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## RMA THESIS

QUEERING THE LESBIAN TEXT.

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### *Abstract*

Building on the link between Lesbian Studies and Queer Studies, this thesis examines the construction of lesbian subjectivities in three contemporary literary works, in particular Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* (1975 [1973]), Dacia Maraini's *Lettere a Marina* (1981), and Carole Maso's *Aureole: An Erotic Sequence* (1996). Challenging the dominant theoretical paradigms of their periods, these texts share a sensibility that retains several elements of critique that have become essential in queer studies —whose official birth only came in the 1990s,— such as the anti-essentialist approach to subjectivity, the emphasis on resistance enacted by means of discursive practices, as well as the ideas on the proliferation of sexual possibilities. Focusing in each chapter on a different facet of lesbian subjectivity, i.e. on a different way in which 'lesbian' can be queered, this thesis studies the textual manifestations of these authors' queer sensibilities, the kinds of lesbian bodies, identities, and desires that these texts contribute to producing, as well as the kinds of political responses and resistances these textual spaces enable. Overall, this thesis proposes that, in these texts, lesbianism ceases to be a subjectivity with predictable contents or to constitute a total political and self-identification. However, it figures no less central for that shift. It remains a position from which to speak, but it ceases to be the exclusive and continuous ground of identity or politics. Indeed, it works to unsettle rather than to consolidate the boundaries around the subject, not to dissolve them altogether but to open them to the fluidities and heterogeneities that make their renegotiation possible. As a result, the queer lesbian becomes not only a valid theoretical tool in the literary analysis, by expanding the discourses on lesbianism and opening up new critical terrains of analysis, but also a fruitful positioning from which to continue working for equality in our contemporary society.



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## *Introduction*

Lesbianism [...] a theme which cannot even be described as taboo, for it has no real existence in the history of literature. Male homo sexual literature has a past, it has a present. The lesbians, for their part, are silent.

(Wittig, *The Lesbian Body* 9)

In her introduction to *The Apparitional Lesbian* (1993), Terry Castle reveals a pervasive pattern that tends to miss or ignore the lesbian, making her invisible to culture itself. She compares western writing to a “kind of derealization machine: insert the lesbian and watch her disappear” (6). In the thirty years since Castle’s contribution, much work has been done to increase lesbian visibility in the cultural arena. However, as scholar in feminist, LGBT, and queer studies Annamarie Jagose argued in 2015, even in the relatively hospitable contexts of feminist and queer studies, where lesbians do not suffer from complete elision, something “awkward, almost shaming” about the lesbian persists (“Debating Definitions” 32).<sup>1</sup> Seemingly always already anachronistic to the scenes in which she appears, the lesbian has been persistently represented in terms of belatedness, derivation, imitation, and secondariness (*Inconsequence* xii). In the attempt to address this concern, my project brings the representation of lesbian subjectivities, bodies and desires to the foreground. More specifically, I examine the imbrication of sexuality and textuality, the erotic and the poetic, in lesbian contemporary literary works, in particular Monique Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body* (1975 [1973]), Dacia Maraini’s *Lettere a Marina* (1981), and Carole Maso’s *Aureole: An Erotic Sequence* (1996).

The historical moments, geographical locations, social, cultural and political issues these authors are/were entangled with are certainly very diverse, causing their works to seem to partially resist a juxtaposition. Monique Wittig, an exponent of radical lesbian feminism, was among the few activists that founded in 1970 the Mouvement de libération des femmes (Women’s Liberation

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<sup>1</sup> See also: Love, Heather. “Emotional Rescue.” In: Halperin, David M., and Valerie Traub. *Gay Shame*. University of Chicago Press, 2009, p. 257.



Movement, MLF) in Paris. By that time, she had already published two novels: *L'Opoponax* (1964) and *Les Guérillères* (1969), a “landmark in lesbian feminism” (Benewick 332-333). *Le corps lesbien* [*The Lesbian Body*] soon followed, circulating at the height of the wide-spread social upheaval, both in France and Europe, that is now referred to as the Second Wave Feminist Movement. Almost a decade later, Dacia Maraini, who had already gained recognition for her feminist novels *Memorie di una ladra* (Bompiani 1972) and *Donna in Guerra* (Einaudi 1975), published *Lettere a Marina* in 1981, “a watershed year for Italian lesbians in terms of political organization and public visibility” (Ballaro 178). The period 1980-81 witnessed the rise within the Italian culture of lesbianism as a visible phenomenon separate from its gay male counterpart, the emergence of national conferences on the lesbian issue as well as the birth of the CLI (*Collegamento Lesbiche Italiane*), the first national Italian lesbian organization (Bono and Kempt 165-166). If Wittig and Maraini can be encased under the rubric of second-wave feminist lesbian writing in Europe, by choosing to include Carole Maso my study partially deviates from that path. Maso is an Italian American novelist and essayist and, although she spent part of her life in Paris, was born and lives in the U.S. As an author, she has been said to “bridge second- and third-wave feminism” (Bona 187). *Ghost Dance*, her first novel, was published in 1986, after what Maso called her “apprenticeship years” during which she “learned to write by writing” (Harris 105). A decade later, when she had already gained popularity, Maso published her collection of short stories *Aureole*.

