to radical feminism’s claims of objectivity – are meant to enshrine the foundational idea that lesbian difference is an unabstracable difference (as opposed to “women”). In their articles in *La revue d'en face*, both Catherine Deudon (a lesbian radical feminist) and Marie-Jo Dhavernas (a heterosexual radical feminist) assimilate Wittig’s positions to Psychépo’s differentialism (or “féminitude”):

[C]ertain female homosexuals (not all) lay claim to a label of radical distinction whose logical outcome is “Lesbian Separatism”. This ideology (this ideological separatism, which is no longer strategic like the non-mixedness of the [women’s] movement) leads to an aspiration to a Land of the Chosen Ones: the “Lesbian Nation” (of the American Jill Johnston), a bigger version of the ghetto... which leaves patriarchy in place. The Lesbian Nation fundamentally agrees with the Patriarchal Nation on the notion of “Woman” (and its opposite concept, “lesbian as Non-Woman”). [...] This is why, even though I am a female homosexual, in no way do I want this chauvinistic, sexist Lesbian Nation that is an avatar of this sectarian sect’s elsewhere (already seen with Psychépo) made in the “symbolic revolution” (Deudon 1981: 82–83, my translation).⁹⁹

Along similar lines, Marie-Jo Dhavernas writes:

Nothing horrifies me more than this symbiotic identity of women, in whose justification, starting from opposite premises, radical lesbians and the eulogists of féminitude come together [...] I do not seek to deny the divergences between separatism and féminitude, but it is time to see what they have in common (Dhavernas 1981: 90, my translation).

⁹⁹ If the “non-mixedness of the [women’s] movement” is “strategic” – unlike lesbianism’s, which is an “ideological separatism” – it is of course because it is always already imagined as temporary, to be eventually superseded by a final reconciliation with men through heterosexual mixedness.

These responses to Wittig's insights highlight – as I have argued throughout the thesis – that lesbian difference is always already an essentialist difference in the epistemic context of French feminism's heterosexual contract. What "horrifies" Deudon and Dhavernas as "bring[ing] us back to Nature" and to "Woman" (Deudon 1981: 83), "chauvinistic, sexist", "sectarian" and of course "American" has nothing to do with theoretical compatibilities between Wittig and the *féminisme de la difference* (as they claim): it is the fact that the heterosexual, white and male gaze does not democratize lesbians' sexual difference. Wittig's lesbian figure horrifies them as much as American lesbian communes horrified them in 1978, as much as Wittig's *Front lesbien international* horrified them in 1974, as much as the *Gouines rouges* horrified them when they decided to gather as lesbians in 1971, as much as women's sexual difference horrified the male architects of the French Republic in 1789. Feminists are relentlessly horrified because visible lesbians expose not only feminism's lie of assimilation but also, alongside it, the horror of women's undomesticated sexual difference for the French nation, which they displaced onto lesbians. I suggest that it is exactly this essentialist horror that Wittig refers to when she talks about the "thundering", "terrifying", "too naked and too terrible" word "lesbians" in her 1983 article:

[D]oesn't the "feminist" in "feminist-lesbians" constitute a small sign of submission to heterosexualism with a view to making the thundering "lesbians" digestible, pacified? The word "lesbians", when used alone, terrifies, it is too naked and too terrible a word, one has to dress it up. Well, for me that word alone is enough. I won't even attach to it the decent "radical" (Wittig 1983: 11, my translation).

Lesbian difference is inevitably stuck in a primitive state of nature ("too naked and too terrible"): as such, it "terrifies" feminists, for whom sexual difference must be "pacified" and made "digestible" – democratized – through women's availability to the male gaze in order for it to become "universal".

This whole story becomes perhaps even more problematic when we realize that these "heterofeminist" discursive practices of power, wielded to thwart the emerging lesbian politicization of heterosexuality in the early 1980s, are endlessly sustained in the ways in which MLF history is written (and of course remain unacknowledged insofar as that history presents itself as objective). Relying on the (heterosexual) myth of women's sameness, which

inevitably reads lesbian visibility in terms of an unacceptable separatism, Françoise Picq describes Wittig's theory as “forg[ing] a new division among women” (2011: 382, my translation). Taking radical lesbians to task for having made “dialogue” “impossible” through the “great violence” of their “misandrist slogans” (2013: 183, my translation), Colette Pipon entirely conceals the ways in which in fact it was originally the *lesbian* “dialogue” that had been made impossible throughout the decade, as I have shown in the thesis. Reiterating the rhetorical strategy by which “heterofeminists” denied the rupture of intelligibility performed by lesbian theory and thus renaturalized the heteronormative foundations of radical feminism, Audrey Lasserre can write that “historically, and contrary to what Wittig says, there was no ‘exclusion’ of political lesbians from feminism by the establishment of a heterosexual line, but a refusal indeed by some feminists [...] to make political lesbianism the new line of (post)feminism” (2014: 538, my translation). As for the sociologist Frédéric Martel, he reproduces the accusations of lesbian essentialism – performatively concealing the MLF’s original heterosexual essentialism – by writing that “Wittig’s militancy” went through “a bewildering about-face”: it “began with the struggle against Psychépo’s ‘féminitude’, out of concern for equality and universalism; it ended in lesbian essentialism, which is neither egalitarian nor universalist. In essence, hers was an exclusively lesbian Psychépo” (1999: 119). Finally, Audrey Lasserre scandalously Americanizes Wittig’s lesbian theory as “foreign” to French feminism to delegitimize it, in direct descent from MLF women’s disqualification of lesbianism as an American particularity:

The translation of [“The Straight Mind”] [...] represents [...] in more ways than one and in a dialectical manner an importation of foreign issues: it is the perspective of a feminist and lesbian who prepared for theoretical and practical war in France and then emigrated to the United States, with input from an American lesbianism that is repositioned on the French scene without further precautions (2014: 474, my translation).

The irony is that while Wittig’s American exile was the consequence of political resistance to her thinking in 1970s French feminism, in a kind of metaleptic inversion (taking the effect for the cause) it here becomes the reason for her supposed cultural unassimilability in France. This inversion conveniently conceals and naturalizes the 1970s and early-1980s political work that eliminated Wittig’s thinking from French feminist politics and theory. Lasserre essentializes French feminism by assuming that some issues would naturally be more

compatible than others with “the French scene”, even though her essentialization is itself the means by which certain issues are *made* thinkable or not. By relying on “the evidence of experience” (Scott 1991) in the MLF archive, and by being unable (like MLF women) to *see* how the heterosexual norm works and how the repression of lesbianism was the very heart of the MLF, these uncritical historiographical narratives turn the history of the MLF upside down. They consolidate over and over again the hegemony of heterofeminism in the domain of French feminist history, politics and theory.

An interesting fact reveals the bias in Lasserre’s culturalist interpretation of the conflict. On 18 January 1982 and with great fanfare, the radical feminists – including Liliane Kandel, Christine Delphy and Catherine Deudon – who had just virulently crushed the legitimacy of lesbian theory invited the American radical feminist Ti-Grace Atkinson to give a lecture on American lesbian separatism, entitled “Feminine Nationalism”, at the prestigious Reid Hall in Paris (see Figure 57). The one-hour talk described American lesbian separatism as “neo-fascist” (1984: 39, my translation), “territorial” (36) and “cultural nationalism” (41) threatening the women’s movement. If for Lasserre Wittig’s Americanness explained French resistance to her insights, it seems that no “further precautions” were required for Atkinson’s insights to be “repositioned on the French scene”. Atkinson’s Americanness was not a problem for French feminists insofar as her views on lesbian separatism supported their own hegemonic positions in France. Indeed, I would even suggest that Atkinson’s Americanness suddenly became an asset: her critique of American lesbian separatism confirmed the supposed un-Frenchness of lesbian politics (as necessarily separatist).

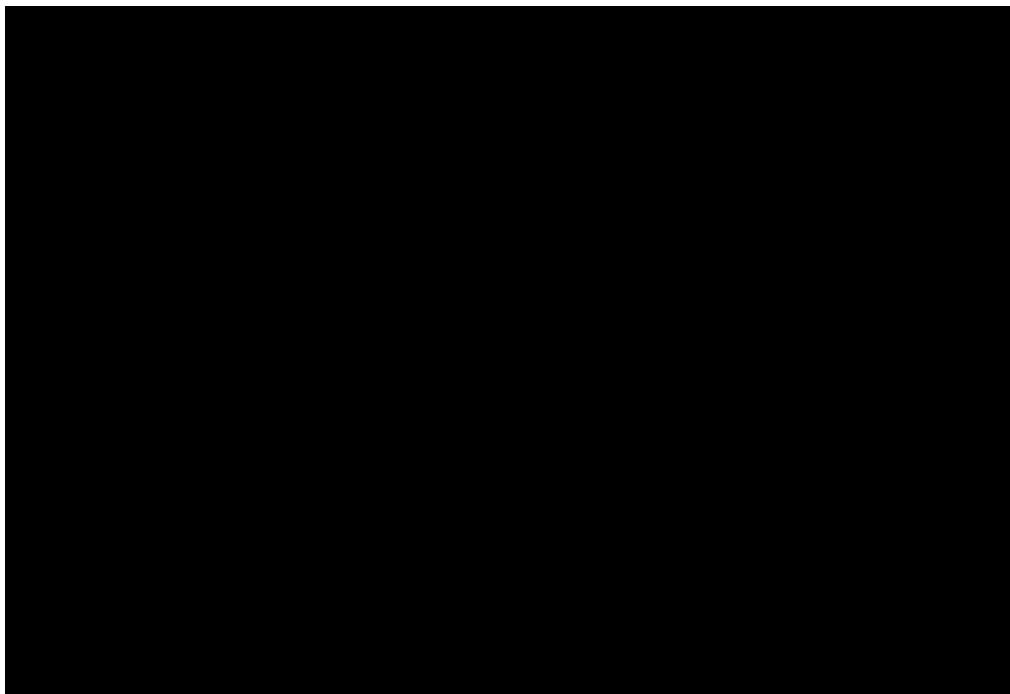


Figure 57. Lecture on “Feminine Nationalism”. Left: Liliane Kandel. Standing: Ti-Grace Atkinson. Reid Hall, Paris campus of Columbia University, 18 January 1982. Photographer: Catherine Deudon.

As I have already argued regarding the Gouines rouges and the Front lesbien international, it is crucial to interrogate what *other* violence the obsessional condemnation of radical lesbians’ “defensive, aggressive, even paranoiac and self-destructive attitudes” (Bard 2004: 117, my translation) and the “totalitarian system” in which an “insidious aristocracy of homosexuality was set in place in the MLF” (Deudon interview in Martel 1999: 138) *enables* at the same time. It is this *other* hegemonic “heterofeminist” violence which I have sought to exhume so far, and which endlessly naturalizes itself through the replacement of its own violence with lesbian violence. In short, it is the violence of the eradication of lesbianism from French feminism and of the perpetual self-legitimization of heterosexuality. As Wittig pithily writes in her 1983 article: “[t]hey separate us while dubbing us separatists. [...] Here is the door slammed in the face of lesbianism by feminism” (1983: 11, my translation). Feeling utterly betrayed by the feminists with whom she had launched the MLF under the Arc de Triomphe in 1970, she concludes her political fable *Paris-la-politique* by bitterly asserting: “there’s nothing for it but to see in these splendid Judases the guérillères of whom I sang in days gone by” (1985: 34, my translation).

On 23 June 1983, 10,000 homosexuals marched in the streets of Paris for the recently

launched annual Gay Pride. Among them – closing a painful, even traumatic chapter in the history of lesbians' relationship with feminism, which left “indelible traces” (Bourcier 2003: 57, my translation) – was a cortege of several thousand lesbians shouting “lesbianism is political”, some of them dressed as Amazons on bikes (see Figure 58). Among them was a new generation of lesbian activists who had inherited – most likely unwittingly – a longstanding paradoxical history that was barely behind them. The following lines from Monique Wittig's *Across the Acheron* could be dedicated to them – to these beautiful dykes en France:

And as I cried out (it's a miracle, Manastabal my guide) a series of dykes appeared, nude on their motorcycles, their skin shining, black or golden, and one after the other they jumped the hill, disappearing into a hedge of flowers (Wittig 1987 [1985] in Crowder 2005: 77).

