

FEMINIST SPACES

CREATE. SHARE. EXPLORE.





Table of Contents
2.1, Fall/Winter 2016

Letter from the Editors	3
Contributor Biographies	4
Twisted Matrix: Sara Ahmed’s Orientation Phenomenology and the Queerness of Trans	6
<i>Lake Elrod</i>	
“That Infinite Sphere”: Paradox, Paralepsis, and Politics in <i>Les guérillères</i>	20
<i>Chase Gregory</i>	
DeViatiOns Pre T	38
<i>Jean Matarrita Chavarría</i>	
Queering Melancholy	40
<i>Laurel Billings</i>	
A Token Isn’t Worth Anything	49
<i>Daniel Putney</i>	
De_gendering	50
<i>Sur Landfried</i>	
From <i>Brokeback Mountain</i> to <i>Tangerine</i>, LGBTQ Representations in Mainstream U.S. Cinema: Inclusive, Exclusive, or Counter Narratives?	56
<i>Amélie Ollivier</i>	
Queering the Study of Classical Antiquity	70
<i>Krista Grensavitch</i>	
Ace of Hearts	77
<i>Darian Canton</i>	
Always Already: Becoming a Trans Ally	78
<i>Maria Cruse</i>	
The Able and the Sexual: Representations of Disabled Women and Their Sexuality in Bollywood, in the Purview of Social Justice	81
<i>Abhimanyu Acharya</i>	



Letter from the Editors

Greetings, Readers,

As we progress into our second volume of *Feminist Spaces*, we cannot help but be increasingly grateful for the support and the opportunities that working for this publication has provided us. As the success of our journal continues to grow, we are appreciative of our readership, of the exceptional and thought-provoking work we receive from our contributors, but most importantly, we are indebted to the members of our board whose remarkable dedication is truly invaluable to us.

It is with this support that we are able to continue fostering these inclusive spaces for students and emerging scholars to share their thoughts and connect with others who are committed to the vitality of women's and gender studies.

In our previous issue of *Feminist Spaces*, we presented an array of critical and creative works that invited our readers to consider the relationship between women and technology and how this discourse is meaningful in both academia and the political movement geared toward gender equity. For our third issue of *Feminist Spaces*, we wanted to continue the discourse of inclusivity by focusing specifically on issues surrounding LGBTQ+ and feminist intersectionality. In this issue, we are delighted to present creative and academic works from emerging scholars that take up issues central to queer theory including, but certainly not limited to, gender fluidity, asexuality, trans inclusivity, and the gender binary.

As always, we now invite you to turn the page and discover what lies within and beyond these continually growing feminist spaces.

Our kindest regards,

Brittany Hammock, Editor-in-Chief
Erica Miller, Managing Editor



Contributor Biographies

Abhimanyu Acharya studies English Literature at St. Xavier's College, Ahmedabad. He is interested in literature and can read in five languages. As a creative writer, he prefers to write stories and plays in his native Gujarati but has written academic work in English and Hindi as well. He has also translated works by Italo Calvino and Anton Chekhov and adapted a play by Harold Pinter.

Laurel Billings is a joint PhD student in English and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She holds a BA in English from NYU and an MFA in creative writing from the University of Alabama. Her research interests include 20th century American literature, women's life writing, queer futurities and affect.

Darian Cantón studies Theatre at the University of West Florida and enjoys creative writing and acting.

Jean Matarrita Chavarría is from San José, Costa Rica and has a BA in Physical Education and Sports with an emphasis in Education from the Universidad Autónoma de Centroamérica. As a Trans poet and activist member of the Costa Rican group Poesía Irreverente [Irreverent Poetry], Jean has been presenting poetry in different places throughout Costa Rica (at State Universities such as the University of Costa Rica and the National University of Costa Rica; at literary and lesbitransinterfeminist events such as the 2nd Latin American LesBiTransInterFeminista Encounter Venir al Sur in 2015 and 2016; and at the Costa Rica International Book Fair in 2015). Jean states that "For me, it is very nice that this work exposes these borders so that other people learn in a poetic manner something about my reality—my trans life."

Maria Cruse is completing her undergraduate work at Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, WA. She is involved on her campus and works in the Diversity and Women's Centers and Residential Life and also volunteers with Campus Ministry. She is passionate about social justice, music, and the community. She plans to pursue a career in social justice work.

Lake Elrod is an independent researcher who holds a BA in Anthropology from New College of Florida as well as an MA in Gender, Media and Culture from Goldsmiths, University of London. Lake's current



research interests include affect studies, phenomenology, and the social power of language at the intersections of gender and culture.

Chase Gregory is a graduate student in the literature program at Duke University where she studies gender and sexuality, graphic literature, and critical theory. Her current project focuses on issues of style in contemporary works of queer theory as well as on early queer theory's literary objects.

Krista Grensavitch is currently a PhD student in the History Department at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and holds an MA in Women's and Gender Studies also from UWM. Krista currently works as a Research Assistant for the Encyclopedia of Milwaukee project and has also served as a Graduate Teaching Assistant for both the History and Women's and Gender Studies departments. Her dissertation will discuss the ways in which Object Lessons can be a feminist intervention into the higher ed classroom, the History classroom and otherwise, and her research interests include feminist and queer theory, material culture theory, and pedagogy.

Sur Landfried (alias) graduated from the University of Marburg in Germany with a BA in educational science. Sur's primary focus is gender studies and queer theory and ze started to transfer this focus to hir minor in fine art. Sur is currently a student in the Master's program of educational science at Philipps-University Marburg. Sur recently presented at the conference, "Between Joy and Concern," an experimental workshop on experiences and strategies in power and discrimination critical practices" at Philipps-University Marburg in September 2015.