As seen, Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body* and Maraini’s *Lettere a Marina* were written in 1973 and 1981 respectively, thus from 20 to 10 years before the official birth of queer theory in the 1990s. Maso’s *Aureole*, instead, was published soon after queer theory’s inception, in 1996. Despite these spatial and temporal variations, I argue that what distinguishes all three authors and thus generates the premises for their encounter is a shared sensibility in representing lesbian subjectivities that retains several features and concerns that have become essential in queer theory. Grounded in post-

structuralism and deconstruction, queer theory works to actively critique heteronormativity,<sup>2</sup> i.e. those ideas, narratives and discourses which suggest that heterosexuality is the default, preferred, or normal mode of sexual orientation, and that gender identities are presumed to be cisgender (Jagose, *Queer Theory* 1). Queer theory is the lens used to explore and challenge how gender- and sex-based binaries are perpetrated, and its goal is to undo hierarchies and fight against social inequalities (Barber and Hidalgo). More precisely, these texts share with queer theory a similar deconstructive strategy, as well as an active engagement with several of its most often employed elements of critique —such as the anti-essentialist approach, the focus on resistance, the emphasis on discourse as a tool of power, and the ideas on the proliferation of sexual possibilities (Grosz, “Experimental” 209). Throughout my chapters, I focus each time on a different aspect of lesbian subjectivity. Taken together, I argue, Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body* (Ch. I), Maraini’s *Lettere a Marina* (Ch. II), and Maso’s *Aureole: An Erotic Sequence* (Ch. III) can provide a preliminary overview of the different ways in which lesbian can be queered, namely in the body, in the identity, and in the desire, respectively. Unsurprisingly, however, these aspects also partially intersect in my close readings, repeatedly expanding the discourses on lesbianism. Moreover, the rationale in selecting each work from a different decade speaks to my ambition to address not only the similarities among them, but also the differences in the authors’ approaches, thereby giving perhaps a sense of what has been achieved in almost 25 years.

Setting up my project in such manner, I examine how these queer sensibilities work, what kinds of lesbian bodies, identities and sexualities are constructed, as well as what kinds of political responses and resistances —to the patriarchal heteronormative order primarily, even though not exclusively— these textual spaces enable for lesbian subjectivities. As it will become clearer later in this introduction, I do not necessarily deem the deconstruction of identity as the “*disavowal* of

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<sup>2</sup> In his *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, Michael Warner employs the term ‘heteronormativity’ to refer to the complex ways in which “Het[erosexual] culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of human association, as the very model of intergender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn’t exist” (xxi). ‘Normal’ and ‘heterosexual’ are understood as synonymous. All social relations and all forms of thinking that exist with these relations are heteronormative. Heteronormativity creates a language that is ‘straight.’ As a result, living within heteronormative culture means learning to ‘see’ straight, to ‘read’ straight, to ‘think’ straight.

identity” (Fuss 104). Likewise, the giving up of a steady and integral identity does not necessarily imply the abandonment of recognizable and effective identity politics, quite the opposite. In the following, I first describe the relationship between LGBT (and lesbian, in particular) studies and queer studies, and what it would (and has) mean(t) to *queer* lesbian identity. Secondly, I retrace the debate, taking place in the 1980s and 1990s, that attempted to define ‘lesbian,’ ‘lesbian body,’ and ‘lesbian text,’ eventually turning to a theorization of them as inherently linked to each other and discursively constructed. Laying down these premises is crucial to understand the authors’ critical approaches as well as their texts’ political implications.

### *Lesbian Studies Versus Queer Studies: A Collision Model*

We have gone from unreflective confidence in the existence of sexual subjects — who only needed to be found and documented — to a boom in lesbian and gay studies filled with subjects speaking and writing about their own lives, to a suspicion that sexual subjects do not exactly exist to be studied, an ongoing deconstruction of sexual subjectivity.  
(Gamson 348)

While queer studies initially grew out of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) studies in the early 1990s (Duggan; Stein; Jagose, *Queer theory*)<sup>3</sup> and has frequently been described as its “radical face” (Parnaby 3), scholars have often pointed to the contested terrains among the two fields, especially that of (sexual) identity politics (Lovaas et. al., “Shifting Ground(s)” 1-2).<sup>4</sup> While many LGBT activists have made identity the herald of their claims for visibility and civil rights recognition,

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<sup>3</sup> Teresa de Lauretis coined the term ‘queer theory,’ in the context of a conference held at the University of California, Santa Cruz, in February 1990. At the same time, two other texts, which have been considered foundational for the emergence of queer studies although their authors do not explicitly employ the term ‘queer,’ were published: Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* and Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*. See also the works by Leo Bersani, David Halperin, Michael Warner and D. A. Miller, which gave the field “unprecedented legitimacy” (Love, “Feminist criticism” 301).