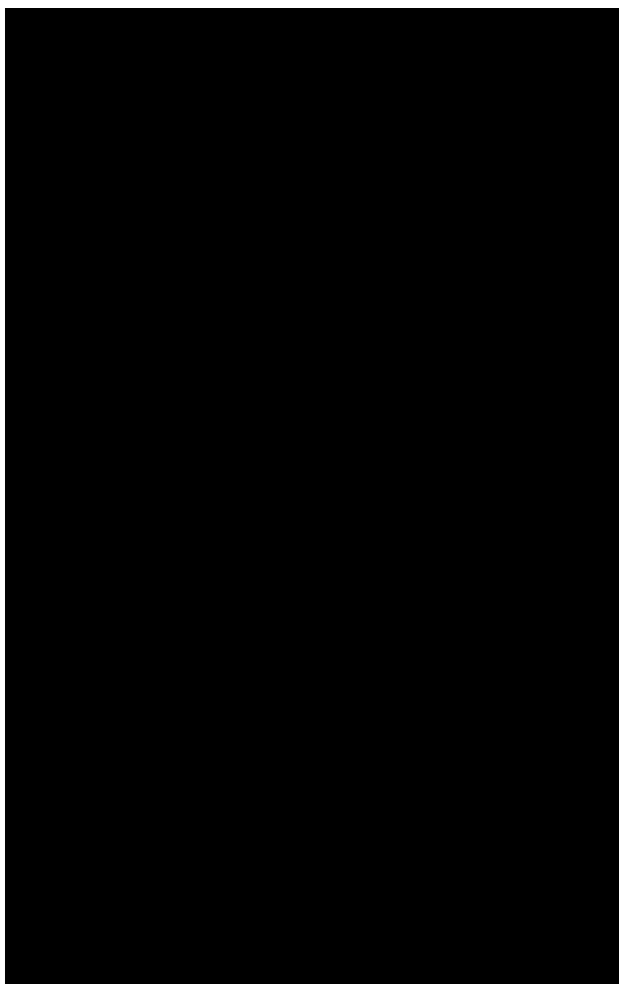


Figure 58. Dykes on bikes opening Paris Gay Pride. On the cardboard sign: “shock lesbos”. 23 June 1983 (photograph reproduced in *Lesbia*, 58, February 1988: 27).

Conclusion

A Feminist Genealogy of French Conservatism

Tucson, Arizona, 1999. Here the wind is as sharp as razor blades slamming at the bottom of the canyon. I am in a Mexican restaurant not far from the university where Monique Wittig teaches. I am waiting for Manastabal, “Wittig”’s guide when she traveled across the Acheron after leaving France in 1976. I can barely see a thing with the dust masking desert horizon and city edges. Manastabal is coming to give me a hand in translating *The Straight Mind* into French (Bourcier 2005: 187).

These are the first lines of French queer theorist and activist Sam Bourcier’s short story “Wittig la Politique”, in which they fictionalize their first encounter with Monique Wittig in Arizona in 1999.¹⁰⁰ If in this thesis I have taken the year 1981 as the end of a decade-long paradox that resulted in the ultimate eradication of lesbian politics and theory from French feminism, the year 1999 – when, in order to translate *The Straight Mind* (1992) back into French, Bourcier reached out to Wittig in the country to which she had fled – certainly marks the beginning of a new story.¹⁰¹ Belonging to a younger generational cohort than MLF women, Bourcier went to the US, as they recount, “to find out [...] a clue, a piece of the puzzle” (2005: 192):

How do you want me to translate *The Straight Mind* without knowing what happened with straight feminism in France? I haven’t traveled up to here to come back home without a single finding. [...] After all, your history is also my history, and I have the right to know (Bourcier 2005: 192).

¹⁰⁰ Manastabal, the fictional character Bourcier substitutes for Wittig, is the guide who escorts the character named “Wittig” out of hell in *Across the Acheron* (Wittig 1987 [1985]).

¹⁰¹ *The Straight Mind* refers to a collection of theoretical essays published in the US in 1992. Among the essays published in *The Straight Mind*, “The Straight Mind” was translated into French in 1980; “One Is Not Born a Woman” was translated into French in 1980; “The Point of View: Universal or Particular” was published in French as “Avant-note” to *La Passion* by Djuna Barnes in 1982; “The Site of Action” was published in French in 1984; and “The Trojan Horse” was published in French in the lesbian journal *Vlasta* in 1985. The other essays in *The Straight Mind* were not translated into French until the translation of the whole book as *La pensée straight* in 2001. With the exception of “The Point of View: Universal or Particular” and “The Site of Action”, all of the essays in *The Straight Mind* were first written and published in English. *La pensée straight* was reissued in 2013 and 2018, indicating a growing interest in Wittig’s thinking in France in recent years.

Seeking to “know” about a history which is also theirs, Bourcier (like me in many ways) went after an old and forgotten history that had become untraceable in France:

France silenced Wittig’s work, and it was in English that some young lesbian activists and theorists like me rediscovered the person who affirmed that “lesbians are not women” [...]. Since then we have been constantly seeking to rekindle this political history, which has not been transmitted to us, and to finally translate *The Straight Mind* into French (Bourcier 2003: 57, my translation).

Embargoed in France at the hands of heterofeminism, Wittigian theory and politics *became*, indeed, American. If in 1970 the production of a pre-modern lesbian temporality was the condition of women’s modernity within the MLF’s discursive legitimacy, in 1980 a new space-and-time opened up across the Atlantic for French lesbian theory and politics. At exactly the moment when lesbianism was being definitively ousted from the domain of French feminism with the reshaping of *Questions féministes* into *Nouvelles questions féministes*, “a clone of *Questions féministes*, *Feminist Issues*, concocted on the West Coast, appeared in Berkeley from 1980 onwards” (Bourcier 2003: 57, my translation). On the editorial board of this new journal, which was originally created to translate *Questions féministes*’ articles into English, we find the five former editorial members of *Questions féministes* who had promoted lesbian theory: Monique Wittig, Noëlle Bisserset, Colette Guillaumin, Nicole-Claude Mathieu and Monique Plaza.¹⁰² As Bourcier observes, if “the heterosexual feminists and closeted lesbians of [...] *Questions féministes* [...] did not want [the] eruption of lesbian politics and thinking in the country of French universalism”, this geographical displacement from France to the United States “reopen[ed] a space of reflection that had been closed down in France” (2003: 57, my translation).¹⁰³ Between the publication in 1980 of the articles “La pensée straight” and “On ne naît pas femme” in *Questions*

¹⁰² *Feminist Issues* was created thanks to Wittig’s intermediation in the US, before the conflict over lesbianism erupted in France and caused the disintegration of *Questions féministes*. At the time of the conflict, the editors of *Feminist Issues*, Mary-Jo Lakeland and Susan Ellis Wolf, stood (unlike French feminists) with *Questions féministes*’ political lesbians, and Wittig was made advisory editor of the journal.

¹⁰³ The articles “The Straight Mind” (1980), “The Point of View: Universal or Particular?” (1980), “One Is Not Born a Woman” (1981), “The Category of Sex” (1982), “The Trojan Horse” (1984), “The Mark of Gender” (1985), “On the Social Contract” (1989) and “Homo Sum” (1990) were all published in *Feminist Issues*.

féministes and the publication in 2001 – thanks to the efforts of Sam Bourcier – of the French translation of her collection of essays *The Straight Mind* (first published in the US in 1992), Wittig almost never published theoretical work or gave lectures in France.¹⁰⁴

It was thus, paradoxically, in English and via the work of American queer and lesbian theorists that Wittig was rediscovered and brought back to France by a new generation of French queer activists and theorists in the late 1990s and early 2000s. As Bourcier observes:

[I]t was [...] through the commentaries of (post)feminist lesbian and/or queer theorists Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler, Linda Zerelli and Namascar Shaktini that I read for the first time commentaries on and fragments of the English version of *The Straight Mind* (2002: 28, my translation).

Not only had the history of 1970s lesbian politics been erased from feminist memory in France – hence Bourcier’s trip to Arizona to reassemble “pieces of the story [...] into place” (Bourcier 2005: 190) – but Monique Wittig’s whole theoretical legacy had also been disabled. Even though Wittig had opened up a new paradigm for feminist theory abroad (especially in the US, via the queer reinterpretations of her work in the early 1990s), and was an acclaimed theorist invited to some of the most prestigious US universities including Cornell, Harvard and the University of California, in France her denaturalization of the straight mind and of the normative relationship between gender and sexuality remained excluded from academic legitimacy, and from feminist studies in particular.

Indeed, at the same time as lesbian politics and theory were definitively being evacuated from the French feminist movement with the controversy surrounding radical lesbianism in Paris, MLF women were taking on the task of institutionalizing feminist research.¹⁰⁵ This process of academic legitimization of feminist knowledges – led by MLF radical feminists who had fervently opposed lesbian theory and radical lesbianism – entailed an unquestioned silencing of knowledges about lesbianism and heterosexuality.¹⁰⁶ France’s first national feminist

¹⁰⁴ See note 101.

¹⁰⁵ On the history of the institutionalization of feminist research in France, see Bard (2003b), Basch et al. (2001), Kandel (2001), Lagrave (1990), Möser (2013), Picq (2005) and Thébaud (2007).

¹⁰⁶ Cornelia Möser makes the same point. She writes: “Lesbian theory almost entirely disappeared from feminist research until 2000” (2013: 86, my translation).

research conference, considered “the almost ritualized birth certificate of the field of women’s studies” (Lagrange 1990: 31, my translation), was organized at the University of Toulouse on 17–19 December 1982 and drew around 800 participants (Picq 2005: 5); of the 144 presentations at this conference, just one single paper discussed lesbianism (AFFER 1984). Entitled “Identity, Politics, Theory: A Wind from the West”, the paper was by a former MLF woman who, referencing Ti-Grace Atkinson, described American lesbian separatism as a “neofascism” which had “paralysed the movement (in the USA, in England, in France...)” (Thévenin 1984: 153, my translation). In line with the paradox of lesbian hostile withdrawal – according to which the lesbian is at once segregated in a world of sexual sameness and waging a hysterical war against society – the author (contradictorily) conceives of lesbian separatism (in fact, lesbianism) as both a “withdrawal into oneself” and a “simple opposition to the oppressor” (155). Thus, lesbianism’s only appearance at this historic conference was a direct descendant of its discursive/epistemic exclusion from MLF legitimacy in the ways that I have explored in this thesis. At the moment when feminism made its prestigious entrance into academia, the pervasiveness of the heterosexual assumption remained unchallenged.

Eight years later, when historians Michelle Perrot and Georges Duby edited the monumental five-volume *A History of Women in the West*, offering “a major crystallization [...] in France [...] of the status of women’s history” (Perrot 1998: xv, my translation), the French heterosexual aphasia persisted: the collection only discussed lesbianism in a section on “dangerous sexualities” in the nineteenth century, and despite its emphasis on gender as a historical construct it did not interrogate the ways in which heterosexuality participates in that historical construction. Another twelve years later, nothing had changed: when feminist researchers sought to organize a symposium on “gender as a category of analysis” at Jussieu University in 2002, “demands to take lesbians” and “all sexual minorities [...] into account [...] went unheeded”, recalls Bourcier (2002: 23, my translation). At another symposium, entitled “Gender and Sexualities: What Research? What Teaching?”, organized by the École normale supérieure on 15–16 March 2002, “no lesbian was able to join the organizing committee, despite repeated explicit requests” (Bourcier 2002: 24, my translation). The “forgetful discursive staging” of these symposiums, Bourcier continues, “reminds us of things in the past”: “it repeats the exclusion of lesbians and of lesbian theory and politics, and the sidelining of Wittig’s work during the 1980s by ‘heterofeminists’ and ‘woman’-identified feminist lesbians” (26–27).

