

# Butler on Wittig: From One Radical to Another Regarding Strategies of Emancipation

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## Abstract

Judith Butler and Monique Wittig are two feminist philosophers with many similarities, but also crucial differences. Wittig's starting point is the materiality of language where she posits that language has a dual function. It can affirm absolute reciprocity and equality among all speaking subjects in Being, but it can also institute artificial differences such as gender and sex. For Wittig, sex is a political category that establishes heterosexual society not in a binary way, but in a way that particularises women as "the sex" while men are universal subjects in Being. Wittig calls for emancipation through a two-pronged lesbian revolution to obliterate sexual difference. Although Butler agrees with Wittig on the materiality of language, the political nature of sex, and that there is no natural category of "women", they critique and differ from Wittig on two fundamental bases. The first is that Wittig uncritically invokes the metaphysics of substance with the concepts of Being and the subject, despite it being the basis of the heterosexual matrix. The second is Wittig's emancipation strategy of revolution over Butler's strategy of redeployment. This paper will discuss Wittig, Butler's critique of Wittig to articulate their own theory of gender performativity, and the more primary point, that Butler does not argue for full-scale revolution. Rather, their emancipation strategy from heterosexual society is more radical as it aims to trouble all identities, and the notion of identity itself, to make space for the legitimacy and recognition of "impossible" identities.

## About the author

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## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I present a twofold argument about Judith Butler's critique of Monique Wittig in Butler's *Gender Trouble*.<sup>1</sup> The first part of my argument is that Butler's critique of Wittig elucidates two crucial aspects of Butler's emancipation strategy from the heterosexual matrix, namely, their repudiation of metaphysics as well as their strategy of internal subversion. The second part of my argument is that Butler's strategy of emancipation is a more radical alternative to Wittig's strategy of emancipation. I am interested in Butler and Wittig, not only because they share many similarities, but also have crucial differences.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first section presents a brief overview of Wittig regarding her views on language, ontology, materialism, the nature of sex, and her conceptualisation of a lesbian revolution. The second section discusses Butler's first critique of Wittig which includes her metaphysical lingering. The third section considers Butler's second critique of Wittig's emancipatory revolution. In the final section, I discuss the significance of Butler's critique of Wittig for their own emancipation strategy, and why this also proves that Butler presents a more radical emancipation strategy than Wittig.

## 2. Wittig: Language, Ontology, Sex, and the Lesbian

Wittig (1989: 3; 1985: 6) claims that language is the first, permanent and final social contract that gives everybody the same power of becoming an absolute and equal subject. However, language has a dual function: it can access the fundamental ontology of Being, but it can also institute difference between individuals. In

the fundamental ontology of Being, all individuals are absolute subjects that are radically equal and the same (Wittig, 1985: 6). Henderson (2018: 196-197) claims that Wittig's notion of Being is similar to Habermas's ideal speech situation that affirms absolute reciprocity among speaking subjects within radical democracy.

The notion of difference only becomes possible within the socially constituted reality. Wittig (1979: 115) claims that any difference between categories of individuals is the result of a political, economic, and ideological order. Unlike the fundamental ontology of Being where everyone is equal and the same, Wittig (1980: 29) argues that there is nothing ontological about difference. In other words, differences between individuals are artificial categories in service of a socially constituted order. Wittig proposes that language can access the existence of a fundamental ontology and create a socially constituted reality of difference.<sup>2</sup>

The dual function of language is premised on Wittig's view of the materialist nature of language. Wittig's focus on language and concepts is material because she argues that concepts can act on the body. She argues that "language casts sheaves upon the social body" (Wittig, 1989: 10). This means that she does not view language as an abstraction, but rather that it has material effects on bodies and reality. Butler (2007: 522) describes materialism as the view that language acts upon the body, articulates its contours and categorises it.

Wittig's materialism is especially important to note for her discussion on the category of sex. She argues that the category of sex is a political category that establishes heterosexual society (Wittig, 1982: 66). The notion of sex as male and female is thus not a natural

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<sup>1</sup> Monique Wittig (1935-2003) is a French feminist author and philosopher that argues for an overthrow of the system of compulsory heterosexuality with a two-pronged lesbian revolution. Judith Butler is an American post-structural feminist philosopher that argues that both gender and sex are discursively constructed and per-

formed. In *Gender Trouble* (originally published in 1990), Butler discusses and critiques Wittig's work.