<sup>4</sup> Even though, in this section, I will treat predominantly queer studies’ concern with the non-essentializing nature of sexual identities, gender and sexuality is not the only area on which queer has had an impact. From the 1990s queer studies have progressively expanded its reach, and now, thirty years after its inception, it cannot “be contained within a single explanatory rubric or associated with a single field or form of knowledge” (<https://www.queerepistemicides.com/blog>).

queers are “not unified by any unitary identity but only to their opposition to disciplining, normalizing social forces” (Seidman 133). Queer studies emphasizes the fluid and continually performed nature of gender and sexuality and question socially established norms and binaries (e.g. heterosexual/homosexual; male/female; etc).<sup>5</sup> As a result, the two fields have often been seen as incremental stages of a developmental narrative, in which queer studies ultimately succeed LGBT studies by reassessing all their previous works as “under-theorized, [...] laboring under the delusion of identity politics” (Halperin 341; Jagose, “Debating Definitions” 41). Unsurprisingly, several scholars have rejected this depiction of LGBT identities as the “face[s] of sexual conservatism” (Jagose, “Debating Definitions” 42), as “step[s] on a path that leads in a queer direction” (Ahmed 223), and pointed, instead, towards the drawbacks of queer’s theorization of identity.<sup>6</sup> For these reasons, the fields have been described as in radical opposition, an “either/or dichotomy” (Piontek 95), or as a “collision model” (Doan 20).<sup>7</sup>

### *Queering Lesbian Studies, or Have Lesbians Always Been Queer?*

“Queer, for me, was not a sign that I was getting rid of identity; rather, it points to the fact that it is spoiled, partial, never fully achieved, but sticky, familiar, and hard to lose completely”  
(Love, *Feeling Backwards* 185).

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<sup>5</sup> In this way, queer aligns itself to postmodernist approaches, inasmuch as it emphasises “a self-reflexive understanding of gender and sexuality” (Lovaas et. al., “Shifting Ground(s)” 5). Conversely, LGBT studies have been associated with modernist approaches, for their undertaking “a search for knowable meanings via rational and scientific methods” (4). The wide corpus of the so-called ‘coming out literature’ constitutes one example of the latter mode of thinking. Seeing history as a linear process of progressive development and presuming a process of uncovering essential homosexuality, these texts conceive one’s past as having always contained the ‘true self’ that only needed to be discovered.

<sup>6</sup> Queer theory has been defined as “a bankrupt approach” (Brookey and Miller 139) and several scholars have questioned its ability to contribute to social and political change. Due to its propensity to include anyone in its ranks (umbrella term) and its destabilizing effects on identity politics, queer has been accused of *erasing* difference, thus functioning as “the vehicle for [...] patriarchal and neoliberal interests” (Bazzoni 54), eventually reproducing oppression rather than working against it.

<sup>7</sup> In her article “Lesbian Studies After The Lesbian Postmodern,” Laura Doan refers specifically to the opposition between Lesbian Studies and Queer Theory.

The flip side of the debate developed in parallel, epitomized by Jack Halberstam's call for a "queer lesbian study" ("Queering" 256). The attempts to map possible alternative genealogies of lesbian studies have situated the field in relational, rather than oppositional, terms to queer studies (Doan 26). According to Doan, if the term 'lesbian' modifies and qualifies 'queer,' and 'queer' is able to challenge the identitarian fixity of the term 'lesbian,' then "the critical frameworks of both Lesbian-Feminist Theory *and* Queer Theory [might] elucidate lived experience, and thus together facilitate an illuminating analysis that would work toward political ends" (26). Similarly, Linda Garber argues that "[t]he point is not that one is right and the other wrong, nor that one type of theory is smarter or more sophisticated than the other, but that either taken alone leaves great patches of the theoretical canvas bare" (6-7). Therefore, according to Cathy Griggers, we should not abandon, but refigure our understanding of identity politics. Since identity is no longer what it was, identity politics must change as well, becoming "a politics of transformation and hybridity as well as resistance" (127). Finally, formulating it one way or another, scholars have emphasised the continually informing and enriching nature of the relationship between lesbian studies and queer studies, underlining how the two fields need "to coexist in an ongoing productive tension" in which neither holds nor pursues theoretical hegemony (Lovaas et. al., "Introduction" 4-5).