The sociologist Denise Veilleux complained in 1999 that “the field of lesbian studies [had] remained a wasteland in French-speaking academia” (1999: 5). In a similar vein, the French historian of modern homosexuality Florence Tamagne commented in 2000 on the “fragmentation” of lesbian history in France, noting that “many of the studies that focus on homosexuals completely forget about lesbians” (2000: 12). Indeed, by the early 2000s lesbianism remained almost entirely unaddressed in French academia. With the exception of Marie-Jo Bonnet’s pioneering history of “romantic relationships between women” from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, which was originally published in 1981 (and was based on her unfunded PhD thesis) (1995), and Martine Caraglio’s (unpublished) sociological PhD thesis on masculine lesbian identities, which was submitted in 1996, no book-length research on lesbianism as an object of study or from a lesbian epistemic standpoint was conducted in France in the 1980s or 1990s.

With the development of gender and sexuality studies from the early 2000s onwards (Fassin 2004, 2008; Perreau 2016; Révenin 2007; Thébaut 2007), the situation changed slightly. Alongside the retranslation of Wittig into French, a few researchers started to work on the history of female homosexuality (Boehringer 2007a, 2007b, 2010, 2014; Murat 2006; Tamagne 2000) or to conduct sociological research on lesbian kinship (Descoutures 2008, 2010, 2013), lesbian migration (Amari 2012, 2013, 2015, 2018) or cognitive processes of lesbian self-identification (Chetcuti 2010, 2016). Eva Feole’s PhD thesis on Monique Wittig’s literary work, defended in 2017, was the second doctorate to focus exclusively on Monique Wittig after Catherine Rognon-Écarnot’s PhD thesis on Wittig’s poetry, published in 2002 (2002a). In this context, three lesbian studies symposiums were held in 2002, 2010 and 2016 (Chetcuti and Michard 2003; Coordination lesbienne en France 2010; Eloit 2016). A 2009 issue of the peer-reviewed sociology journal *Genre, sexualité et société* (Gender, Sexuality and Society) focused on lesbianism (Chartrain and Chetcuti 2009), and the LGBTQI magazine *Miroir/miroirs* (Mirror/Mirrors) published an issue on the politics of lesbian representation in 2015 (Chetcuti and Quemener 2015; see also Quemener 2014). Yet, despite these developments, Bourcier, Veilleux and Tamagne’s statements from two decades ago remain relevant. Lesbian studies barely exists as a field of research in France, and lesbian perspectives struggle to find their place in feminist, gender and sexuality studies, while receiving little institutional support. As evidence of the lack of academic recognition for lesbian research, two of the three symposiums organized on lesbianism in the last fifteen years were set up by activist organizations, the Coordination lesbienne en France (Lesbian

Coordination in France) and the Paris lesbian archive, rather than by universities. In France, several editorial houses rejected *La pensée straight* before its publication in 2001. As Wittig pithily observed in a 1999 interview with a French journalist:

It was the furthest that I could go in my political thinking, which is not acceptable here, and which is to consider heterosexuality as a regime of power, a regime of domination (Devarrieux 1999: iii).

Wittigian theory's forced dislocation to the US, and its belated return to France after a twenty-year American detour, is the materialization of the impossibility of problematizing heterosexuality "as a regime of power, a regime of domination" in the French universalist regime. As I showed in the first chapter of this thesis, the 1970s revolutionary feminist movement neither forgot to politicize heterosexuality nor (as historians and MLF women contend) joyfully celebrated homosexuality (to such an extent that it supposedly repressed heterosexuals): in fact, the condition of possibility of the MLF was the abjection of lesbianism. In other words, the MLF, epistemically, politically and theoretically, was an anti-lesbian movement. The women's liberation movement defined itself against its constitutive outside as *not* a movement of lesbians: women could only be rational – and hence amenable to integration into the nation – to the extent that they were *not* hysterical dykes. In that regard, the history I have retraced is that of a distant echo of the original repudiation of women from the French Republic in 1789. By refusing to question the heterosexual norm – which they upheld as a utopian condition for integration into the French nation and for becoming as rational as men could be – French feminists established their feminist subjectivity on the paradox of their irrevocable subordination to men. This, I think, was what Wittig tirelessly tried to tell them: establishing feminism as a heterosexual movement can only be reactionary. To the extent that lesbians had to be defined as non-rational, tyrannical, sectarian, misandrist, conspicuous, paranoiac, totalitarian, self-important and arrogant in order for (heterosexual) women to be moderate (like men), as I showed in the second and third archival chapters, lesbians were ensnared in an impossible speaking position: every time they sought to dismantle the feminist closet, they fulfilled the prophecy according to which they could not be included in the MLF's rational female individuality. Lesbianism is a trauma, a "repudiated identification" (Butler 1997a: 137), at the heart of French feminism; the recent history of the ongoing exclusion of lesbianism from feminist knowledges is another spectral manifestation of that trauma.

“You may wonder what I am doing translating Wittig into French”, writes Bourcier (2005: 187). It is indeed bewildering “to translate a French author into French” (188), but it is also tragic, because it bears the trace of a painful exile: it is the legacy of Monique Wittig’s unassimilability to French feminism, and of her subsequent forced Americanization. When Sam Bourcier and Suzette Robichon – the lesbian activist who spent the 1970s “remain[ing] to one side, on the lookout for anyone like [her]” (Suzette 1979: 91) – co-organized the first symposium on Monique Wittig in France on 16–17 June 2001 in order “to counter the invisibilization that threatened [her] work” (Bourcier 2002: 27, my translation), “an American took care to call us right before the symposium to let us know that Wittig was not coming, that she did not believe in it, and that in any case Wittig was American...” (2002: 30).¹⁰⁷ Wittig was made American, and the traces of that translation – of an original Wittig, of an original lesbienne in France – were altogether effaced from French memory.

¹⁰⁷ Suzette Robichon has long been deeply committed to expanding the influence of Monique Wittig’s work in France and abroad. In 1985 she edited a special issue of the lesbian journal *Vlasta* (1983–1985) on Monique Wittig. It was in this issue that Wittig’s *Paris-la-politique* was first published. It remains to this day the only issue of a French journal entirely devoted to Wittig. In 2014 she created the non-profit organization Les ami.es de Monique Wittig (Friends of Monique Wittig) with a view to keeping the memory of Monique Wittig alive.



Figure 59. Edition of the TV programme *Aujourd'hui la vie* (58 mins 58 sec) on the women's liberation movement, broadcast on Antenne 2. 14 May 1985. Copyright: Institut national de l'audiovisuel. Source: <http://www.ina.fr/video/CPB88002074> (screenshot). Last accessed: 10 July 2018.

How haunted does this picture look to you (Figure 59)? It is extracted from an hour-long TV programme on the French women's movement, broadcast on national television on 14 May 1985. In the image, we can identify, from left to right, Christine Delphy, the actor Delphine Seyrig, Simone de Beauvoir (with a gigantic image of her younger self behind her), Annie Sugier and Anne Zelensky (the two authors of *Histoires du M.L.F.* in 1977). If this picture feels so haunted to me – from the photograph of Beauvoir from another time, whose sepia colours seem to overflow onto the TV set, to the frozen marble busts mirroring each of the speakers, to the uncanny void that separates them all – it is perhaps because it records the remainders of an epistemic elimination: the last survivors of an enduring victory for feminist legitimacy. It shows the winners of a dirty fight who succeeded in being, as Wittig called them in her 1980 letter to Beauvoir, the “legitimate ones” and not the “crazies” (Wittig 1981b: 1). If this picture feels haunted, it is also because the ghosts that were left behind are never far away.

I suggest that French academia and feminist politics are haunted today by a conceptual vacancy: a void left wide open by the silencing of lesbian theory in the early 1980s. From the

standpoint of the history I have written in this thesis – that of feminism's anti-lesbianism – I argue that it becomes possible to chart unexpected discursive complicities between 1970s revolutionary feminism and French conservatism that can illuminate anew contemporary debates on gender, race and sexuality. Indeed, one of the most tragic outcomes of this conceptual vacancy is that it has disabled the political and theoretical problematization of feminism's anti-lesbianism and thus has made the discursive continuities I am about to address unthinkable. Making the case for an urgent reconsideration of the seemingly clear line between feminism and anti-feminism insofar as it conveniently conceals their shared anti-lesbianism, I propose below a *feminist* genealogy of contemporary French conservative discourses on the dangers of the introduction of Anglophone gender and queer theories, France's alleged singularity in matters of sexuality, and the prohibition of the Islamic headscarf. Let's see what appears differently in contemporary sexual and racial politics when we invite the Wittigian ghost back into the picture above – and “learn, these lessons, otherwise” (Spivak 1992 in Gordon 1997: 25).

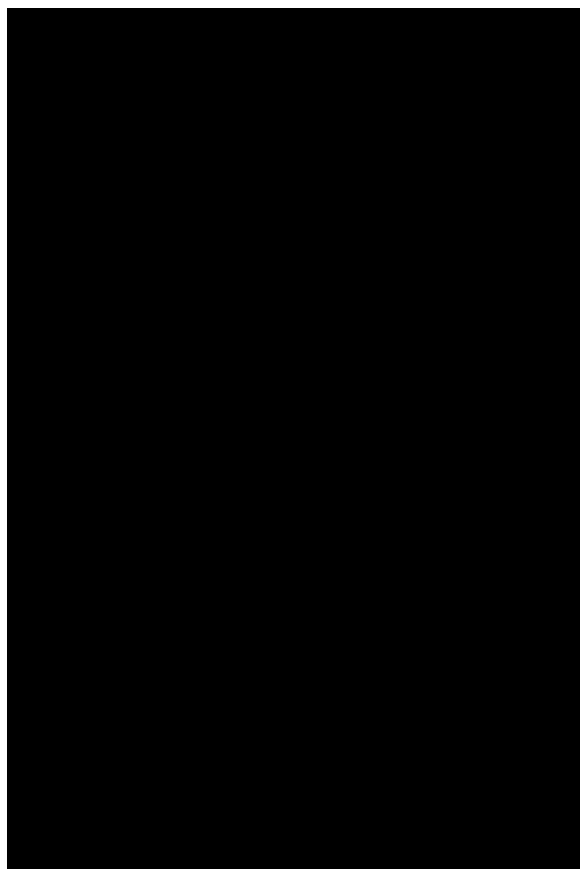


Figure 60. Monique Wittig. Malibu Beach, California, 1985. Photographer: Babette Mangolte. Source: http://www.leseditionsdeminuit.fr/auteur-Monique_Wittig-1467-1-1-0-1.html. Last accessed: 16 July 2018.

1. From the L Word to the G Word

In the 1990s, French feminist scholars were unanimous that the word “gender” was untranslatable into French (Costello 2016; Davis and Kollias 2012; Disch 2008; Fassin 1999a, 2008, 2009, 2016; Kraus 2005; Möser 2013). For the historian of the French Revolution Mona Ozouf, gender is “a word that can hardly be translated into French” (1995 in Fassin 1999a: 137); for the feminist philosopher Geneviève Fraisse, who participated in the MLF, “gender or *genre*’ is ‘a philosophical position of American origin” (1996 in Fassin 1999a: 138); for the historian Christine Bard, the concept of gender represents an “invasion” from which one must be “protected” (2003 in Möser 2013: 229). The untranslatability of postmodern gender theories in France was epitomized by the fifteen-year delay before the translation of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990), which might be said to echo the nine-year delay before the translation of Wittig’s *The Straight Mind*.¹⁰⁸ Insisting on the Americanness of gender theories, French feminists in the 1990s talked about “gender” (in English) rather than “genre” (the French translation) when they discussed it. For Fassin, “gender” (in English in his French text) was conceived as “alien to the national tradition” (2009: 28) and “relegated to a position of untranslatable strangeness, which [was] gladly called ‘Anglo-Saxon’” (2008: 383, my translation).