Amélie Ollivier is a first-year graduate student in Women Gender and Sexuality Studies at Oregon State University. She moved to the United States from France where she taught English at the Secondary Level for 8 years. Her research interests involve representations of diversity in the media and questions surrounding diversity in the classroom with a focus on LGBTQ issues.

Daniel Putney is an English and journalism student at the University of Nevada, Reno. He enjoys writing about queer-related concerns and social justice issues. His poetry has been published in various media.



“That Infinite Sphere”
Paradox, Paralepsis, and Politics in *Les guérillères*

Chase Gregory

"As they stand there with an open book the chosen passages are re-uttered from the other side by a voice that becomes distant and repeats itself. Lucie Maure cries to the double echo the phrase of Phenaraete, I say that that which is is. I say that that which is not also is. When she repeats the phrase several times the double, then triple, voice endlessly superimposes that which is and that which is not. The shadows brooding over the lake shift and begin to shiver because of the vibrations of the voice."

-- Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*

I begin this project *in medias res*, with a question that may seem somewhat auxiliary, but that nonetheless proved fundamental to my primary question: how do we define “shape?” More specifically, I feel that before I begin to answer my question, “What is the shape of *Les guérillères*?” I need to know the difference between “shape” and “form,” a distinction made in class while discussing this question, and one that I still haven’t quite pinned down. A quick online search yielded both definitions. Shape, I learned, is “the external form or appearance characteristic of something”; form, on the other hand, is something’s “visible shape or configuration.” And so upon first trying to solve this problem, I met a tautological impasse: shape is “an external form,” while form, on the other hand, is “the visible shape.” Having made, I thought, no significant progress in distinguishing the two terms, and stuck on this first step, I felt prevented from moving forward.

The question hasn’t gone away, but having come across this strange conflation of terms, and in the spirit of one of the most frequently-quoted lines of Monique Wittig’s book: “Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent,”¹ I will put the problem of “form versus shape” aside for a moment, and attack the text from another angle. As a war text, *Les guérillères* seems to me able to withstand a militant strategy of reading, one that, like its titular guerilla fighters, erupts in a variety of spaces and wields a variety of munitions. I will attack from another starting point, then: this time mathematically mapping, so to speak, the terrain of *Les guérillères*. Only in beginning again, I think, am I to get my bearings both temporally and spatially with regard to the shape (or is it the form?) of Wittig’s project.



There is, after all, another way to think of “form,” apart from “shape:” that is, form as it regards the style and genre of a text. In this sense, the form – that is, the genre – of a novel depends heavily on the *temporal logic of its narrative*, as well as the *temporal structure of the text*. Those might seem confusingly similar, so just to be clear: by “temporal logic of its narrative,” I mean the temporality of the story itself – what we can call vaguely “the plot” of *Les guérillères*; and by “temporal structure of the text,” I mean how Wittig chooses to lay out her novel, i.e., how the book reveals the plot to us.

Wittig herself classifies her novel as “an epic poem... a collage... you can't assign a genre to it outside of the epic movement given by the rhythm, the action, and the characters.”² Whether we classify *Les guérillères* as an epic, or as science fiction, or as a “utopian novel,” or as something else, all of these genre choices have different relations to time, and therefore different relations to the central question I want to ask of *Les guérillères*, namely, what is its relation to “the future.” This relationship to the future highlights what is at stake in theoretical readings of *Les guérillères*, as well as returns to a question that echoes throughout Wittig’s theoretical and literary work: how do we understand the future with regard to revolution, to politics, and to the relation between words or grammar and what we might call “material,” “real-world” action and activism?

For the purposes of my second attack strategy, I’m going to assume *Les guérillères* has three parts. Dividing a plot or a text into three parts might be a little suspect, seeing as any delineation of threes seems bound to be haunted by a Hegelian chronology, but I justify my decision based on a number of factors, primarily that *Les guérillères* is literally delineated into three parts by three bold **O**s, which interrupt the text once at the beginning, and twice in the middle, suggesting that the novel is, if not narratively, at least structurally a triptych. Breaking the book into three parts also allows me to theorize the complicated and often ambiguous narrative structure of the novel, as will become clear, I hope, in a moment.

So we have three parts, each marked by these circles, which I will try to summarize briefly here. For now, I will call the three sections of the book “Part One,” “Part Two,” and “Part Three,” and I will number them based on their appearances in the novel – these names, that is, reflect what I have called the temporal structure of the text. Thus “Part One” is the beginning part of the text, after the first circle, “Part Two” starts with the



second circle, and “Part Three” is the last third of the text, and comes after the third circle.

Les guérillères begins with a poem in capital letters. If we are to believe Wittig that the book's genre is closest that of an epic, we would expect it to begin with an invocation to a muse, or perhaps a *praepositio*, stating the epic's theme. Instead, we open with a gap: the first words of the text, “GOLDEN SPACES LACUNAE,” rather than ground us, instead seem to call into being a non-place, a space, a hole. What does it mean to call a “space” golden? The list of disparate images that follows, a *parataxis* of short, intense phrases, reads like montage or collage: “THE WEAPONS PILED IN THE SUN... THE DEAD WOMEN THE DEAD WOMEN” etc. inundate us, like a *guerrilla* attack, but also like a carnival, full of colors (green, violent, gold...). Is this a different kind of invocation? If so, to what muse does it speak? In any case, this strange parataxic prelude ends with a scene of “triumph,” and the phrase “ALL ACTION IS OVERTHROW.”³ We thus begin with an overthrow and a gap, before the first circle marks the beginning of what we are calling “Part One.”