Another way to look at this controversy is advanced by Carol Guess. In her article "Que(e)rying Lesbian Identity," she outlines how queer theorists posit a stable lesbian identity in their texts only to deconstruct it, showing that such an identity is always already a misrecognition. Her aim, she explains, is not to contest that assertion, but rather "the idea that lesbian identity claims to be stable in the first place" (23). Via close readings of several fictional lesbian texts,<sup>8</sup> Guess demonstrates that lesbian identity is routinely represented "not as a unified subject position, but as a

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<sup>8</sup> In particular, Guess examines Minnie Bruce Pratt's *Crime Against Nature*, Alison Bechdel's *Dykes to Watch Out For*, and Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*. All works represent an affirmation of lesbian identity, while simultaneously questioning its boundaries. *Crime* calls for a redefinition of lesbian identity by demanding the inclusion of 'mother' within that category (25). The comic strip *Dykes* humorously subverts the essentialist premise which it relies on, namely the title's implication that 'dykes' can be depicted, recognized, and watched (28). And lastly, *Oranges*' heroine does not 'find' lesbian identity by falling in love with a woman; rather, she loses religious and familial identity by experiencing feelings of estrangement and alienation (29).

mesh of permeable boundaries” (23). For these writers, “speaking the name” (Guess 27)<sup>9</sup> means challenging not only hegemonic (hetero-)normative systems, but also dominant lesbian ideologies, which, by sticking to an essentialist conception of identity founded on binarism, would ultimately serve to support the ideologies they presume themselves to be resisting. Instead, by depicting lesbian identity as “unstable, shifting, elusive, and powerfully adaptive” (35), i.e. queer, these texts show how this definition was *already* residing in lesbian writing. What emerges, Guess argues, is “a site of contestation which is generative, rather than destructive” (35).

Whether one considers the impulse to ‘queer the lesbian’ a self-reflexive re-examination of that category in view of the new stances of queer, or interprets it as an invitation to account for the *already* very much queer category of ‘lesbian,’ the result does not change. On the one hand, I agree in affirming that lesbian identity must be maintained, especially when homosexual identities remain stigmatized, since to part from it would mean to collaborate, however inadvertently, to lesbian invisibility and oppression (Rich, “It Is the Lesbian in Us...” 202; Guess 19). As Rosi Braidotti puts it, one “cannot deconstruct a subjectivity that has never been fully granted. [...] In order to herald the death of the subject, you must first have achieved the right to speak as a subject; in order to demystify the metadiscourse, you must first have gained access to a position where you can speak” (*Nomadic Subjects* 136, qtd. in Bazzoni 56). Similarly, Monique Wittig argues that abandoning the category of lesbian would mean to lose “the faculty of being subjects even before having gained it. [...] we can renounce only what we have” (*The Straight Mind* 57).

On the other, I acknowledge the enriching outcomes brought about by the interaction between lesbian studies and queer studies, and especially the gain in *queering* lesbian studies and the lesbian subject. To activate, or verbalize, the term queer means to let it get close to the category of lesbian identity, enough to get affected by its concerns. As Bazzoni states, queer can “keep learning [...] lessons in ‘difference,’ ‘positionality’ and ‘situatedness’” (63) from LGBT and feminist studies. In a

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<sup>9</sup> Guess refers to Adrienne Rich’s contribution “It Is the Lesbian in Us...” In *On Lies, Secrets, and Silences* (W.W. Norton and Co. 1979, pp. 199-202): “The word lesbian must be affirmed because to discard it is to collaborate with silence and lying about our very existence; with the closet-game, the creation of the *unspeakable*” (202).

structurally unequal world, “a [queer] post-identity category” (59) risks to reproduce privilege and make it invisible: “[i]t is one thing to aspire to a future as an open possibility, quite another to mistake that future for the present” (63). However, queer can favour a shift from difference to differences (63), addressing Butler’s question in *Undoing Gender*: “Why can’t the framework for sexual difference itself move beyond binarity into multiplicity?” (197). Ultimately, adopting this theoretical framework—one which maintains the category of lesbian identity as valid, while at the same time continually questioning its boundaries by means of queer approaches— would bring into relief what Carol Guess has described as the excessiveness of desire and sexuality (20). According to Butler, the erotic resides precisely in instability (“Imitation” 13-14). Thus, considering lesbian identity as a fixed category would lead to a “stabilization of sexual praxis,” which, in turn, would only work to “drain that praxis of its erotic potential” (Guess 21).