Many reasons have been invoked to explain the untranslatability of gender theories in 1990s France, and in particular the French “specificity of the non-reception” (Fassin 2007: 16, my translation) of *Gender Trouble*. Butler herself, for example, convincingly explains that the text “has threatened an ‘Americanization’ of theory in France for the few French publishers who have considered it” (1999: x) insofar as her reading of “French theory” is a “cultural translation” that makes the text “foreign to a French context” (1999: x). Franco-German feminist theorist Cornelia Möser (2013) and American feminist theorist Katherine Costello (2016) both rightly argue that materialist feminists (who were in a position of hegemony in 1990s French academia) saw *Gender Trouble* as reintroducing the differentialist theories associated with Psychépo that they had fervently combatted in the 1970s. Fassin astutely contends that Butler’s promotion of a “minority politics that is not communitarian” (2007: 16, my translation) falls foul of the Republican distinction between communitarianism and universalism: “[Butler’s] very thinking was [...] strictly speaking unthinkable in the French

¹⁰⁸ On the vexed reception of *Gender Trouble* in France, see Costello (2016), Fassin (2007), Möser (2013), Perreau (2016) and Vidal (2006).

context”, he writes (16).

Although I agree with all these explanations, I would like to suggest another which has not yet been proposed. I argue that Anglophone gender theories represented for French feminists the impromptu and anxious return of an old and forgotten ghost they thought had been properly buried two decades earlier: lesbianism. In a sense, Butler repeated in English for a French audience what had forcefully been made unspeakable in French in the MLF: that heterosexuality is not the most cherished gift of (French) democracy but an oppressive regime of power through which oppositional and naturalized gendered positions are stabilized. As Katherine Costello observes:

Monique Wittig’s theoretical and fictive works provide the basis for two of *Gender Trouble*’s most famous claims: that sex is always already gender and that the binary identity categories of sex and gender are the naturalizing and self-legitimizing effects of the heterosexual regime, or what Butler calls the heterosexual matrix (2016: 159).

The naturalization by feminist researchers in the 1990s of “gender theory” as an American idiosyncrasy simply reiterated the Americanization of lesbianism by French feminists in the 1970s (most 1990s feminist academics had participated in the MLF) (second archival chapter: 194–206). Paraphrasing Fassin’s thought-provoking article “The Purloined Gender” on the “absence-presence” of gender theory in 1990s French academia, we could say that the purloined lesbian was “invisible, although – or rather, because – [she] [was] obvious, all the better hidden from our view for being in full sight” (Fassin 1999a: 138) in and through the (newly) unspeakable G word. It is hard, indeed, not to hear the L word screaming through the G word when, lamenting “this *gender studies* that comforts women in their difference” at a feminist conference in 1995 (“*gender studies*” in English and italics in the French text), the feminist and senior civil servant Annie Fouquet asked: “[i]s it a ghetto or an alibi to keep women busy while inequalities of the worst kind persist elsewhere?” (1995 in Möser 2013: 231–232, my translation) – using the same old (Hegelian) trope of a hostile withdrawal from (real) politics into a segregated and differentialist ghetto that was wielded in the 1970s to prevent the politicization of lesbianism. As Clare Hemmings observes, the “dismissal” of *Gender Trouble* among feminists “masks and displaces central anxieties about queerness that

the text also brings with it when it travels” (2011: 15).¹⁰⁹

“From one language to another, the [gender] referent has escaped; somewhere along the way, it has drowned in the Atlantic Ocean”, writes Cynthia Kraus ironically of the supposed untranslatability of the word “gender” into French (2005: 180, my translation). Indeed, this drowning might well be the belated echo of another: the original drowning of the lesbian referent in the Atlantic Ocean in the 1970s: “*a woman who loves women, what you mean by lesbian*”, as Antoinette Fouque said to Kate Millett in 1981 (Fouque 1980: 13). In that regard, “[t]he thing of this missing word”, “between the English term *gender* and the word that we don’t have to say it in French” (Kraus 2005: 178), might well be... lesbianism. Or rather, lesbianism might well be the missing word, the missing concept – superbly addressing the political and theoretical articulation of gender and sexuality – whose absence prevented gender from being thinkable and translatable in France as “genre” in the 1990s. In other words, gender was unthinkable because lesbianism had never been thinkable in the first place.

From this perspective, we could argue that gender, as a conceptual descendant of a lesbian critical position, was always already French, but – like Wittig, who became American over time – its original French echoes were progressively and purposefully effaced. When Fassin writes that “the comparison with the United States encourages us to think what has largely remained unthought [...] in the French context: the articulation between gender and sexuality” (2009: 45, my translation), he is mistaken. Feminists, lesbians and radical lesbians such as Monique Wittig, Louise Turcotte, Martine Laroche, Claudie Lesselier, Colette Guillaumin, Nicole-Claude Mathieu, Monique Plaza and Suzette Robichon relentlessly sought to articulate gender and sexuality in the 1970s and early 1980s; but they were *prevented* from speaking. Called paranoid, crazy or anti-feminist every time they tried to think gender and sexuality together – as I have shown through the history of the Gouines rouges in 1971 (first archival chapter: 144–157), the Front lesbien international in 1974 (second archival chapter: 168–184) and radical lesbianism in 1980 (third archival chapter: 234–278) – they were barred from feminist legitimacy. The supposed Americanness of lesbianism in the 1970s, like the supposed Americanness of gender theory in the 1990s, was a naturalizing technique that

¹⁰⁹ Hemmings is referring to Sabine Hark’s compelling analysis of the reception of *Gender Trouble* in Germany (2001). Hark’s argument is rather similar to mine: she argues that queer theory and *Gender Trouble* in particular reactivated long-standing anxieties about lesbianism among German feminists.

performed this prohibition. Discussing how “French theory” becomes American when it returns home to France” as “queer theory”, Bruno Perreau argues that “transatlantic exchanges are the product of cultural fantasies whose effect, if not function, is to mask their original source” (2016: 7). Following Perreau, we could say that “America” was produced as a “point of reference” for lesbianism in 1970s France which, “by force of repeated telling, efface[d] the very traces of its making” (Perreau 2016: 8) and in so doing effaced the French (or Wittigian) history of gender theory. Lesbianism and gender theory were made un-French – dis(en)fr(e)ncised, if I may – because heterosexuality is untouchable in the universalist logic of French feminism: it is the utopian condition underwriting men and women’s democratic togetherness within the nation’s single community.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler reopened the closet on which the 1970s French feminist movement had been founded and re-exposed that which had had to remain concealed *as a secret*: the lesbian as feminism’s irredeemable and psychotic other (precariously) stabilizing the white and heterosexual boundaries of the feminist subject “women”. In a sense, Judith Butler is a prosopopoeia in France for the exiled Monique Wittig. French feminists thought that they were done with lesbianism and Wittig, and that no one would dare to disturb their comfortable heterosexual aphasia again. But ten years later, Butler arrived; and, refusing amnesia, young lesbians such as Sam Bourcier went all the way to the US to revive and bring back home the monstrous Americanized lesbian ghost. In that regard, it was by no means a coincidence that the Beauvoirian French feminist philosopher Elisabeth Badinter recently accused Butlerian theory of being “on the edge of delirium” (in Armanet 2016, my translation): in so doing, she delegitimized Butler through the same tropes of hysteria and paranoia which had relentlessly served throughout the 1970s to cast the lesbian into the unintelligible limbo of feminist reason.

In 1994, an article on women’s studies in US academia entitled “When the Sex War Takes Possession of Social Sciences in the United States” was published in the popular sociology magazine *Sciences humaines*. The article was illustrated with a large image showing two topless women with unrestrained breasts demonstrating in front of a banner that said “lesbians fighting for socialism”, with the caption: “lesbian demonstration [...] in New York” (Lubecki 1994: 38–39, my translation). What I find fascinating about this image is not so much the (well-worn) anti-feminist conflation of feminism with lesbianism, sex war and America, but its semantic and visual resemblance to the image from the 1978 article on American lesbian

communes published in the feminist journal *La revue d'en face* (see Figures 61 and 62), which I analysed in the second archival chapter (196–204). In both cases, the lesbian is represented through a racist and colonial imaginary as a foreign and unfettered savage who is unrestrained by the (heterosexual) laws of civilization. The anti-lesbian complicity between French feminist and anti-feminist discourses, which sustains their shared heteronormative order, could not be more glaring.

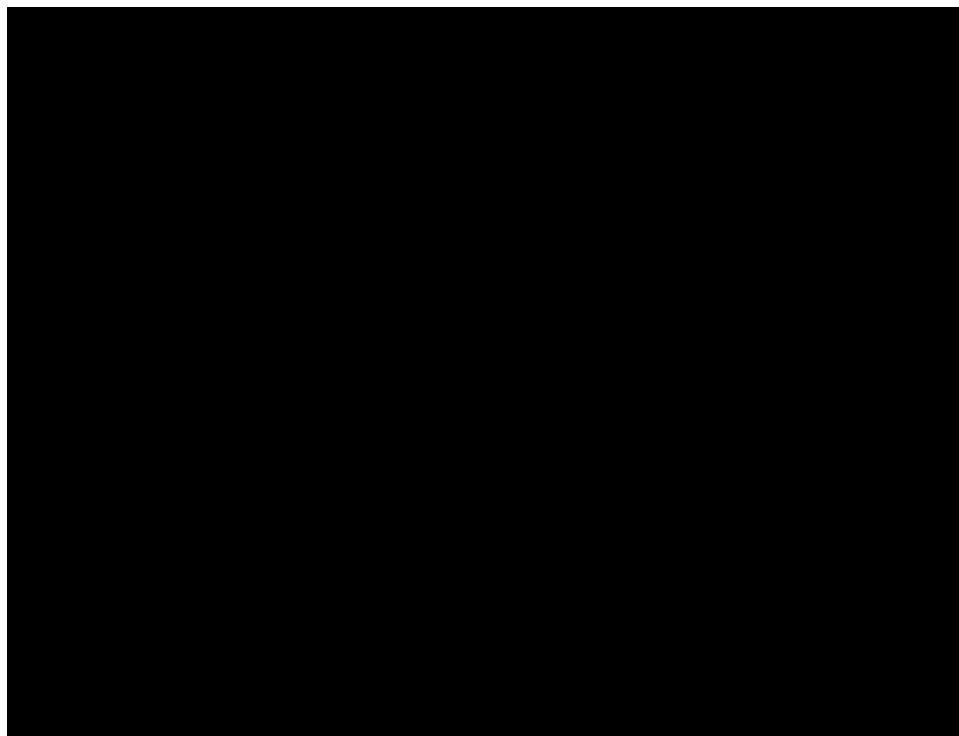


Figure 61. Illustration (image cropped) from Lubecki, “Women’s Studies: When the Sex War Takes Possession of Social Sciences in the United States” (*Sciences Humaines*, 42, August–September 1994: 38–39).

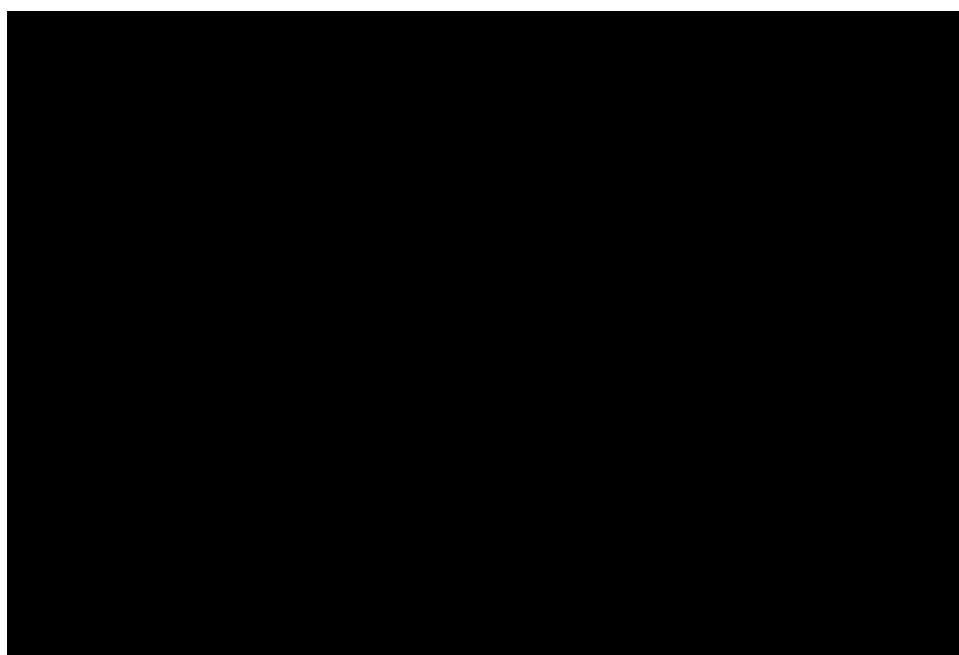


Figure 62. Illustration from Bendl, “A Tribe of Women” (*La revue d’en face*, 3, February 1978: 34).