A brief aside here: the exact end/beginning of each section is slightly ambiguous, seeing that in the English version of *Les guérillères* the circle images fall between paragraphs, so that it's unclear in what section that paragraph belongs, whereas in the French edition, the circles come at the end of the paragraph instead of intersecting it. In addition, the book is further marked by lists of names (a continuing list?) in capital letters, perhaps recalling list of dead soldiers on a war memorial. These names periodically interrupt the text, and echo also, in terms of their formatting, the poem in the beginning of the book. Finally, gaps or lacunae exist between the segments of text in the book – blocks of words that I hesitate to call “paragraphs,” because they seem to exist independent of one another, so that the effect of reading them is less like a continuous narrative than it is like cinematic montage. All of these interruptions and gaps contribute to a text that seems riddled with holes and blank spaces, something to keep in mind when we think about its shape.

The world of Part One is a world “turned... upside down;”⁴ a bacchanalia characterized by laughter, flooding, rain, pastoral scenes, lists of fruits, perfumes, incenses, infighting, engineers, and the invocation of multiple named Goddesses. Writes Wittig: “*Elles* tries to make its way across the labyrinth of dead culture of ancient signs, of representations—across stories, facts, history, ancient symbols. *Elles* exalts itself in some of the ‘feminaries’; *elles* is caught in the trap of narcissism or self-admiration.”⁵



It's in Part One, also, that we first hear of the "feminaries"—bound litanies describing sexual difference and exalting the biological markers of female-ness:

They say that they expose their genital so that the sun may be reflected therein as in a mirror. They say that they retain its brilliance. They say that the pubic hair is like a spider's web that captures the rays... They are all illuminated at their centre, starting from the pubes the hooded clitorides the folded double labia.⁶

Slowly, however, *elles* begins “to transcend itself;” the feminaries begin to lose meaning, and a new generation of “young girls” are now “amused” by them. “Terms to designate the vulva” fall into obsolescence and cannot be deciphered.⁷ At the end of Part One, right before the second **O** appears on the page, the feminaries, at first so crucial, “have fulfilled their function:” the *elles* burn them in a celebration, it rains, and the colony of former fighters goes to bed in the trees.

In Part Two, we see a shift away from natural metaphors and towards a different way of knowing oneself. The women dance, “giving voice to a song from which no coherent phrase emerges.”⁸ Whereas laughter is the primary mode of Part One, Part Two is also marked by grief: there is crying, lamentation, drunkenness. There is more pain, more ambiguity, and even a scene of painful ecstasy, which one can choose to read (depending on how one perceives the timeline of the book, as we'll see) either as an epileptic prophesy or an episode of intense, post-war PTSD.

At a given moment she lets herself fall to the ground, she strikes the ground with her arms, she rolls about shrieking. Her mouth seizes the earth and spits it out. Her gums bleed. Words like death blood blood burn death war war war are heard.... Four of the women carry her, singing, Behind my eyelids/the dream has not reached my soul/whether I sleep or wake/there is no rest.⁹

Paralepsis – that rhetorical device in which a subject is brought up by its negation—factors heavily in Part Two: now the women “do not say” what they “said” before. Part Two ends with an escalation of violence, games, and laughter: “Then they begin to laugh ferociously, slapping each other on the shoulders. Some of the women, lips parted, spit blood”¹⁰.

As we read, the chronological ordering of Part Two becomes more and more ambiguous: are the women predicting, or remembering? Consider the last paragraph of what I am calling Part Two:



The women say that, with the world full of noise, they see themselves as already in possession of the industrial complexes. They are in the factories aerodromes radio stations. They have control of communications. They have taken possession of aeronautical electronic ballistic data-processing factories. They are in the foundries tall furnaces navy yards arsenals refineries distilleries. They have taken possession of pumps presses levers rolling-mills winches pulleys cranes turbines pneumatic drills arcs blow-lamps. They say that they envisage themselves acting with strength and happiness. They say that they hear themselves shout and sing, Let the sun shine / the world is ours.¹¹

By the time we reach the third and final **O**, it's unclear (as it was unclear in the PTSD/prophesy episode) whether this vision is of the future or the present: the verb "see" in "the women see already" occupies a strange place in time.

Part Three, in contrast to the first two parts of the novel, is characterized both by an extreme rise in violence and by the introduction of *ils*, the first time we see the masculine pronoun (besides one brief reference to a book written by a dead author in part one). There are battle scenes of all sorts: cavalry, archers, troops armed with rifles, clubs, blades, torches, and futuristic ray guns; women mock men as "vile creatures,"¹² hiss at them, mock their "tails"¹³ attack bearded strangers, and launch bombs and grenades. Some of the younger men surrender and join the rebel fighters, who embrace them. The war crescendos; it is going well, women march in the thousands.

The text ends with another poem, again in capital letters, that echoes the poem in the beginning both in its format and its parataxis. Here, again, there are gaps ("MARGINS SPACES INTERVALS"), but also a more violent call to action: "AGAINST TEXTS / AGAINST MEANING / WHICH IS TO WRITE VIOLENCE / OUTSIDE THE TEXT."¹⁴ Then, after this last poem, a coda of sorts: a song at the end of a war: "And when it had finished and we remained there in a kind of embarrassed silence, a woman at the end of the hall cried, Comrades, let us remember the women who died for liberty. And then we intoned the Funeral March, a slow, melancholy and yet triumphant air."¹⁵

At the outset, we might be tempted to read the book so that the narrative structure and the textual structure are both linear and in order; that is, as the book proceeds from Part One, to Part Two, to Part Three, so does the plot proceed from beginning, to middle, to end. A careful reader gets the



sense, though, that it's not that simple. Not only does the brief textual gloss I've just offered seem to refute or at least complicate a simple linear reading, but also various comments by Monique Wittig herself seem to indicate that something else is going on here, and more complicated structures of time are at play.