*Lesbian Body(ies) and Lesbian Text(s) as Discursively Constructed: The Lesbian Epidermal/Textual Spaces of Resistance*

According to Annamarie Jagose, the lesbian body does not sidestep, but continually foregrounds, issues of discursivity and representation (“Way Out” 280). Referring back to feminist and lesbian theorists’ attempts in the early 1980s to provide a conclusive definition of ‘lesbian,’ Jagose underlines how the project soon revealed its unfeasibility. After a decade, those scholars were holding no monolithic, consolidated definition, and their “complementary and conflicting” voices (267) had engendered a crystallization of this indeterminacy (Gallop 118), rather than its resolution. These conflicting definitions and incoherencies about the category of lesbian rehearse what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her *Epistemology of the Closet*, has identified as the two contradictions “internal to all the important twentieth-century understandings of homo/heterosexual definition” (1). The first contradiction unfolds between seeing homosexuality as a broadly human latency or potentiality (also defined as universalizing view, e.g. Adrienne Rich’s ‘lesbian continuum’) versus seeing homosexuality as the property of a distinct and delimited population (or minoritizing view, e.g.

Ferguson et al., Stimpson).<sup>10</sup> The second contradiction is, instead, between regarding homosexuals as indeterminately located between or across genders (the liminality or transitivity model, e.g. Wittig), and regarding them as the epitome of each gender (the gender-separatist model, e.g. Rich).<sup>11</sup>

In the 1990s, even though lesbian theorists did not consider the field “to be plagued with the problem of definition [anymore]” (Zimmerman 455), similar questions continued to be asked. In her essay “Sylvia Townsend Warner and the Counterplot of Lesbian Fiction,” Terry Castle asks “[w]hat is a lesbian fiction?” (213), rearticulating Zimmerman’s query “[w]hen is a text a ‘lesbian text?’” (455). Is it any narrative depicting sexual relations between women? If this was the case, any work written by male writers, including pornographic or semi-pornographic texts of male voyeurism, would be classified as such (Castle, “Sylvia” 213). Is it, then, any text written by a lesbian? This would be an equally tricky definition, for authors’ sexual orientation is not always manifest and clear-cut. ‘A text written by a lesbian depicting sexual relations between women’ might appear a more precise phrasing, but, as Castle argues, such definition relies “too heavily on the opacities of biography and eros, and lacks a certain psychic and political specificity” (213). Consequently, despite the numerous attempts to pin them down, the instability of the categories of ‘lesbian’ and ‘lesbian text’ continues to indicate the extent of their indeterminacy. The project of definition is continually deferred by the coexistence of oppositional constructions and, as Jagose puts it, “the interarticulation of deadlocked contradictions” grants no final pronouncements (“Way Out” 269).

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<sup>10</sup> Even though the contributions mentioned in this section do not constitute an exhaustive survey of the theorizing about the category ‘lesbian’ produced at that time, they nonetheless suggest the most general outlines of that debate. Adrienne Rich’s ‘lesbian continuum’ described lesbian existence as informing and structuring all interactions between women, thus reframing lesbianism as detached from sexual practice. Objections to Rich’s formulation of lesbianism as “an intensely affective attachment, a cooperative sociality and a political resistance to male domination” (Jagose, “Debating Definitions” 33) were numerous and often pointed to its underplaying of the role of “genital sexuality” (Ferguson et al. 160) and “carnality [that] distinguishes [lesbianism] from [...] affectionate friendships in which women enjoy other, support each other, and commingle a sense of identity and well-being” (Stimpson 364).

<sup>11</sup> While Rich perceived “the lesbian experience as being, like motherhood, a profoundly *female* experience” (“Compulsory Heterosexuality” 650), thus appropriating ‘lesbian’ to womanhood and the feminine, Monique Wittig rejects ‘man’ and ‘woman’ as natural categories and, by stating that “lesbians are not women” (*The Straight Mind* 32), configures lesbians as the privileged subjects able to refuse to participate in the oppressive heterosexual social relations. According to Wittig: “Lesbian is the only concept [...] 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 that we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation [...] a relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or stay heterosexual (20).



To make sense of the conceptual slipperiness of 'lesbian,' Jagose turns towards Michel Foucault's theorization of the interaction between power and discourse. Rather than considering power as uniquely repressive, as "a monolithic force with comprehensively coherent effects" (Jagose, "Way Out" 279), Foucault underlines its productivity. Power is "exercised from innumerable points" (*The History of Sexuality* 94) and its effects are not predetermined. Notwithstanding that, for the lesbian subject, an emancipatory position beyond power cannot be envisaged since every body is necessarily implicated in power relations, this does not imply resignation to passivity either. Resistance, Foucault argues, "is coextensive with [power] and absolutely its contemporary" ("Power and Sex" 122). Like power, also resistance circulates in discourse, defined as the "heterogeneous collection of utterances pertaining to a particular concept" (Jagose, "Way Out" 279), or, in Foucault's words, the "series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable" (*The History of Sexuality* 100). Discourse, then, is "entirely within, yet not necessarily in the service of, the mechanisms of power" (Jagose, "Way Out" 279):

We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 100-101)