<sup>2</sup> An example of the social reality of difference is the gendered pronouns in language that institute the differences between men and women because it perpetuates the heterosexual binary (Karhu, 2016: 831).

division at all. When sex is analysed from Wittig's materialist perspective, she argues that sex works to oppress women and then claims that this same oppression is a result of their natural bodies. The category of sex implies that it is a women's nature to reproduce, raise children and do domestic chores (Wittig, 1982: 66-67). Butler (1993: 1-2) agrees with Wittig's view that sex is political and not natural when they claim that sex is a normative category that is forcibly materialised over time through repetitive performances. Similarly, for Wittig, sex is a category that is forcibly materialised through the discourse of a socially constituted reality of difference.

Wittig does not view sex as binary at all (Henderson, 2018: 193). She argues that within heterosexual society, only women are their sex and they have been made their sex in their minds, acts, bodies, gestures, and even their murders and beatings (Wittig, 1982: 68). It is important to note Wittig's fundamental ontology of Being and the socially constituted reality of difference. Women are the only sex, because they are defined by their sex – in other words, women have been particularised. Women are relegated as the different or the other in many ways (Wittig, 1980: 28-29). They are trapped within the socially constituted reality of difference, whereas men are absolute subjects in Being. Men are not different or others, they are the universal person and only they can participate in the fundamental ontology of Being (Wittig, 1983: 64).<sup>3</sup>

Wittig's emancipation strategy from heterosexual society is a lesbian revolution. Wittig (1981: 13) calls the lesbian a "not-woman, not-man", because the lesbian stands completely outside the heterosexual order and is thus free from it. A lesbian is not a woman, because this term only makes sense in an asymmetrical relation to a man within heterosexuality (Henderson, 2018: 193). Wittig (1980: 30) argues that lesbians and homosexual men cannot refer to themselves as men

and women, because that means that they are perpetuating heterosexuality. Based on this, she makes a sharp distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality, where the latter means freedom. Wittig (1989: 11; 1980: 27) also views heterosexuality as a universal and totalitarian order with courts, laws, terrors, mutilations, and police that control all mental production. Due to its totalitarian nature, the only way to emancipate oneself from heterosexuality is to overthrow the entire system itself.

The lesbian revolution also consists of the textual revolution. The textual revolution is when a writer attempts to universalise a minority point of view (Wittig, 1983: 66). This ties in with Wittig's fundamental ontology and the socially constituted reality of difference. When a writer universalises a minority point of view, the persons in these minority positions can assert themselves as absolute subjects in Being. In this regard, and based on her emphasis on language, Wittig (1984a: 45) argues that literary works act as a war machine against socially constituted difference.

I mentioned earlier in this section that language has a dual function: it can institute difference but also access Being. Wittig (1984b: 93) appeals to the latter function as a revolutionary practice, because language forms itself in a relationship of absolute reciprocity. In her own literary works, *The Lesbian Body* (1986) and *The Guérillères* (1971), Wittig attempts to universalise a lesbian point of view, and her use of gender-neutral pronouns is a means of moving away from difference, toward absolute reciprocity in Being. She also writes that the "I" in language reorganises the world from the speaker's point of view and lays claim to the universality of Being (1985: 6). Wittig's overall strategy of emancipation is thus to obliterate the sexual difference that founds heterosexual society to assert everyone as absolute, equal, and free subjects in Being.

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<sup>3</sup> In the same way, Wittig (1980: 28-29) argues that in racist societies, white people are not different but black people are.

### 3. Butler's First Critique of Wittig: Metaphysical Lingerings

Butler's first critique of Wittig is the metaphysical lingering that undergirds her interpretations of the heterosexual matrix and her emancipation strategy. To understand Butler's criticism, one needs to start with Butler's rejection of the discourse of the metaphysics of substance that Wittig maintains. Butler (2002: 27) agrees with Michel Haar, originally from Nietzsche, that substances are artificial philosophical means of instituting order, simplicity, and identity. However, substances do not reflect the true complexity of reality – they are illusions produced by language. For example, Butler (*ibid.*, 22) argues that identities only become intelligible when they are coherent and continuous and have some kind of intrinsic essence or self-identity. However, identities are far more complex, and this complexity problematises the notion of a coherent and essential identity. This complexity becomes even more evident when the discourse of the metaphysics of substance is read within gender and sexual identities in heterosexual society.