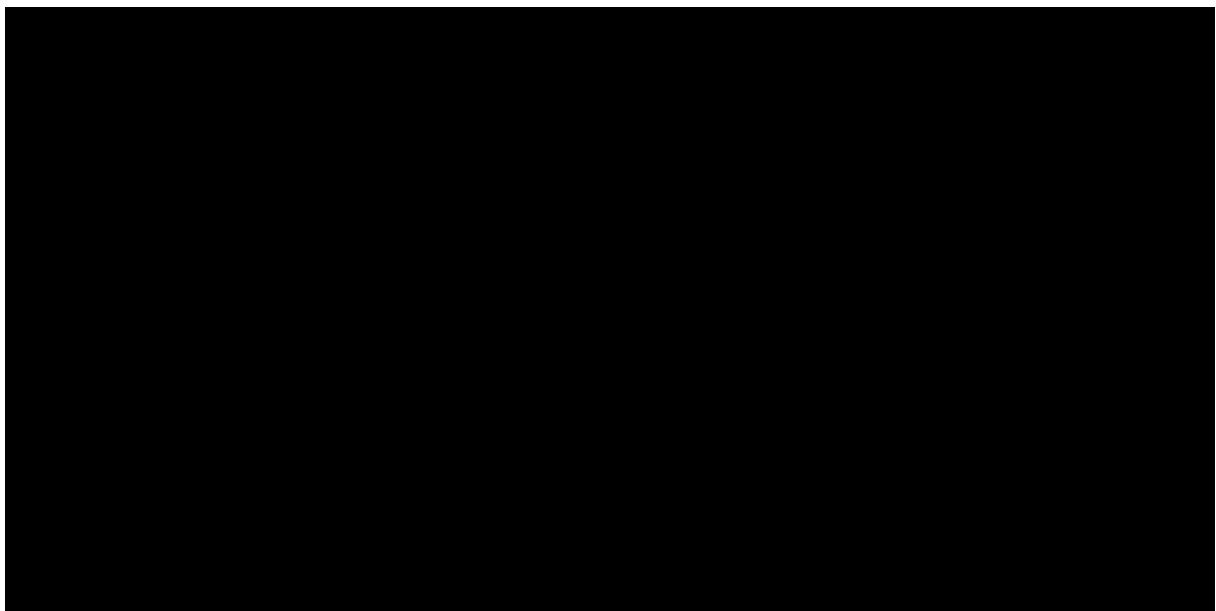


Figure 63. “Gender theory, here we come!” Image from the Facebook page “The Whole Truth About the Inventor of Gender Studies”. Source: <https://cafaitgenre.org/2013/06/14/theorie-du-genre-la-belle-aubaine/> (reproduced in Perreau 2016: 58). Last accessed: 10 July 2018.

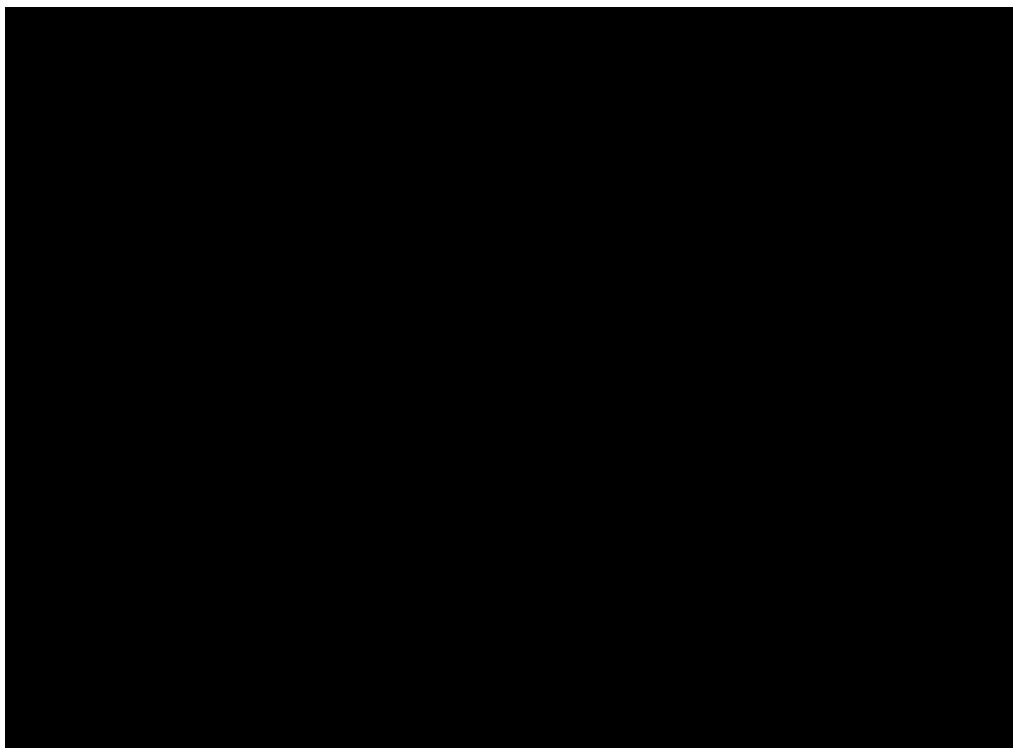


Figure 64. Manif pour tous demonstrators against “gender theory” and equal rights for homosexuals. On the banner: “gender is not my kind” (“gender” in English in the French text). Paris, 2 February 2014. Photographer: Peter Potrowl. Licensed under Creative Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0). Source: [https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genre_\(sciences_sociales\)](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genre_(sciences_sociales)). Last accessed: 16 July 2018.

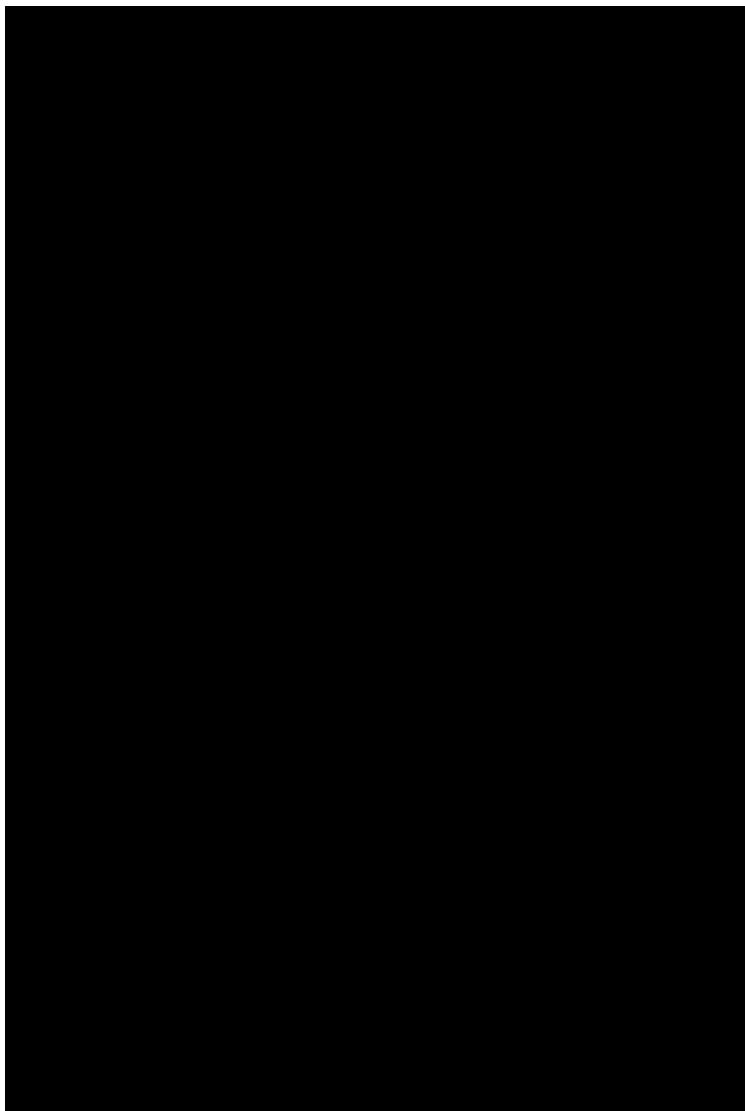


Figure 65. Manif pour tous poster: “where Taubira slithers, roots wither”. Retrieved from: <http://www.lamanifpourtous.fr/> (reproduced in Perreau 2016: 61). Last accessed: 16 July 2018.

Perhaps that complicity becomes even more disturbing when we flush it out from contemporary hyper-reactionary homophobic and racist responses to equal rights for sexual minorities. Having been markers of academic feminist discourses in the 1990s, the threat of an American invasion through the import of “gender theory” and the supposed untranslatability of the word “gender” became core arguments of La manif pour tous (Demo for All) and other reactionary collectives that mobilized against the legalization of marriage and adoption for same-sex couples in 2013, known as the Taubira Law. Figure 63 above compares the arrival of gender theory in France (supposedly exemplified through the legalization of same-sex marriage) to the American Normandy landings of 6 June 1944, while

Figure 64 shows a banner displayed at a protest against the Taubira Law on which the word “gender” is portrayed (in the first half) as untranslatable: “le gender c'est pas mon genre”, meaning “*gender* [in English in the text] is not my kind [genre]”. For Perreau, “the racialized monster” holding a chainsaw in the forest, which was used on Manif pour tous posters to represent Christiane Taubira, the Black Minister for Justice who put forward the law in parliament (see Figure 65), “expressed a fear of a devouring, egotistical sexuality, itself sparking fear of a race of brutal, disloyal citizens who could never become part of the ‘real’ France, characterized by the moderateness of its universalist philosophy” (Perreau 2016: 60–61). This depiction also has unsettling resonances with 1970s feminist representations of the racialized lesbian psychotic freak leaping naked in the forest, against which the moderateness of French (heterosexual/universalist) women was posited.