According to Jagose, the lesbian body is discursively constructed, but, following Foucault, neither fully self-determining nor fully determined. There is no transcultural or transhistorical 'pure' and prediscursive lesbian body to be faithful to ("Way Out" 281). Conversely, according to Jagose, the lesbian body is inessential, a cultural text discursively produced *and* discursively productive, "not simply transmitting but also producing meaning in a constant negotiation with signifying practices" (282). On its surface, whether "epidermal or textual" (280), the constantly changing, and even contradictory, possible meanings of 'lesbian' are inscribed and resisted, in the continual production of that body. I partially disagree with Jagose's definition of language as the *only* source of meaning

since it lacks an acknowledgement of power as linked not merely to discourse but also to material practices and struggle (Giroux 29) as well as “real needs and desires” (Waugh 37, qtd. in Wolfe et. al. 3-4). While I do not contend that *everything* that pertains to bodies, identity, and sexuality has to deal with discourse as well, I recognize its extensive impact on their shaping. For this reason, discourse and its effects appear substantially in my project, which, following Foucault’s notion of contestation, locates the discursive surface of the lesbian body/text as “the privileged site for political struggle” (Jagose, “Way Out” 280).

Concurrently with Jagose’s theorization, Marilyn Farwell has defined the ‘lesbian text’ as a narrative that does not necessarily imply a story by lesbians about lesbians, but rather as one that “affirms a place for lesbian subjectivity, [a] narrative space where both lesbian characters, and other female characters, can be active, desiring agents” (Farwell, “The Lesbian Narrative” 157). Similarly, Charlotte Ross has phrased it as “a narrative space in which women might desire differently” (16). The lesbian subject, Farwell argues, must be “written against narrative conventions” and can be seen to “invade” or “reorder crucial narrative elements” (*Heterosexual Plots* 15). Therefore, Farwell shifts the attention from what a lesbian text *is* to what it actually *does*, that is, carving out a space of resistance for lesbian subjects within the politics of power. In this way, she aligns to Jagose’s affirmation that the current project for lesbian theorizing is not to resolve the contradictions which structure the category of ‘lesbian,’ but rather to acknowledge and produce “increasingly precise articulations of those contradictions [...] not simply between them but also internal to each,” (Way Out” 277) as well as to recognize as political the very terms through which the lesbian bodies and texts are constituted.

I situate the analysis at the intersection between literary studies, lesbian studies and queer studies, aiming to contribute to studies on desire as well.<sup>12</sup> While I maintain the identity category of

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<sup>12</sup> Such is the difficulty of articulating desire that scholars Federico Lauria and Julien A. Deonna diagnosed contemporary philosophical criticism with exhibiting a perplexing denial of desire, maintaining in 2017 that “no live debate on the nature of desire is currently taking place” (1). Lauria, Federico, and Julien A. Deonna. “Introduction: Reconsidering Some Dogmas About Desire.” *The Nature of Desire*. Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 1-22.

'lesbian' as valid for its political potential, I intend to examine the texts under consideration adopting the defamiliarizing stances granted by a queer approach. I will employ queer not as "a post-identity category" (Bazzoni 59), but rather as a "destabilizing and mobilizing vector" (59), "a practice, a mode of thinking, an openness to the unexpected" (62), or, as Piontek has phrased it, as "a questioning stance, a cluster of methodologies that lets us explore the taken for granted and the familiar from new vantage points" (2). In particular, I am interested in the following questions: what kinds of lesbian bodies do these texts contribute to producing? How do they engage with their social, cultural and political environments and deal with the pressures exercised by the heteronormative system? What kinds of textual and political resistances do these works enable for queer lesbian subjectivities? By the means of which formal and narrative strategies? Are there recognizable discourses shared among the three authors, and, if yes, in what do they converge and in what do they diverge? In attempting to answer these questions, following Jagose, Farwell and Grosz, I do not provide stable definitions (of bodies, of texts); rather, I trace their passage, the mechanisms by the means of which they function, their encounters (of bodies, of texts, of bodies and texts), and their interventions. As Grosz has phrased it, I am interested in "what kinds of lesbian connections, what kinds of lesbian-machine, we invest our time, energy, and bodies in, what kinds of sexuality we invest ourselves in, with what other kinds of bodies, and to what effects?" ("Refiguring" 184).

Throughout this introduction, I have often referred to the political, e.g. the political potential of the category of lesbian, its political struggle, the texts' political resistances and purposes. Before delving into the analysis of my case studies, I intend to substantiate what, I believe, is the relationship between literature and politics, as well as lay out what kinds of politics these texts serve. According to Jacques Rancière, there is a specific link between "politics as a definite way of doing and literature as a definite practice of writing" (10). Politics is commonly viewed as "the practice of power or the embodiment of collective wills and interests and the enactment of collective ideas" (10); in other words, an understanding of politics in terms of government politics, partisan politics, electoral politics, political leadership and so on, with strife and confrontation implied. Surely, this kind of

politics determines several factors of our daily environments and modes of thinking. It also, however, presupposes the existence of individual subjects sharing a common world, whose lives repeatedly demand decisions of personal governance to be taken, although sometimes unconsciously. What, according to Rancière, really deserves the name of politics has to be found on the latter level, coinciding with “the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common world” (10):