Suspicious though I am of arguments based on authorial intent, it might be useful to look at Wittig's own comments about the structure of *Les guérillères*, of which she made a few, at different times in her career. In "The Mark of Gender," an essay published in 1985, Wittig describes the book as a "total war," where "the third part of the book" is in fact the "chronological beginning of the narrative," and, as would follow, "the textual beginning [is] in fact the end of the narrative."¹⁶ So, it follows that the temporal logic of *Les guérillères* is Part Three, Part Two, Part One; or, Part Two, Part Three, Part One; depending on what Wittig means by "the end" – here "the end of the narrative" could mean "the last third of the narrative within a linear temporal logic" (i.e., Part 3), or "the last two-thirds of the narrative within a linear temporal logic" (Parts 2 and 3). Either way, two things remain consistent: Part One, the beginning of the narrative plot, is at the textual end of the book, which means that either way (3, 2, 1 or 2, 3, 1) this book starts *in medias res*. This should remind us again of the Homeric epic, in which the text begins in the middle of the narrative action.

Other things, it should be clear now, point us in the direction of *Les guérillères*-as-epic. The book contains various *enumeratio* or epic catalogues: long genealogies, lists of places, objects, ancestors, and names. It's repeated "they say... they do not say" recall *The Odyssey's* recurring verbal tic, "So he spoke," "Thus he spoke," or variations thereof. *Les guérillères* is universal and vast in scale, calls upon the divine, and describes a war. It even has an epic hero, though a less conventional one: for Wittig, the hero is "*elles*," both the pronoun and the group.¹⁷

But before we get too happy with ourselves, and declare the problem of genre solved – our answer is that *Les guérillères* is a simple linear epic, beginning in the middle of the action and ending with the end of a violent war – it's worth considering another commentary by Wittig, a piece titled "Some Remarks on *Les guérillères*," published in 1994, nearly ten years after "The Mark of Gender." Here Wittig complicates her initial explanation *Les guérillères's* temporal structure.



Wittig still insists that “[the] section of *Les guérillères* written first... becomes the last part of the text, the textual end of the book,”¹⁸ a statement that would seem to support either the (3, 2, 1) or the (2,3,1) interpretation. Even more helpful is her assertion, directly following this description, that the book “is written back to front” and “must therefore be read back to front”¹⁹; this clearly suggests a textual temporal structure that is the inverse of the narrative temporal structure of the novel: (3, 2, 1). Again, we still have a narrative heading towards a future, even if that future is placed textually at the beginning of the novel. We are still, for now, in the realm of modernism, where the revolutionary act is merely a stylistic reversal of *textual* temporal logic rather than an attack on the *narrative* temporal logic that relies a “future” at all.

In the wake of Wittig’s 1994 essay, though, things get more complicated. In this second essay, Wittig also insists on the formal structure of a *circle*, a structure referenced by the three **O**s visually marking the text, as well as by the various invocations of the theme of the circle by the characters *elles* themselves (the ring, the vulva, the sun, the O, the zero, etc.). “The circle appears three times in *Les guérillères* and indicates how the book develops chronologically and formally,” writes Wittig. “And its meaning changes each time. The first circle corresponds to the emergence out to the labyrinth, out of the old culture; the second gives the manner of functioning of the text; the third is that of the action, of overthrow, of the epic poem.”²⁰

By introducing the *circle* as *Les guérillères*’ “modus operandi,” Wittig turns a line into a shape, as the book “turns on itself to rejoin the beginning of the text.” Thus what was originally thought to be a reverse linear structure – 3,2,1 – now folds in on itself a looping myriad of narrative options. Many moments in the text support this reading of *Les guérillères* as a circle. The constant thematic allusions to circles and cycles, the zero, the sun, etc. already discussed are supplemented by a description, in Part Two, of the strategic movement of *elles* themselves: “Their peregrinations are cyclical and circular. Whatever the itinerary, whatever point of departure they choose, they end up in the same place”²¹. Anywhere is now the beginning! If we were to imagine tracing our finger around the circumference of a circle that had been designated into three parts, we might come up with any of these temporalities: starting at Part 1 and going in one direction, {1,2,3}; starting at Part 2, {2, 3, 1}; starting at Part 3, {3, 1, 2}; or, going the other direction, {1, 3, 2}; {2, 1, 3}; or {3, 2, 1}, respectively.



Here, let's think of the direction we move (counterclockwise or clockwise) as the narrative temporal structure of *Les guérillères*, and the numerical combinations ($\{1,2,3\}$, $\{3,2,1\}$, etc.) as the textual temporal structure of *Les guérillères*. As you can see, though, within this circular model we are still bound in some ways to a linear temporality, inasmuch as we have to choose between going clockwise or going counterclockwise; i.e., between reading the novel front to back, or back to front. "Clockwise" and "counterclockwise" here are particularly apt terms, as we need only to think of the hands of a clock, moving forward or moving back, to understand that this model still exists in a space where moving "forward" or "backward" in time is still conceivable: that is, there is still a "past, present, and future" in this model, although a more complicated one; we can still only ever move "forward" or "back," we still either *progress* or *regress*.