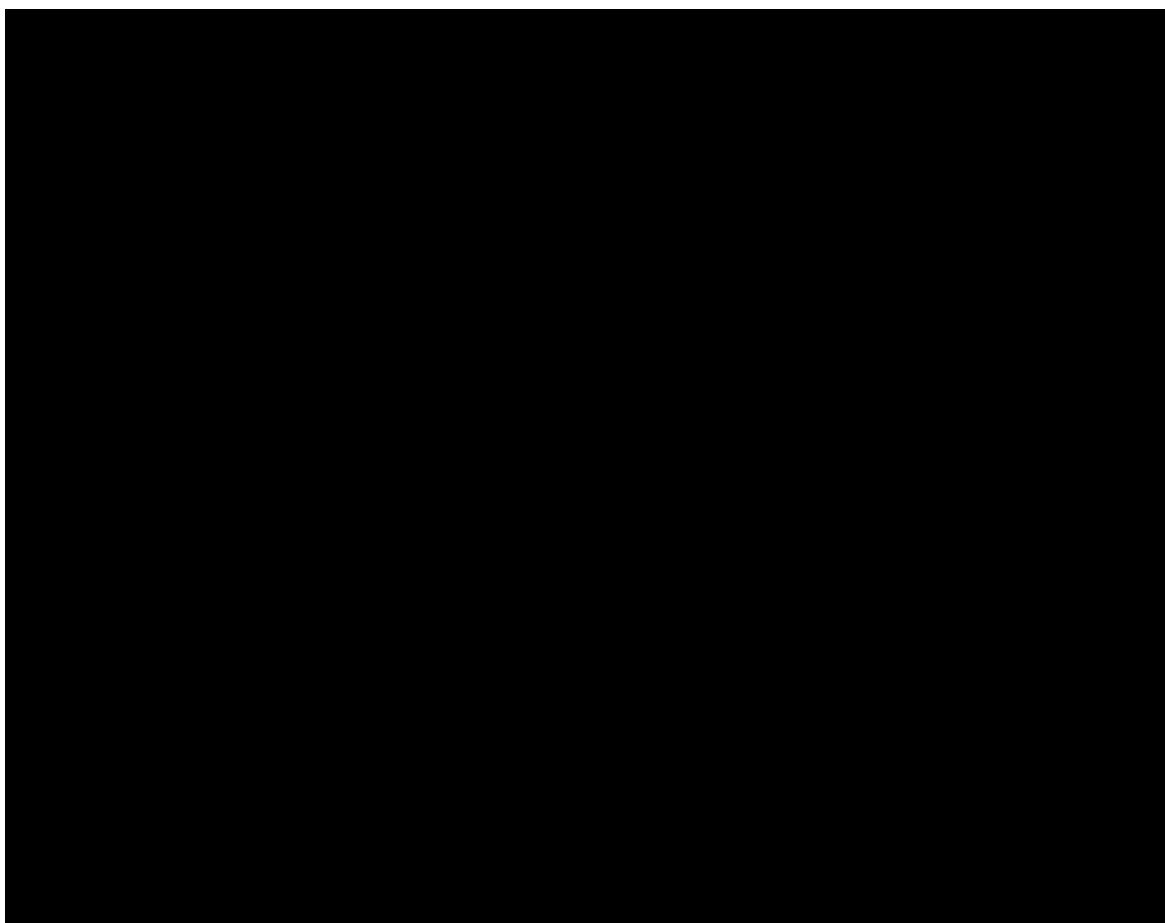


Figure 66. Poster by Hommen (an anti-gay marriage collective) showing an image of the anti-Nazi Resistance fighter Jean Moulin and the message: “no to gay marriage”. Source: <http://hommen-officiel.tumblr.com/> (reproduced in Perreau 2016: 34). Last accessed: 16 July 2018.

Homosexuality was also recurrently addressed as a fascist threat against the French Republic. Opponents to the new law compared themselves, for example, to the iconic Resistance hero Jean Moulin as if they were themselves Resistance fighters (see Figure 66), and portrayed French President François Hollande walking hand-in-hand with Hitler and Stalin.¹¹⁰ These “various references to terrorism and totalitarianism”, which attacked the gay marriage law as “anti-democratic, anti-Republican, anti-French” (Robcis in Duong 2014), echo the ways in which 1970s feminist discourses produced the spectre of the lesbian as a tyrannical and totalitarian freak who was waging a primitive sex war against civilization through the figure of the hysterical dyke. The particularity of French opposition to the legal recognition of homosexual partnerships, Camille Robcis explains, was to frame homosexuality as a threat not to religious beliefs but to the “*Republican* specificity of the family”, which gay marriage’s opponents considered “universal and heterosexual” (2016: 31, emphasis Robcis’, my translation). For these reactionary constituencies, the French Republican contract provided a “perfect balance between freedom and cohesion, capable of avoiding extreme individualism [...] and at the same time totalitarianism’s excessive homogenization”, which allegedly pertained to homosexuality (Robcis 2016: 31); and it must be recognized that it was on the basis of the same universalist belief and collective unconscious that 1970s feminists established the “freedom and cohesion” of “women” against tyrannical lesbians, who were always caught in the paradox of “extreme individualism” (hostile war on nature, and imitation of men) and “excessive homogenization” (withdrawal from culture, and female essentialism). Finally, as Camille Robcis observes (in Duong 2014), in a recent book against the “age of ‘gender’” (“gender” in English in the French title) conservative philosopher Thibaud Collin twice misspells Monique Wittig’s name as “Monica Wittig”: in a troubling way, the cultural fantasy of lesbianism as an American import (which is also upheld in the MLF historiography when historians write that Wittig became a political/visible lesbian in the US) seems to stretch across feminist and anti-feminist genealogies alike.

From an archaeological perspective, reactionary discourses that address lesbianism (or feminism, or gender theory) as an American threat and the lesbian (or the racialized Taubira) as an uncivilized psychotic subject are *not* anti-feminist insofar as French universalist

¹¹⁰ Members of the anti-gay-marriage group Hommen demonstrated in costume as Hollande, Stalin and Hitler to cries of “Hollande dictator!” See the following press article on the protest (RTL and AFP 2013): <https://www rtl fr/actu/politique/les-hommen-font-defiler-un-faux-hollande-aux-cotes-de-staline-et-hitler-7763128932>. Last accessed: 16 July 2018.

feminism has relied on the same discursive strategies to police its own racial and heterosexual borders: like 1970s universalist feminist discourses, contemporary reactionary discourses are based on homophobic and racist assumptions. The naturalization of feminism's anti-lesbianism has rendered this genealogy unthinkable today.

2. The French Singularity in Matters of (Hetero) Sexuality

In the wake of allegations of sexual misconduct against the American producer Harvey Weinstein in October 2017, an unprecedented wave of condemnation of sexual harassment erupted in the United States and expanded into a transnational anti-harassment movement under the name of the #metoo movement.¹¹¹ However, when the movement hit France, a virulent opinion piece published in the prestigious centre-left daily *Le monde* in January 2018 sparked international controversy: 100 French women (including the iconic actor Catherine Deneuve) condemned a “totalitarian social climate” and a return to the “good old witch-hunting days” that denoted a “hatred of men and sexuality” (Collectif 2018a, my translation).¹¹²

Far from being new, the arguments developed in this opinion piece hinged upon the long-standing fantasy of “French singularity” (Ozouf 1997 [1995]) in matters of sexuality, according to which France is supposedly characterized by a natural harmony between the sexes (Fassin 1999a; Scott 1997, 2011). This myth of French sexual singularity became a core feature of French Republicanism in the 1990s in the context of the reinforcement of Republican doctrine in the wake of the French Revolution's bicentennial in 1989 and the first controversy over the Islamic headscarf during the same year.¹¹³ Although the historian Christine Bard characterized the 2018 opinion piece as “an expression of anti-feminism” (in Vincent 2018, my translation), in the 1990s many feminists (the same feminists who claimed

¹¹¹ The movement had antecedents in non-Western countries such as India, and the phrase “me too”, which has served as the movement's rallying cry, was coined in 2006 by Tarana Burke, an African-American grassroots activist.

¹¹² The text is entitled “We Defend the Freedom to Proposition, Which Is Indispensable to Sexual Freedom” (available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/01/09/nous-defendons-une-liberte-d-importuner-indispensable-a-la-liberte-sexuelle_5239134_3232.html). Last accessed: 16 July 2018).

¹¹³ The cultural fantasy of a transatlantic contrast between sexually harmonious France and American sex war is not specific, as Fassin and Scott argue (Fassin 1999a, 2001, 2009; Scott 1995, 1997, 2004, 2007), to the consolidation of Republicanism in the 1990s. As I have shown in the thesis, it actively structured 1970s revolutionary feminist discourses as well.

that “gender” was untranslatable into French) had promoted the idea of French sexual singularity along the same lines as the “anti-feminist” 2018 text. In fact, from the perspective of the discursive history of French feminism, the myth of French sexual singularity is *not* anti-feminist but fundamentally anti-lesbian: although it (almost) never explicitly addresses heterosexual and lesbian differences, it is structured, like 1970s feminist discourses, around the binary opposition between (French) heterosexuality as a condition of (sexual) democracy and (American) lesbianism as a tyrannical withdrawal from sexual mixedness that inaugurates a dangerous state of totalitarian (sexual) war.

From feminist history pioneer Michelle Perrot’s recognition of the widespread perception in France of a “sexually pacific France, in which men and women, despite their disagreements, know how to talk about love” (1995 in Fassin 1999a: 118), to feminist historian Mona Ozouf’s celebration of an unconditional “brief, perilous, and unlucky” encounter between men and women that “bears the resounding [...] name of love” (1995 in Fassin 1999a: 124), to liberal feminist philosopher Elisabeth Badinter’s contention that “the French woman”, unlike the American woman, “has never entirely broken off dialogue with her companion” (1992: 18, my translation), French “sexual singularity” is an effect of a discursive consecration of heterosexuality that posits women’s compulsory availability to men as the necessary condition of democratic gender relations. In that regard, unlike Joan W. Scott, I do not think that the myth of French sexual exceptionalism implies a fear of feminism as a “foreign import” (2011) – its proponents quoted above identify as feminists – as much as it implies a fear of lesbianism that is attached to feminism. This is why it stretches across feminist and conservative genealogies alike.

It is crucial to note that, in the myth of French sexual singularity, sexual violence fully disappears from view. And with good reason: it is replaced by the fantasy of lesbian tyranny. Indeed, if women’s availability to the male heterosexual gaze is a marker of (sexual) democracy, the lesbian is produced – as in the 1970s – as the unstated subject of an anti-democratic sex war. In that regard, discourses promoting French sexual singularity are all structured around the haunting figure of the good old hysterical dyke. Theorizing what she calls the French “sexual exception” in 1995, Badinter writes:

There is a whole liberal sphere of influence inherited from Simone de Beauvoir; it exists mainly on the Left and is a universalist form of feminism, careful not to provoke

the war between the sexes and remaining distant from [differentialist and warlike feminism]. [This] militant radicalism, mainly embodied in the lesbian movement, stems from the belief that the relationship between the sexes is intrinsically violent and that women will only be saved by absolute [sexual] segregation (1995 in Célestin, DalMolin and de Courtivron 2003: 225).

In this text, Badinter does not even hide the figure of the hysterical dyke behind surrogate signifiers, as is most usually the case: she makes perfectly clear that the lesbian is an essentialist, warlike and separatist subject against whom moderate (“liberal” and “on the Left”) and French (“in the lineage of Simone de Beauvoir”) feminism is defined. Her lesbian figure is the same hysterical dyke produced by the 1970s feminist heterosexual contract that I have exposed in this thesis.

Similarly, the purloined subject stabilizing the aforementioned 2018 opinion piece is not so much the feminist as it is the “hysterical dyke”. As “enemies of sexual freedom”, women who support the #metoo movement are compared to “religious extremists” and condemned as “establishing something like a totalitarian social climate” (Collectif 2018a, my translation): as such, they are posited as stuck in a state of war, like the MLF’s lesbian from “before the movement” (Anon. 1980a: 22; Deudon 1981: 83) or like the bloodthirsty lesbian creatures hidden in the American forest who had not yet been emancipated by feminism’s heterosexual contract and thereby updated into (heterosexual) “women”. The authors of the opinion piece want to “raise [their] daughters” in a world where they will not be “intimidated or guilt-tripped” about sexual freedom, and it is difficult here not to think of the description in Françoise Picq’s canonical history of the MLF of the courageous MLF heterosexual women who, resisting tyrannical lesbians, “had no intention of either being dishonest about their own desires or accepting the imposition of a new norm” (2011: 236). Importantly, the authors of the opinion piece never claim that they are against feminism; they write that they “do not recognize [themselves] in *this* feminism [...] that takes the form of a hatred of men and of sexuality” (my emphasis): they thus define themselves not as anti-feminist, but as against a totalitarian feminism which is implicitly *lesbian*. To claim that they are in fact anti-feminist, as most French feminist commentators have done, is to erase the history of French feminism’s anti-lesbianism, from which the discursive logic of the opinion piece emerges. Indeed, the heterosexual democratic imaginary on which the legibility of “women” as rational political subjects rested in the MLF provides an unexpected feminist genealogy for the allegedly “anti-

feminist” myth of French sexual exceptionalism. In fact, from an archaeological perspective, the authors of the opinion piece are direct descendants of what radical lesbians tirelessly tried to address in the early 1980s while being called paranoiac, crazy and extremist: *heterofeminism*, that is, “feminist[s] who [campaign] for heterosexuality” (Wittig 1983: 13).¹¹⁴ The reason why “anti-feminist” and (universalist) “feminist” rhetorics are so hard to distinguish in France – from Elisabeth Badinter, to Françoise Picq, to Mona Ozouf, to the 2018 pro-harassment opinion piece – is because of what they have in common: anti-lesbianism.