Politics is first of all a way of framing, among sensory data, a specific sphere of experience. It is a partition of the sensible, of the visible and the sayable, which allows (or does not allow) some specific data to appear; which allows or does not allow some specific subjects to designate them and speak about them. It is a specific intertwining of ways of being, way of doing and ways of speaking. (10)

In this partition of the visible and the sayable, in this “intertwining of being, doing and saying that frames a polemical common world” (10), literature gets inevitably involved, regardless of the author’ degree of personal commitment to the social and political issues and struggles of the time. Literary products, as well as their interpretations, are necessarily political to the extent that they are reconfigurations of the (un)visible elements of reality. More specifically, by representing, i.e. bringing to visibility as well as founding in discourse, lesbian subjectivities and their needs, my case studies add their voices to the pile, modifying, however imperceptibly it might seem, the chorus. These modulations might be too feeble and get lost in the ensemble; or, on the contrary, be distinctly audible but sound out of tune, openly in discordance with the whole. At some point, they could get heard by similar voices, who may start singing as well. In this way, literature functions as a sounding board for those subjectivities and their needs, transmitting and accentuating them, in the attempt to bring those voices —and their very political demands for equality— outside the literary realm.

## *Anxious Bodies, Leaky Bodies: Monique Wittig's The Lesbian Body*

### *Monique Wittig: Some Premises*

With the rise of feminist movements especially in the U.S. and France in the early 1960s, Monique Wittig (1935-2003) has become increasingly well known as an exponent of radical lesbianism, a lesbian movement that challenges the status quo of heterosexuality and mainstream feminism, which arose in part because mainstream feminism did not actively include or fight for lesbian rights. Both her theoretical and fictional works have been carefully analyzed far and wide. In their analyses, scholars have pinpointed different facets of Wittig's production, alternatively rejecting or celebrating it for its seemingly essentialist stances. Only recently, with the volume *On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, Political, and Literary Essays*, Namascar Shaktini has underlined the queer facets of her work, responding to "influential misreadings" —transparently targeting Judith Butler's critique, in *Gender Trouble*, of Wittig's work— "that dismiss [Wittig's] writing as 'essentialist,' 'humanist' and/or 'lesbian separatist'" (ix). Wittig's works have been explicitly recognized by queer theorists as a significant influence on their ideas, for instance by Annamarie Jagose, Diana Fuss, and others (Crowder 490). As far as her fictional works are concerned, many have proposed to consider them as an *oeuvre* which, read in sequential order, documents the evolution of her radical feminist ideology. From the germinal *L'Opoponax* (Les Éditions de Minuit 1964), which depicts the resistance of young schoolgirls to the sexist/heterosexist society, one witnesses Wittig's revolution against the patriarchy in *Les Guérillères* (Minuit 1969), eventually participating in the "recuperation of self, language, and history" (Wenzel 267) with *Le corps lesbien* (Minuit 1973) and *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* (Éditions Grasset 1976).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Wittig's works were translated into English as *The Opoponax* (Simon & Schuster 1966), *Les Guérillères* (Viking Press 1971), *The Lesbian Body* (Beacon Press 1975), and *Lesbian Peoples Material for a Dictionary* (Avon 1979). In my analysis, I refer to the English edition *The Lesbian Body*, occasionally mentioning the original French *Le corps lesbien*.

Before discussing *The Lesbian Body* in particular, I will clarify how I interpret and employ Wittig's theorization of 'lesbian' as well as her conception of the relation between body and text. Undoubtedly, Wittig considers 'lesbian' as occupying a vantage position from which to criticize the artifices of culturally constructed repressive categories and patriarchal discourses. In her collection *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, 'lesbian' is positively regarded as separated from the category of woman, as "a not-woman, a not-man, a product of society, not a product of nature, for there is no nature in society" (13), as a "runaway, fugitive slave" (45), "standing at the outposts of the human" (46), and "located philosophically (politically) beyond the categories of sex" (47). Spatially, these definitions seem to locate 'lesbian' *outside* the discourses it serves to criticize. However, Jagose warns against such an interpretation. The elision of 'lesbian' from the classificatory models of sex and gender, she argues, should not be misrecognized as "its triumphant transcendence of them" (265), or as deemed to function utopically. While such a position might seem liberating, it considerably diminishes Wittig's resistive potential. Therefore, I discuss Wittig's 'lesbian' as neither simply subsumed by nor unimplicated in those very discourses of heterosexuality, masculinity, and femininity it might seem to exist beyond.