Gender and sexual identities under compulsory heterosexuality are only intelligible when they are coherent and continuous. Coherence and continuity come about within a binary system: for example, intelligibly “male” bodies are sexed as male (as opposed to female), and their gender is a man (as opposed to a woman), and based on being male and a man, they must desire the opposite sex (women) (Butler, 2002: 23-24). Gender and sexual identities are thus substances that aim to order reality under compulsory heterosexuality. Wittig (1989: 10) would agree with this, because she says that “language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body”. As a materialist, Wittig

casts sex and gender as substances that institute differences – it does not reflect reality in any way and creates artificial differences. Butler (2002: 33) uses this insight to introduce their theory of gender performativity which claims that substances such as gender and sexual identities continually create the phenomena that it purports to be.<sup>4</sup>

However, Butler argues against the entire discourse of the metaphysics of substance which includes substances such as the subject and Being – concepts that Wittig's theory heavily relies on. Butler (2002: 14) contrasts their view of “the subject” or “the person” with Wittig's view. Wittig subscribes to the humanist view of the subject when she claims that there is an absolute subject prior to language and the social. The subject or the person denotes the universal capacity for reason, morality, and language (in Being) and gender and sex is attributed after (*ibid.*). Butler (*ibid.*, 14-15), on the other hand, advocates for a relational view of the subject. In other words, “the subject” is not an absolute entity, but rather a relational being where these relations are constantly shifting in different contexts. Gender and sex, then, is a relation that is continually performing (instead of expressing) the subject which implies that there is no subject or person (viewed as coherent, continuous, and self-identical).<sup>5</sup>

Wittig (1985: 6) argues that a relative subject is inconceivable and could not speak at all – this shows that she needs the notion of an absolute subject in Being. However, if Wittig agrees that gender and sexual identities are substances (illusions of language that violently shape reality by imposing coherence and continuity), then what makes substances such as the subject and Being any different? Like sexual and gender identities, the subject and Being also appear to be self-identical, coherent, and continuous. Wittig (1982: 64)

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<sup>4</sup> Butler (2002: 10-11) claims that if the immutable binary nature of sex can be contested, then “sex” is in fact as culturally constructed as gender – sex was gender all along and there is no distinction between sex and gender. Binary sex is not the politically neutral surface onto which culture or gender acts.

<sup>5</sup> Butler (2002: 178, 180) argues that gender (and its corollary, sex) is a performance with punitive consequences that requires repetition of socially established meanings. If these identities are performative, instead of expressive, then they constitute the identity they claim to express or reveal.

argues that oppression creates sex, and she meant heterosexuality. However, Butler (2002: 33) would argue that there is an underlying oppressive mechanism at work as well – the metaphysics of substance. When one speaks “I”, it does not assert absolute subjectivity as Wittig claims, because “I” is constantly being constituted and performed.<sup>6</sup> For these reasons, Wittig cannot recourse to Being, the subject or the person, because they are part of the discourse of the metaphysics of substance – the same discourse that instituted the category of sex in the first place.

#### 4. Butler’s Second Critique of Wittig: Redeployment over Revolution

Butler’s biggest problem with Wittig is her notion of a world outside heterosexuality. As I explained in the first section, Wittig views heterosexuality as totalitarian, and universal, and the only way to be emancipated from it is to overthrow the entire system. This is the political dimension of the lesbian revolution. Butler identifies a few issues with Wittig’s emancipation strategy which allows them to formulate their own emancipation strategy. Firstly, Butler (2002: 154-155) critiques Wittig’s sharp distinction between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Butler argues that this is simply not the case – heterosexuality and homosexuality are embedded in each other and define each other relationally. When Wittig posits homosexuality or lesbianism as freedom, she fails to see that it is not only heterosexuality that informs sexuality (ibid., 155). For example, the discourse of the metaphysics of substance also constrains what possibilities can be realised in sexuality.

Secondly, Butler (2002: 156-157) critiques Wittig’s notion of revolution as a strategy of emancipation. Wittig (1982: 68) claims that we should destroy the category of sex and live beyond it. However, a key difference between Butler and Wittig is that Butler does not view

heterosexuality as totalitarian. Butler (2002: 155) instead views heterosexuality not only as a compulsory system, but also as an “inevitable comedy”, because its identities are impossible to embody. Instead of overthrowing the entire system, it is possible to undermine it from within its gaps.

Where Wittig (1980: 30) claims that gay men and lesbians cannot call themselves men and women, Butler asks what would happen if they did do this. The terms “women” and “men” would be redeployed against heterosexuality itself. Similarly, when lesbians have butch and femme identities in relationships, it is anything but a mere assimilation of lesbianism into heterosexuality as Wittig claims (Butler, 2002: 157). Instead, it reveals the artificial and constructed nature of feminine and masculine identities. Butler’s emancipation strategy is to use heterosexuality against itself in subversive contexts.