3. The Heterosexual Politics of the Veil: From the Hysterical Dyke to the Hysterical Veiled Woman

In *The Politics of the Veil*, Joan W. Scott makes a very important argument: she argues that the veiled woman is unassimilable to the French Republic not only because she makes visible a religious difference that falls foul of the French nation’s individualist social contract, but also because in refusing to make herself available to the male gaze in French public space, she exposes “the problem that sex poses for republican political theory” (2007: 170). As Hemmings notes, drawing on Scott’s argument:

“Becoming French” as part of necessary assimilation necessitates not only relinquishing cultural, religious, and racial otherness but also recognizing the gendered complementarity that underwrites (heterosexual) *parité* [...]. To challenge that “nondifference”, to make it visible, is thus to raise other spectres of difference in French politics and identity as never entirely eradicated and, indeed, Frenchness as never really achievable for those who cannot be assimilated into the emblematic white, secular Christian couple (2016: 80).

If, as I have argued in the thesis, for second-wave feminists the lesbian exposed the constitutive unassimilability of sexual difference to the French Republic, which the MLF’s heterosexual contract sought to conceal and deny, and if the veiled woman similarly interrupts

¹¹⁴ As a consequence of the disqualification of radical lesbianism in the early 1980s, the political notion of “heterofeminism” has entirely disappeared from French feminist theory, politics and memory: it can only be found in radical lesbian archives, and in Wittig’s 1983 article “Les questions féministes ne sont pas des questions lesbiennes”, where she defines it. It is, in my view, a useful concept which should be brought back.

the “objectification of women’s sexuality [that] serves to veil a constitutive contradiction of French republicanism” (Scott 2007: 170), then an epistemic continuity between the lesbian figure in 1970s revolutionary feminist discourses and the figure of the veiled woman in contemporary conservative Republican discourses can and should be traced. In fact, to the extent that they both expose the “irreducibility of the difference between the sexes” (Scott 2007: 41), which it is the function of women’s compulsory availability to the male gaze to veil, they are both accused of promoting a totalitarian separation of the sexes that betrays the democratic heterosexual mixedness of the nation. Thus, I suggest that we can identify similar discursive strategies in the ways the lesbian was excluded from feminist legitimacy in the 1970s and the ways the veiled woman is excluded from the French nation in contemporary Republican discourses.

In March 2018, a manifesto published in the right-wing daily *Le Figaro*, signed by 100 intellectuals – and illustrated by two veiled women strolling in the suburban town of Sarcelles – sought to warn against the dangers of “Islamist separatism” (Collectif 2018b).¹¹⁵ The concept of hostile withdrawal, which I have identified as characterizing lesbians’ position of externality to the dialectics of heterosexuality, is now applied to headscarf-wearing women: just as lesbian-identified lesbians were deemed to be aggressively and primitively withdrawing from the democratic feminist community (in fact, from the male gaze) into a separatist, tyrannical and anti-feminist ghetto, the authors of the text in *Le Figaro* compare the wearing of the veil to “a new kind of apartheid”, a “separatism” and an “inverted segregation” that threatens “what has been done in France to guarantee civil peace” (my translation). To the extent that emancipation is guaranteed by women’s availability to the (white, secular) male gaze, the lesbian and the veiled woman are both conceived as (aggressively) hiding themselves: while the lesbian nightclub in the 1970s was a “hiding place” or a “prison” (Anon. 1971e: 15), the veil is the sign of an “imprisonment” (my translation).

Eschewing compulsory availability to the male gaze that “guarantee[s] civil peace” and provides emancipation, both the lesbian and the veiled woman are thus read as hysterical. Lesbian-identified lesbians were described as waging a (paranoiac) war against the fabric of feminist democracy, egotistically and perversely seeking to undermine (feminine) women’s

¹¹⁵ The text is entitled “The Call of 100 Intellectuals Against ‘Islamist Separatism’” (available at: <http://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/societe/2018/03/19/31003-20180319ARTFIG00299-1-appel-des-100-intellectuels-contre-le-separatisme-islamiste.php>). Last accessed: 16 July 2018).

love with (masculinized) lesbian hatred/selfishness (“We were furious! We were already very, very, very close friends [...] And they did that to us!” said one feminist who opposed the creation of the Gouines rouges in 1971); the veiled woman is imagined as waging war on the nation’s “civil peace” by promoting “Islamist totalitarianism” and “secession from the national community” because she has a “most blatant hatred of our country and democracy”. Like the lesbian, she has lost her reason and is driven purely by sick instincts of destruction. Interestingly, while the pro-harassment opinion piece discussed above compares the #metoo movement to “religious extremism”, the authors of the text on “Islamist separatism” – published only two months later – compare the visibilization of religious affiliations (“particularisms”) to a “return to religious wars”: tribalist and full of hatred, the lesbian and the veiled woman are made illegible as anti-democratic subjects of the modern French nation and excluded from the boundaries of individual humanity. Unacculturated to (white) civilization’s (heterosexual) laws, they are terrorist enemies from within, threatening the racial and heterosexual stability of French democracy. For Republicans and 1970s revolutionary feminists alike, the war “between contemporary France and Islam” (Scott 2007: 98) and between feminism and lesbianism is a war between “modernity and tradition, reason and superstition” (Scott 2007: 98). Needless to say, neither the lesbian nor the veiled woman has a natural hatred for feminist sisterhood or democracy – in both cases, they simply want “integration without assimilation” (Scott 2007: 138): it is feminists and liberal democrats themselves who cannot abide lesbians and veiled women as “insiders who don’t belong” (Scott 2007: 181).

The authors of the *Le Figaro* text conclude by demanding to “live in a complete world where the two sexes look at each other without either feeling insulted by the presence of the other”. As we can see, in the lineage of 1970s feminist anxieties about the “lesbian ghetto always enclosed within [...] segregation” (Catherine 1974: 2091) – a fantasy space where women escape the civilizing male gaze – the veiled woman frightens Republicans to the extent that she threatens the gendered complementarity, underwritten by heterosexual mixedness, that conditions the unity of the nation (a “complete world”). If for 1970s revolutionary feminists the “forms of socialization in movement” of the MLF were posited against the lesbian ghetto “frozen in alienation onto oppression” (Deudon 1981: 83), for contemporary Republican ideologues nothing has changed: the nation’s heterosexual contract underwrites the possibility of “forms of socialization in movement” (“a complete world”) – signifying life and reproductive futurity – while the veiled woman is “frozen in alienation onto oppression” (“a

new kind of apartheid”) – signifying morbidity. In that regard, it is worth noting that Elisabeth Badinter’s promotion of French sexual exceptionalism – according to which, as I noted above, lesbian radicalism “stems from the belief that the relationship between the sexes is intrinsically violent and that women will only be saved by absolute [sexual] segregation – might also describe word-for-word the veiled woman’s alleged war against “civil peace”.

Thus, the colonial-heterosexual contract – under which, in the name of Enlightenment principles, lesbians were deemed pre-modern and backwardly withdrawn into a state of primitive difference, against (heterosexual) women’s sovereign modernity, in 1970s revolutionary feminist discourses – is the very same contract under which headscarf-wearing Muslim women have been accused of promoting a tribalist sexual and religious war against French liberal democracy since the first controversy over the veil in 1989. However, although (or rather because) the figures of the lesbian and the veiled woman have been discursively constructed along similar lines, perhaps the greatest ruse of Republican reason is to have parcelled out otherness in such a way as to render headscarf-wearing lesbians unthinkable in the French imaginary. On the one hand, as I have noted in the thesis, if the lesbian could be subjugated by being racialized in the MLF, it was because she was always already imagined as white. On the other hand, if the veiled woman is imagined as alienated by her religious patriarchal culture, it is because she is always already imagined as heterosexual. The division between race and sexuality conceals the ways in which they are in fact mutually determining and mutually constituted. Having politicized the abject space of the ghetto in the late 1970s as not a “Black” or “Jewish” ghetto (Groupe des lesbiennes féministes 1987 [1976]: 21), and having metaphorized Nazi violence in the early 1980s with a view to addressing heterosexual power, French (white) lesbians have tragically contributed to the unthinkable of the very racial and colonial mind that informed their own subjugation, and thus they have consolidated the whiteness of their political subjectivity at the cost of intersectional coalitions against the French Republican matrix.

The French celebration of universalist heterosexuality did not start in 2012–2013, when hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets against gay marriage and adoption. Nor did it start with fervent opposition to the contracts of civil union that legalized contractual partnerships for same-sex couples in 1999. Nor did it start with the myth of French sexual singularity, or with French feminist researchers’ anxieties about gender theory from the early 1990s onwards. As Wittig told us in 1997 when she gave her lecture at the Centre Pompidou

after a two-decade absence from France: “it’s an *old story*” – a story which had “always astonished [her]” (1997, emphasis Wittig’s). The story of the French celebration of heterosexuality and gendered complementarity is indeed an astonishing story whose lineaments bring us back to the paradoxical history of 1970s revolutionary feminism. The unthinkable of these complicities to date, in my view, has been the price of the elimination of lesbian theory and politics from French feminism. I am not seeking to conflate 1970s feminism with contemporary reactionary, Catholic and far-right discourses on sexual and racial minorities. Yet, the ways in which the heterosexualization and racialization of the French nation have informed our feminist history and the production of an acceptable political subject must be neither overlooked nor forgotten. And perhaps, a good way of remaining on the alert about those complicities is to remember Monique Wittig’s untimely interjection from the back of the room in New York in 1979, when she responded to Cixous’ mythologization of the lesbian as un-French (second archival chapter: 204–206) – “What France? This is a scandal” (Douglas and Brooke 1979: 5) – as an “excessive critical position” (de Lauretis 1990: 145) from which to constantly ask ourselves what geopolitical, ideological and political formations our discourses might be complicit with. The unthinkable of the feminist genealogy of contemporary conservatism is an example of how “[t]he past” – the erasure of lesbian theory and lesbian politics – “is in the present in the form of a haunting” (Freccero 2007: 194).

4. Remembering Melancholia

According to Bourcier, the translator of *The Straight Mind* (1992) into French, “Wittig told [them] to keep the English word *straight* for the title in the French translation. Straight rather than heterosexual” (2005: 188). One question bugged me for a while: why did Wittig want to translate her title “The Straight Mind” into French as “La pensée straight”, rather than, let’s say, “La pensée hétérosexuelle”? Why did she keep half of the title in English and thus forcefully introduce an English word (“straight”) into the French language? Why would she remove the French word “hétérosexuelle”, given that she had spent so much energy precisely trying to make heterosexuality thinkable in French?

I would suggest that by keeping the English word “straight”, Wittig wanted us – French lesbians, feminists and queers – to know that *The Straight Mind* had been made foreign before it could return to France. She is telling us to never forget the story of the long journey “in

hell" (Wittig n. d. [circa 1981b]: 1) and forced exile that gave birth to the text. In Bourcier's short story fictionalizing their encounter with Wittig in Arizona, Wittig's guide Manastabal tells them:

Don't expect to find the original text. There is no original, amigo – you translate a translation. Translation was the very condition of the possibility of "The Straight Mind" from the beginning. Didn't you know that "The Straight Mind" was written in a language foreign both to French and to straight language? Forget the original (2005: 188).

Wittig wants us to remember – at the very moment when France seems to finally be hospitable to her thinking – that *The Straight Mind* was made unspeakable in French, and that, for that reason, *La pensée straight* is the translation of a translation. In that regard, I read the English word "straight" as the echo of a forced dislocation that bears the memory of injuries in the present. It is a small word with great significance: a "Trojan Horse" (Wittig 1992 [1984]: 68) that resists reabsorption into newly hospitable France and refuses to "remember to forget" (Renan 1882 in Khanna 2008: 143) the history of forced foreignness. It exceeds Frenchness because "translation was the very condition of the possibility of 'The Straight Mind' from the beginning": by keeping alive the memory of lesbian losses – the memory of the translation – she bears witness to and reminds us of the violence of assimilation.