Again, we seem to have reached our answer: *Les guérillères* is a circle. Except that here, again, sentences later in her 1994 commentary, Wittig transcends her own formal description again, adding quite literally another dimension to the shape of the novel when she describes the structure of the book as, in the words of Blaise Pascal: " 'It's virtually that infinite sphere whose center is everywhere, circumference nowhere.'"²² In the text itself, the aforementioned "cyclical and circular" peregrinations of the women don't exactly fit the description of a flat circle, and instead seem much more complicated: "they follow the path from the interior to the exterior they must traverse the widest of the circles before finding the cross-passage that leads them to the center. At the same time it is without limit, the juxtaposition of the increasingly widening circles configures every possible revolution."²³ We move from a circle to an "infinite sphere," that is, from two to three dimensions.

We are again troubled by the middle, by the lacunae at the middle of an **O**. Wittig describes this second part of the book as "going back and forth between a future and a past" at once readying the reader for the war to come and describing "the modification of the naive conceptions of the *guérillères* such as they were just after the war, that is to say in the first part... this immediate part is not the center of the book since 'it is everywhere.'"²⁴ To try to unravel this dizzying description, it's worth returning to the Part Two of *Les guérillères*, since this is the part giving us the most trouble, and since it is, after all, where Wittig locates "the manner of functioning in the text."²⁵



As has been already noted, Part Two is marked, as a text, by recurring paralepsis, especially in reference to the feminaries, which factor prominently also in Part One from page 58:

They say that they did not garner and develop the symbols that were necessary to them at an earlier period to demonstrate their strength. For example they do not compare the vulvas to the sun moon stars. They do not say that the vulvas are like black suns in the shining night.²⁶

And, again, a few pages later:

They do not say that Vulvas with their elliptical shape are to be compared to suns, planets, innumerable galaxies. They do not say that gyrators movements are lie vulvas. They do not say that the vulva is the primal form which as such describes the world in all its extend, in all its movement. They do not in their discourses create conventional figures derived from these symbols.²⁷

Wittig, in her 1994 analysis of her work, links these various paralepses with the structure of the text. “The paralepses also function to put the reader on guard against a linear reading of the text,” she writes. And later: “As well as certain fragments of the text... The war is already made in this second part. However it has yet to come in the text. For in a text of fiction one can be, as here, at once in the present, the future, and the past”²⁸. The negations function as more gaps, more lacunae. Thinking through these negating paralepses, then, I want to offer a twist on the novel’s thematic circle, to bring it into the third dimension: what if *Les guérillères* is a Mobius strip?

The Mobius strip, discovered in 1858 by German mathematician August Mobius, is sometimes defined as a surface with only one side. To make a Mobius strip, simply take two-dimensional surface and connect its two opposing edges together, twisting one of the edges. Writes Clifford Pickover in *The Mobius Strip: Dr. August Mobius's Marvelous Band*: “It has become a metaphor for change, strangeness, looping, and rejuvenation. In fact, today the Mobius band is the ubiquitous symbol for recycling, where it represents the process of transforming waste materials into useful resources.”²⁹ The famous strip, in addition to being a mathematical paradox – a so-called “hole within a hole”³⁰ – is also a “non-orientable surface:” that is, if a two-dimensional figure travels around/along the Mobius strip from start to finish in one direction, it will return as its own mirror image. Put more simply: it is impossible to travel either simply “clockwise” or “counterclockwise” on a Mobius strip without somehow changing one’s orientation.



In part because of these intriguing properties, the Möbius strip has been nearly exhausted as a metaphor, not only famously in Lacanian analysis – a tricky subject, no doubt, when talking about the work of a prominent materialist feminist – but also, relatedly, in my own field of queer theory, notably by Diana Fuss,³¹ Lee Edelman,³² but by others as well. Psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan has used the strip as a topological metaphor for understanding how psychoanalysis collapses multiple binaries even as it enforces them – unconscious/conscious, for example, or signifier/signified³³– and also as a way to think through what he calls “traversing the fantasy.”³⁴ Because the only thing that distinguishes the two sides of a Möbius strip is the time it takes to run one’s finger around its surface, it serves as a helpful model for the structure of the (Lacanian) unconscious: that is, as a language.

Edelman, in an essay for an early gay and lesbian theory compendium edited by Diane Fuss in 1991, describes the strip as both a helpful metaphor for metalepsis (the rhetorical substitution of cause for effect), and as a shape distinguished by “the impossibility of distinguishing its front from its back, a condition that has... [not only] an immediate sexual resonance; [but also] a crisis of certainty, a destabilizing of the foundational logic on which knowledge as such depends.”³⁵ In both models of the Möbius strip, time remains the thing that both is troubled by and constitutes the strip’s shape, which means that the strip, if we’re going to take it seriously as a model for a narrative, is not only a spatial model, but a temporal one as well—a reason, as I hope is clear from the start of this talk, that makes it a particularly appealing model for *Les Guérillères*.

Before we go any further: I remain wary of recuperating Wittig, as some have done, as either a “proto-queer theorist” or, as others have claimed, as an inventor of certain “queer” theories outright (for examples, see the 2007 special issue of *GLQ* devoted to Wittig), not only because in our contemporary moment the entire definition of the academic/activist buzzword “queer” is highly up for debate, but also because projects of recuperation seem to me always in danger of disregarding complicated histories in favor of simplified progress narratives. It’s tempting, with the vocabularies we have in the present moment, to group Wittig’s theories under one theoretical banner, be it “queer theory” or “materialist feminism” or “French post-structuralism,” or something else. Nonetheless, I feel obliged to note the channels by which I first became familiar with Wittig: two classes, one in undergrad and one in my first year of graduate school, with “queer” in the title.