Butler is expressing their own emancipation strategy by contrasting it to Wittig’s revolution. In addition to this, Butler also reads strategies of redeployment in Wittig’s textual revolution. In 2007, Butler wrote an article revisiting their critique of Wittig’s textual revolution. When Wittig (1983: 66) argues that literary works should universalise a minority point of view, Butler argues that she is redeploying the term “universality”. The term “universal” is supposed to indicate shared and solid grounds for our cognitive experience (Butler, 2007: 526). In compulsory heterosexuality, Wittig (1983: 64) claims that the masculine denotes the abstract, universal person, whereas women are particularised. By universalising a minority point of view, as Wittig does herself in her literary work, she is denaturalising this universal. Wittig is in fact redeploying the concept of a “universal”.

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<sup>6</sup> For Butler, there is no subject, only doings.

## 5. The Relevance of Critiquing Wittig and the Radicality of Butler

Butler's two critiques of Wittig's emancipation strategy elucidates two crucial aspects of their own emancipation strategy. Firstly, when Butler critiques Wittig's metaphysical lingering to concepts such as Being and the subject, they are bringing fully into view the post-structural or relational insights that inform their theory of gender performativity. Butler wants to do away with age-old philosophical metaphysical ideals such as substance that ultimately undergird the heterosexual matrix itself to introduce their theory of gender performativity. Substances create and constrain the realities they claim to name, and this is exactly what sex and gendered identities do. We are always performing these identities, because we can never be them – they do not reflect any true order of reality.

Secondly, Butler's critique of Wittig's lesbian revolution allows them to fully articulate their own emancipation project of redeployment in subversive contexts. This links back to Butler's repudiation of the metaphysics of substance, because if gender and sex is always being performed, then it is possible to perform differently and subvert heterosexuality from inside itself. When homosexual relationships take up heterosexual norms such as the butch and femme identities in lesbian relationships, it is not the case that homosexuality is assimilating into heterosexuality. Butler (2002: 41) claims: "gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy". This implies that heterosexual norms in homosexual contexts denaturalises these norms, but more importantly, it also means that these identities are copies (or substances) of which the original never existed in the first place.

The second part of my argument is that Butler's emancipation strategy is more radical than Wittig's emancipation strategy. There are many similarities between Butler and Wittig: the discursive production of the heterosexual matrix, the political nature of "sex", and that there is no natural category of "women". It may seem

that Wittig's notion of a revolution is more radical than redeployment. However, I argue that such a view fails to see why Butler argues for redeployment in the first place. Due to the performative nature of heterosexual identities, identities and the metaphysics of substance as a whole, we can never escape performativity. Lesbianism is also subject to performativity – it is not complete freedom as Wittig argues.

After Wittig's lesbian revolution, we would still have to institute identities, uncritical of their performative nature. Instead of perpetuating the same discourse of substances that instituted oppression in the first place, we can instead open toward a future of multiplicities of identities. Redeployment can do this more than full-scale revolution ever could. Butler (2002: viii) already mentions this in the 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble* when they say the following: "the aim of the text was to open up the field of possibility for gender without dictating which kinds of possibilities ought to be realised". Butler does not locate an emancipatory telos in the figure of a lesbian outside the system, rather they are opening space for "impossible" identities to attain legitimacy.

## 6. Conclusion

Wittig argues that language can access the fundamental ontology of Being in which all individuals are equal and the same, but it can also institute material differences such as compulsory heterosexuality that institutes differences between individuals. The category of sex is the fundamental category undergirding heterosexuality, and it is produced through language. Wittig's emancipation strategy is the lesbian revolution that aims to overthrow heterosexuality entirely, both politically and through literature. Butler disagrees with Wittig's critique of sex and gender as metaphysical substances that constrain reality, while simultaneously affirming metaphysical substances such as Being and the subject. Butler also critiques Wittig for her conception of the lesbian revolution which is based on

a sharp distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality.

In this paper, I argued that Butler lodges two critiques against Wittig to fully articulate their own emancipation project. Repudiating the metaphysics of substance allows Butler to articulate their theory of gender performativity. Butler's critique of Wittig's revolution also enables them to formulate their own emancipation project of redeployment. Redeployment follows from Butler's view that gender and sex are con-

stantly being performed which implies that we can perform differently to subvert heterosexuality. Lastly, I argued that Butler's emancipation strategy is far more radical than Wittig's strategy, because Butler allows for an open future of gender possibilities in which substances, such as identities are constantly troubled. Wittig's entire overthrow of heterosexuality fails to recognise the underlying extent of the metaphysics of substance and thereby neglects to acknowledge that homosexuality or lesbianism does not mean complete sexual freedom.

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