"The minority subject is not self-centered as is the straight subject", writes Wittig. "Its extension into space could be described as being like Pascal's circle, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere". It is this "estrangement", this "out-of-the-corner-of-the-eye perception" (Wittig 1992: 61–62) – as what makes the minority subject – that Wittig performs by fracturing the familiarity of the French in the title "La pensée straight" so that the text never "becomes univocal" (63). *La pensée straight* will not be assimilated to France, it will not be easily accepted, it will not be made "theirs, [...] adopte[d] [...] as a monument and shelter[ed] [...] within their walls, a gratuitous object whose only purpose is to be found in itself" (Wittig 1992: 68), because it is a "war machine" (68) produced in "hostile territory" (69) that knows the cost of exclusion. She occupies the French language with the word "straight" because "the stranger it appears, nonconforming, unassimilable, the longer it will take for the Trojan Horse to be accepted" (69). This is Wittig's legacy: an "out-of-the-corner-of-the-eye" consciousness, against the ghosts of

assimilation.

Wittig always refused assimilation and mourning. When she marched at the San Francisco Gay Pride in June 1980, alongside a group of friends with T-shirts bearing the inscriptions “Front lesbien international” and “International Lesbian Front”, not only was she clinging onto her unfulfilled dream of a Front lesbien international in the US, but the very mixing of French and English bore witness to her refusal to assimilate into the more welcoming American cultural space (see Figure 67).

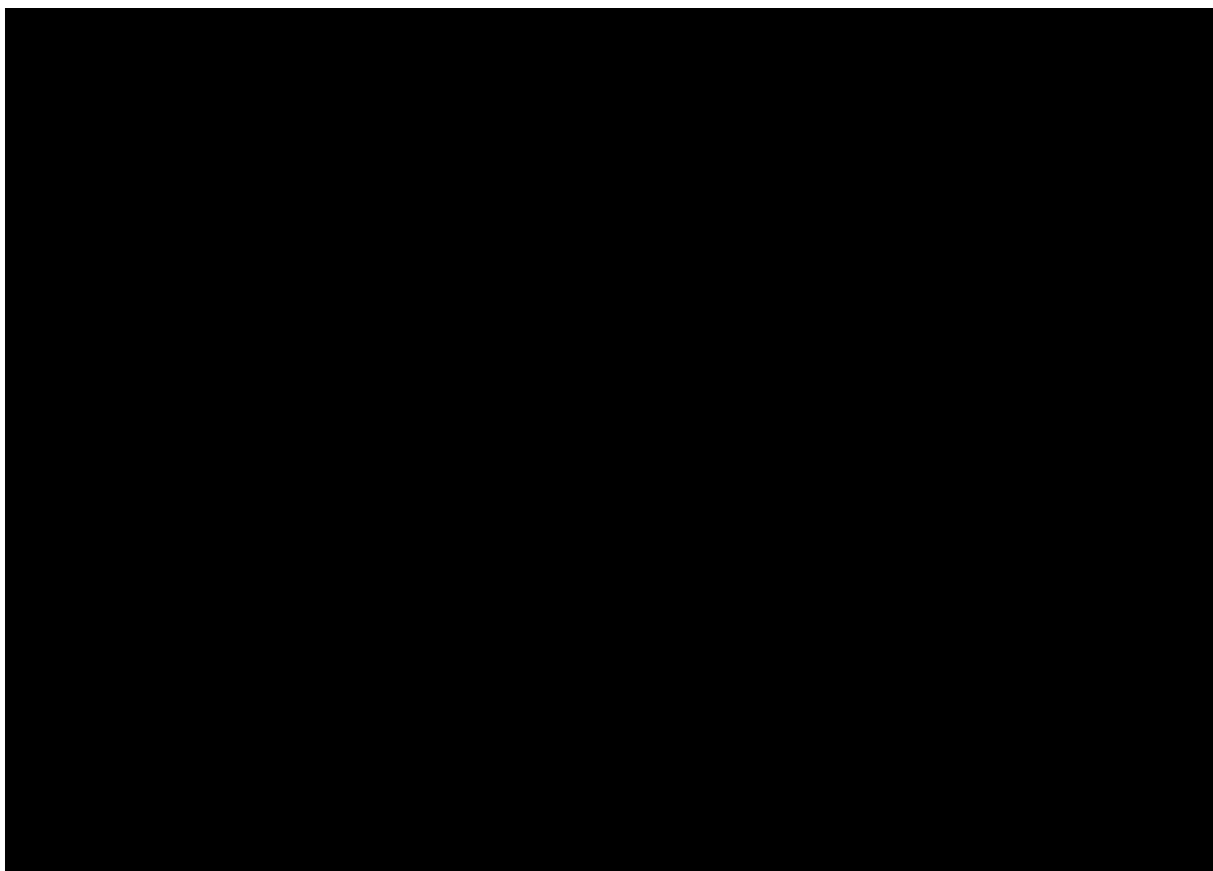


Figure 67: Monique Wittig (far left), Sande Zeig (second to the right) and friends at San Francisco Gay Pride. June 1980. Copyright: Louise Turcotte/Monique Wittig Literary Estate.

In a sense, translation was Wittig’s own national language, and it was also the language of her lesbian figure, “written in a language foreign both to French and to straight language” (Bourcier 2005: 188). Translation – translation that retains the mark of the translation – is the language of the “conscious pariah” (1944: 107), Hannah Arendt’s figure of the outcast who, unlike the “parvenu” (108), rejects so-called emancipation and forges a rebellious consciousness in a tradition of exile, marginalization and isolation. One could think of the

exiled Monique Wittig, mixing up languages, refusing to assimilate as an American lesbian in the US after having refused to assimilate as a woman or a human in France – her incredibly strong French accent years after she settled in the US attests to her refusal to become Americanized – as a model for a lesbian (or queer) historical consciousness that takes the experience of social outcastness (and its memory) as a critical position from which to resist normative injunctions and amnesiac liberal universalism.

Wittig wants us to know that lesbian politics had to pay “the price of delocalization, of displacement and of travel” (Bourcier 2002: 30) because “‘to be’ a lesbian is to always be exposed to translation in order to be heard” (Bourcier 2002: 30-31, my translation). To be a lesbian is to be an “eccentric subject” (de Lauretis 1990, 2005) constituted through a process of disidentification and dislocation, “a process of struggle and interpretation; of translation, detranslation, and retranslation” (de Lauretis 2005: 55). Being a lesbian is about remembering the history of our abjection, the history of who we are and what we have been made into, in order to remain, against all the odds, conscious lesbian pariahs. The “transnational and translational [play]” (Epps and Katz 2007: 431) in “*La pensée straight*” tells us to retain allegiance to the lesbian “consciousness of a ‘something else’” (de Lauretis 1990: 145), to an “expatriated sense of home” (Khanna 2003: 178) forged “through practices of political and personal displacement across boundaries between socio-sexual identities and communities, between bodies and discourses” (de Lauretis 1990: 145), between the Front lesbien international and the International Lesbian Front, between *The Straight Mind* and *La pensée straight*, between Monique Wittig and Théo, erasure and melancholia, exile and renaissance. It is the consciousness of the “lesbien”.

The word “straight” in “*La pensée straight*” is a scar: it tells us the wounded story out of which the lesbian as non-woman emerged. It is, in a sense, a prosopopoeia of the history I have written: it is the trace of “*La pensée hétérosexuelle*”’s impossibility that conserves the memory of the open wound of forced exile. “*La pensée straight*” is a performative that keeps this whole history alive and thus endlessly available for reactivation in the present: and this might even be Monique Wittig’s last and most enduring ruse against the straight mind.¹¹⁶ As postcolonial and queer theorist Rahul Rao importantly argues, drawing on Butler’s

¹¹⁶ On the ways in which unfinished mourning can be a political resource in the present, see among others Benjamin (2003 [1940]), Brown (2001), Butler (2004b), Eng and Kazanjian (2002) and Horkheimer and Adorno (1982 [1944]).

formulation of the universal as constituted through the “not yet” and the “unrealized” (Butler 1997b: 90):

[V]ital as it is to continue to struggle against abjection, there is also a value in carrying its traces, in not seeking [...] complete effacement [...]. For it is only the memory [...] of that abjection that can keep those of us now ambivalently admitted into the charmed circle of human rights, in touch with the “not yet”, the “unrealized”, the unentitled and excluded (2014: 213).

What we should remember about the history of this ten-year lesbian paradox is perhaps not the solution to the “something-to-be-done” (Gordon 1997: 205) – the lesbian who is not a woman – but the fact that there was a time when there was a “something-to-be-done”; not the solution to the paradox, which was itself productive of new paradoxes – a new assimilative lesbian subjectivity – but the original feminist paradox of assimilation; not the mourning of lesbian losses, but the wounded story *before* the mourning, the story of melancholia itself: the ten-year history of lesbians’ exclusion from the boundaries of female individuality at the heart of the glorious history of revolutionary feminism.

What we should remember is the epistemic violence of French feminism, which turned the lesbian into a “hysterical dyke” (Anon 1973c: 2), a “witch”, a “shrew”, a “hysteric-sexist-terrorist” (Lyon University Women’s Group n. d. in CLEF 1989: 101) and a “radical paranoiac” (Monique [Plaza] 2010 [1981]: 27). Remembering melancholia is about remembering the lesbian from the time when, within the force field of feminism, she was the liminal, the ostracized, the illegible. Only if we remember “the memory [...] of that abjection” (Rao 2014: 213), the history of not being “covered” by the (feminist) universal (Butler 1997b: 90), can we resist descending “into a triumphalist futurity” (Rao 2014: 213) and ignoring the ethical demand the “not yet” imposes upon us today.

Remembering melancholia is thus not about building identity, but about remembering that paradoxes are always productive of new paradoxes, so as to remain hospitable to future spectres haunting the “violating enablement” (Spivak 1993: 44) of liberal individualism. In that regard, I argue that the 1970s subjugated lesbian knowledges deployed against the violence of feminist assimilation should be used to deconstruct and resist universalist operations of power in the present (against headscarf-wearing women, for example, or in

support of the myth of French sexual singularity). I would suggest retaining allegiance to the memory of the hysterical dyke – the lesbian who could never become a woman – as a spectre who contains “the possibility of politics” (Khanna 2008: 234) in the present, since the feminist construction of the hysterical dyke bears witness to the genealogical interlocking of racial, colonial and heteronormative power, as well as to the lie of assimilation that is inherent to modern sovereignty. From the standpoint of the discursive life of the hysterical dyke in the 1970s, resistance to contemporary universalist practices of power would draw on Wittig’s anti-assimilationist lesbian politics within feminism, as I demonstrated with the history of the Front lesbian international (second archival chapter: 168–184); on the force of criticism that lies in the manifestation of backwards affects of disbelonging in relation to a glorious collectivity that claims to welcome everyone (second archival chapter 2: 185–194); and on radical lesbians’ subversive rearticulation of feminism’s heterosexual order through the hyperbolic actualization of its lesbian abjected outside (third archival chapter: 234–265). Thus, it is “in the cuts” through which the figure of the hysterical dyke “emerges that a different notion of the political could be elaborated” (Khanna 2008: 13).

A politics that starts from the hysterical dyke would know that “those who are deemed ‘unreal’ nevertheless lay hold of the real, a laying hold that happens in concert, and [that] a vital instability is produced by that performative surprise” (Butler 1999: xxvi). A politics that starts from the hysterical dyke and the failure of community would also know that “[t]he task is to refigure this necessary ‘outside’ as a future horizon, one in which the violence of exclusion is perpetually in the process of being overcome”, rather than seeking inclusive representation “in which we begin, without ending, without mastering, to own – and yet never fully to own – the exclusions by which we proceed” (Butler 2011 [1993]: 25). Remembering melancholia is about bringing the hysterical dyke back from exile and deploying her as a form of longing for the future in the pursuit of justice in the present. It is about remembering critical – even “paranoiac” – resistances, fissures and insurgencies against foreclosure, against the loss of an ideal, as what exceeds the order of things. It is about remembering that there was a time when being a “lesbien” was “a kind of paradox but not really, a kind of joke but not really, a kind of impossibility but not really” (Wittig 2005: 46). And if you remember that, let me tell you a secret: you might even know the pleasures of sharing a good laugh with the ghost of Monique Wittig.

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