I note this not only in the spirit of academic honesty – I want you to know where I’m coming from – but also because I do find in Wittig’s writing, and particularly in *Les Guérillères*, a strange way of thinking about time and narrative that I am tempted to call “queer.” Furthermore, the “twist” of the Mobius strip recalls, to me, the etymology of “queer” – from the Middle High German root **terkw-* “to turn, twist, wind”³⁶ – with the added bonus of spatializing, quite effectively I think, what I see as a resistance to a “straight,” future-oriented readings that linear, or even circular, temporality might imply. Although I use the Mobius strip metaphor slightly differently than either Lacan or Edelman, I think it’s important to discuss ways in which the strip has been used by previous queer and psychoanalytic theorists, especially given the ambiguous and often contested relationship of Wittig’s work to queer theory, and her noted opposition, as a member of *Questions féministes*, to Lacanian/Freudian *Psych et Po* school of French feminist thought in the late 1970s.³⁷

It’s worth noting, too, that Wittig herself references the Mobius strip in *The Straight Mind*, in her 1989 essay “On The Social Contract.” Here, the strip functions as a limited metaphor for the construction of homosexuality:

If I try to look at the dotted line that delineates the bulk of the social contract, it moves, it shifts, and sometimes it produces something visible, and sometimes it disappears altogether. It looks like a Mobius strip... But this Mobius strip is fake, because only one aspect of the optical effect appears distinctly and massively, and that is heterosexuality. Homosexuality appears like a ghost only dimly and sometimes not at all.³⁸

Thus, the heterosexual social contract becomes recognizable only as it “goes without saying.”³⁹ So we can use the Mobius strip, or rather, what Wittig terms the “fake” Mobius strip, to understand the hegemony of heterosexuality. But we can also think about it in terms of gender, and the fixed gender binaries Wittig is interested in undoing, particularly in *Les guérillères*.

In fact the Mobius strip proves to be a useful way of thinking about how grammar functions in *Les guérillères*, especially given how Wittig describes it herself, as a kind of universalizing agent that collapses or makes unreadable differences in gender. By universalizing the (hitherto) feminine form of “they” – that is, the plural pronoun “elles” that reoccurs throughout the text – Wittig “set[s] up *elles* in the text as the absolute



subject of the world.” This *elles* (regrettably translated as “the women” in the English version, and thus in the English arguably not quite escaping the mark of gender) is meant both as a full-scale “assault” on the masculine universal subject *ils*, and, as the “conqueror” of the world of masculine subject, its new universal. As Wittig puts it: “The goal of this approach is not to feminize the world, but to make the categories of sex obsolete in language.”⁴⁰

It’s also worth mentioning that, in his exhaustive study on the Mobius strip in mathematics, games, literature, art, and technology, Pickover notes that one of the works of literature with a Mobius-shaped-plot is Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*: “In some ways, *In Search of Lost Time* resembles a chunk of spacetime that contains past, present, and future. In this chunk, the reader and Proust may explore the story like they would a hyperspace palace, wandering in time and space through rooms anchored in different epochs.”⁴¹ Wittig cites Proust as an example of a “war machine” similar to her own project in *Les Guérillères*, in her essay “The Trojan Horse:” “By the end of *Remembrance of Things Past*, it’s done. Proust has succeeded in turning the ‘real’ world into a homosexual-only world.”⁴² And later, in “The Mark of Gender:” “This understanding both global and particular, both universal and unique, brought from a perspective given in homosexuality, is the object of some extraordinary pages by Proust.”⁴³

Like Wittig’s grammatical move, the Mobius strip also turns two sides into one. Mimicking the trick of the Mobius strip, Wittig makes *elles* a universal rather than a specific pronoun only through the narrative structure of time; in much the same way that by moving our finger along the Mobius strip, through time, we come to understand a two-sided structure as a one-sided structure, so do we, through a progressive linear structure of narrative, come to know *elles* not as one side of a masculine/feminine gender delineation, but as the universal itself. This logic of universalization *over time* is present in “The Mark of Gender,” when Wittig describes the necessity for “two-thirds of the text ...to be totally inhabited, haunted, by *elles*... Only then could *il(s)*, *they*, appear, reduced and truncated out of language” (emphasis mine). Wittig insists on the necessity for the story to “eliminate, in the first two parts, any ‘he’ any ‘they-he.’”⁴⁴ Such statements would lead us to believe, if we take Wittig at her word, that the text propels itself towards a future of universal *elles*, in a linear time structure in which *elles* gains dominance and universality over the specific *ils* only through its repeated, militant insistence in the first two-thirds of the text.



However, as we have previously established, time in *Les guérillères* is not so simple. Let's return briefly to the sentence from "The Mark of Gender" quoted earlier: "two-thirds of the text had to be totally inhabited, haunted, by *elles*... *Only then* could *il(s)*, *they*, appear, reduced and truncated out of language." ⁴⁵ Upon closely re-reading this sentence, we see a more confusing temporality at work. Although the "only then" of "Only then could *ils* appear" suggests a progressive, linear, causal buildup, the verb "haunted," in the phrase "totally inhabited, haunted, by *elles*" complicates our conception of time quite a bit, as for something to "haunt" a text, or anything for that matter, it must already have existed. Thus for a "haunting" *elles* to fully "inhabit" two-thirds of the text, in order that the form of *elles* might transcend *ils* in the future, means that this transcendence is based not solely on a utopic future, nor on a utopian "return" to an Amazonian past, but on an endlessly recurring, haunted, twisted and slightly shifting relational *elles* whose meaning changes not because of a temporal progression within the *narrative*, but because of its spatio-temporal *position* within the *text*. *The future is here presented as a paradox without beginning or end, where two sides actually become one and the same.*

A turn to a more three-dimensional topology seems particularly apt, given *Les guérillères*'s attention both to landscape and to material – mud, water, ruins, blood, flesh, food, terrain, buildings, etc. The move from two to three dimensions is also a move from the Cartesian plane, with its binaries of *x* and *y*, to a geography that has not only length and breadth, but depth as well. Considering Wittig's attention to material means paying attention to material's *three-dimensionality*, its existence in both time (history) and space (matter). It is here, at the intersection of time and the material, that politics and the future become a matter of concern.

Much has been made of *Les guérillères*'s status as a "utopian" text – some critics (Chisolm, Nelson-McDermott, etc.) describe it as a work of Amazonian futurism, a radical lesbian science fiction about a revolution fought and won. Science fiction has long been associated with the "open future" of utopia, but such a reading of the of *Les guérillères* as utopic science fiction fails to allow for a more complicated temporarily, one which posits an (anti)politics of paradoxical return, rather than of a promising tomorrow.

Les guérillères's three-part, seemingly dialectical structure, as well as its status as radical feminist science fiction, at first suggests a utopian vision



of a future synthesis born of a revolutionary women's struggle, and indeed it has been read that way. And yet, as we have seen, the shape of narrative seems to resist linearity or progression, which a simply future-oriented reading would suggest. The circles marking the beginning of each section, as well as Wittig's statement about how the text "should" be read – that is, with the chronological end of the narrative at the locational beginning of the book – makes it hard to find a beginning or an end to the narrative at all, calling to mind the "always already" of deconstruction. *To quote a debate held by the elles amongst themselves in Part Two:*

The progression continues simultaneously with the completion of the cycle. But that is to say too much or too little. The women say that, to complete a cycle, a series of brilliant deeds or extraordinary and baleful events is required. Charlotte Bernard says that they are not concerned. Emmanuela Chartre says that it is no longer done to marvel at that kind of cycle. Marie Serge says that in any case the cycle may relate to myth and may not mention acts that have any semblance of reality. Flaminie Pougens says that for the women to be wholly engaged it is necessary to invent these. Then they laugh and fall backward from force of laughing.⁴⁶

Is *Les guérillères*, then, strictly parody? Do we read Wittig ironically – laughing like the women in her book? There is, after all, a good amount of satire in *Les guérillères*, especially in Wittig's descriptions of the feminaries, an ironic nod to previous, essentializing movements within women's liberation, which Wittig criticizes in *The Straight Mind* and elsewhere. Like the feminaries, Wittig sees these movements as reinforcing the gender dichotomy that leads to women's oppression ("The Mark of Gender," etc). Similarly, the *elles* of *Les guérillères* come to eventually laugh at the thought of liberation coming from a mere reversal of binary oppression: "It deploys a series of terms which are systematically related to opposite terms. Its theses are so crass that the thought of them makes the women start laughing violently... They joke on this subject, they say it is to fall between Scylla and Charybdis, to avoid one religious ideology only to adopt another."⁴⁷ Read this way, Wittig's work ceases to become a utopian vision and instead becomes a parody of such revolutionary utopian projects.

This reading, though, is again too simple. In fact, both a dialectical and deconstructive readings of *Les guérillères* are possible, and coexist in tension. Here, genre is key: by insisting on the novel's status as epic rather than as science fiction, Wittig changes its relationship to the future. The subjects of *Les guérillères* are constantly remaking and transcending elles



– themselves – and here is “overthrow” is the overall operation of the text, what Wittig calls its *gesta* or, at another point, its “epic movement,” its “rhythm.”⁴⁸ Its screwy, circular, Mobius-strip time and shape allows for holes in meaning and plot that remain unresolved; though the book may hint at resolution at its end, the join or overlap between the first “ACTION OVERTHROW” (page 2) and the last “ALL ACTION IS OVERTHROW” (page 144) brings us back to a circular structure with a slight twist, a repetition-with-difference. We return, in other words, to the “PHOENIX” of the first all-capital poem, even as we mourn “THE DEAD WOMEN” whose names recur throughout, and constantly haunt, the text.

In the spirit of the Mobius strip, I would like to return, now, to the very beginning of this paper, and the question I found myself stuck on: the difference between “shape” and “form.” As I pointed out, I was originally caught in a looping tautology, where “shape” was defined as “an external form,” while “form” was “the visible shape.” Now, revisiting this problem, I see a way to twist what seems like a circular tautology, focusing instead on what I first thought to be synonyms but which now seem quite different: that is, the difference between “external” and “visible.” While the novel’s *form* might be “visible” in many ways – the arrangement of the texts, the white spaces of the gap, the mark of the circle on the page, etc. – its *shape* is “external;” it is, in other words, outside. In the case a Mobius strip (a shape with, in many ways, no discernible “outside” at all) shape becomes, in effect, the “hole within a hole.” This infinite sphere is in fact a gap, a looping figure eight of infinity characterized by its double-lacunae.

The “hole within a hole” of the Mobius strip is a rupture through which the utopian *gesta* is enacted, but never accomplished: not a future, so much as a proliferation of presents, actions that lead nowhere but that do not necessarily remain unchanged, like the two dimensional figure traveling along the non-orientable Mobius strip, whose image shifts as a necessity of making the journey back to the beginning. Comparing her work to the Brechtian project of anti-Aristotelian “epic drama,” Wittig states that *Les guérillères* takes on a “revolutionary dimension” that “has the advantage of presenting to the spectator and open, incomplete form on which s/he can immediately exercise his/her critique, and act.”⁴⁹ This emphasis on openings in gaps is key to understanding the time, space, and politics of the novel.

Rather than proclaiming a vision of utopia, *Les guérillères* pushes back against the very idea of a “future” to be eventually arrived at, challenging rhetorics of revolution based on progression towards a common, collective



goal. Such futures, as the negative turn in queer theory would later point out, rest heavily on an implicit or explicit notion of reproductive, generational progress, abjecting the non-reproductive, capital-Q “Queer” impulse in order to fetishize a future and create a politics.⁵⁰ At the same time, this is not simply nihilistic repetition à la the death drive, but a cycle in which things are invented, slightly remade, revised – queered, in the etymological sense. Wittig’s text insists on the twist in the cycle. Her narrative of war and revolution doubles back on, contradicts, interrupts, and undoes itself... presenting a myriad of different strategies, Wittig allows the political goals of *Les guérillères* to shift as often as the referent of its ubiquitous pronoun, *elles*, also shifts. Wittig blurs the line between two camps –that of the dialectical revolution and that of the deconstructive revolution – and thus serves to call both into question.

Writes Wittig of the revolutionaries towards the end of Part Two:

They say that they foster disorder in all its forms. Confusion troubles violent debates disarray upsets disturbances incoherencies irregularities divergences complications disagreements discords clashes polemics discussions contentions brawls disputes conflicts routs debacles cataclysms disturbances quarrels agitation turbulence conflagrations chaos anarchy.⁵¹

Les guérillères is not a linear progression towards a future, nor is it a zero-sum game. Rather, it is a rupture, an interruption, an attack on the world and time we know, out of which something else, something alien, might burst.

Bibliography

- Delphy, Christine. “The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move,” *Yale French Studies* 87, no. 87 (1995): 190–221.
- Edelman, Lee. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Series Q (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
- Epps, Brad and Jonathan Katz, eds., “Monique Wittig at the Crossroads of Criticism,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 4 (2007), doi:10.1215/10642684-2007-020.
- Evans, Dylan. *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1996).
- Fuss, Diana. *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, Book, Whole (New York: Routledge, 1991), Lynne Huffer, *Mad for Foucault*:



- Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory*, Gender and Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).
- Kelley, Caroline. "Utopia: 1969: Renversement," *Drain Magazine*, 2010, <http://drainmag.com/utopia-1969-renversement-caroline-kelley/>.
- Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Book, Whole (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988).
- De Lauretis, Theresa "When Lesbians Were Not Women" ("Autour de L'oeuvre Politique, Théorique et littéraire de Monique Wittig," Paris, 2001), http://www.tanianavarrosain.com.br/labrys/special/special/delauretis.htm#_ftn1.
- Toril Moi, *Sexual/textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, 2nd ed, New Accents (London ; New York: Routledge, 2002).
- Pickover, Clifford A. *The Möbius Strip: Dr. August Möbius's Marvelous Band in Mathematics, Games, Literature, Art, Technology, and Cosmology* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2006).
- Wittig, Monique. *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992).
- . "Some Remarks on Les Guérillères," in *On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, Political, and Literary Essays*, ed. Namascar Shaktini (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).
- . *Les Guérillères*, trans. David Le Vay, Book, Whole (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007)

¹ Monique Wittig. *Les Guérillères*, trans. David Le Vay, Book, Whole (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007). 89.

² Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). 37.

³ *Les Guérillères*, 1.

⁴ Monique Wittig. "Some Remarks on Les Guérillères," in *On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, Political, and Literary Essays*, ed. Namascar Shaktini (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005).41.

⁵ *Ibid*, 41.

⁶ *Les Guérillères*, 19.

⁷ *Ibid*, 41.

⁸ *Ibid*, 54.

⁹ *Ibid*, 64.

¹⁰*Ibid*, 86.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 97.

¹² *Ibid*, 115.

¹³ *Ibid*, 106.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 142.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 144.

¹⁶ "Some Remarks on Les Guérillères," 19.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 40.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 41.



-
- ¹⁹ Ibid, 40, emphasis mine.
- ²⁰ Ibid, 42.
- ²¹ *Les Guérillères*, 69.
- ²² “Some Remarks on Les Guérillères,” 41; *Les Guérillères*, 69.
- ²³ Ibid, 69.
- ²⁴ Ibid, 42.
- ²⁵ Ibid, 21.
- ²⁶ *Les Guérillères*, 58.
- ²⁷ Ibid, 61.
- ²⁸ “Some Remarks on *Les Guérillères*” 40.
- ²⁹ Clifford A. Pickover, *The Möbius Strip: Dr. August Möbius’s Marvelous Band in Mathematics, Games, Literature, Art, Technology, and Cosmology* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth Press, 2006). xviii.
- ³⁰ Ibid, 2.
- ³¹ Diana Fuss, *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, Book, Whole (New York: Routledge, 1991). 7.
- ³² Lee Edelman, *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, Book, Whole (New York: Routledge, 1991).96-7, 113.
- ³³ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1996). 11.
- ³⁴ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Book, Whole (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988). 273.
- ³⁵ Edelman, *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, 97.
- ³⁶ Lynne Huffer, *Mad for Foucault: Rethinking the Foundations of Queer Theory, Gender and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010). 2.
- ³⁷ Christine Delphy. “The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move,” *Yale French Studies* 87, no. 87 (1995). 213.
- ³⁸ *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, 41.
- ³⁹ Ibid, 41.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid, 9.
- ⁴¹ *The Möbius Strip*, 180.
- ⁴² *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, 74.
- ⁴³ Ibid, 88.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid, 9.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid, 9.
- ⁴⁶ *Les Guérillères*, 79.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid, 80.
- ⁴⁸ “Some Remarks on Les Guérillères,” 37.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid, 37.
- ⁵⁰ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Series Q (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
- ⁵¹ *Les Guérillères*, 90.