Moreover, in the preface to *The Lesbian Body*, Wittig declares she is "writing the never previously written" (9), i.e. a lesbian text, referring to the lack of works that overtly describe female same-sex relationships and desires. She continues: "everything that is written exists" (10).<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Butler argues that to represent does not amount to the mere description of reality and the reproduction of existing points of view or existing interests. On the contrary, it "*posits* interests and positions that do not yet exist, setting them up, founding them" ("Wittig's" 521). Therefore, Wittig is not only *describing* lesbian bodies but also *making* them (Oberman 157). But what kind of bodies are those? Whether made of words or flesh, Wittig does not seem to pay heed to such distinction. To her, textuality is always already a materialism (Butler, "Wittig's" 528). As such, the text acts upon bodies,

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<sup>14</sup> Such stance can be linked to poststructural feminism, a branch of feminism that engages with insights from post-structuralist thought. Poststructural feminism emphasizes "the contingent and discursive nature of *all* identities" (Randall 116), and in particular the social construction of gendered subjectivities.

expounding “how concepts touch upon, constrain, and release bodies in ways that constitute and deconstitute a fundamental sense of bodily location and temporality, position, relationality, and boundary” (528). Concurrently, bodies act upon the text, rendering it tactile, thick, sticky, slimy, and physically affecting. As a result, body and text are closely intertwined, and Wittig describes them interchangeably as two bodies or two texts, stemming from the same desire:

The body of the text subsumes all the words of the female body. [...] To recite one’s own body, to recite the body of the other, is to recite the words of which the book is made up. The fascination for writing the never previously written and the fascination for the unattained body proceed from the same desire. The desire to bring the real body violently to life in the words of the book. (“The Lesbian Body” 9-10)

### *The J/e [I] and The Process of Lesbianization*

A great number of contributions have been made on the subject of Wittig’s poetics in general and *The Lesbian Body* in particular. For instance, Namascar Shaktini has explained the functioning and purposes of Wittig’s “process of overwriting” (“Displacing” 32). Given the “all ubiquitous masculine presence” (32) in culture as well as literature, Wittig undertakes a systematic re-inscription which aims to “relocate subjectivity outside the orbit of phallogocentrism” (33). In *The Lesbian Body*, Shaktini argues, Wittig displaces the phallic body and subject with the lesbian body and subject (37). The split pronouns constitute an agent and effect of this displacement,<sup>15</sup> which operates thus on a symbolical as well as formal level. In the prefatory note to *The Lesbian Body*, Wittig describes j/e [I] as the “cutting in two which throughout literature is the exercise of a language which does not constitute m/e as a subject” (10-11). J/e [I] refuses the expedients of a system which is grammatically gendered and regards the masculine as neutral and the feminine as marked, and in which *elle* or *elles* are submerged in *il* or *ils*, i.e., that all the feminine persons are reducible and complementary to the

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<sup>15</sup> The splitting is applied not only to the first-person pronouns but also possessive adjectives. While in French the typographic rendering is unproblematic (‘j/e,’ ‘m/on,’ ‘m/oi,’ etc.), the English version can only replicate the split in ‘m/e,’ ‘m/y’ and ‘m/ine,’ but it encounters difficulties with ‘I’. In David Le Vay’s translation of *Le corps lesbien*, the issue has been addressed by italicizing it throughout. For a more exhaustive debate on this, see Daly, Mary. *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Women’s Press, 1979, p. 327.

masculine persons (10). Besides, split pronouns are indicators of the violence necessary to enter an alien (i.e. masculine) language: while the speaker may be split and forced to use a language extraneous to her, she is also “*forcing* her own body and language into the body of the alien text, expanding it through disruption” (Oberman 159). In her essay “The Mark of Gender,” Wittig describes j/e [I] as:

a sign of excess. A sign that helps us to imagine an excess of ‘I,’ and ‘I’ exalted. ‘I’ has become so powerful in *The Lesbian Body* that it can attack the order of heterosexuality in texts and assault the so-called love, the heroes of love and lesbianize them, lesbianize the symbols, lesbianize the gods and the goddesses, lesbianize the men and the women. (*The Straight Mind* 87)

This process of lesbianization has several effects, which critics have examined separately or in combination. For instance, Judith Butler has analysed Wittig’s universalization of a minority position, arguing that *The Lesbian Body* produces “a shock for the reader, any reader, and [...] launch[es] an assault on the basic categories of sex” (“Wittig’s” 520-521), rendering them obsolete. Besides, scholars have underlined how Wittig has succeeded in representing women as active desiring agents,<sup>16</sup> while expanding the range of erotic possibilities up to comprehend not exclusively genitality but “all body parts and excretions” (Downing, “Sexual Perversion” 207; Lindsay 51). Furthermore, Wittig’s overwriting actively debunks those myths which have substantially contributed to “the shaping of western ideal of self and the subject” (Martindale 343), rewriting “a non-phallic, non-masculinist history and mythology for [women and lesbians]” (Downing, “Antisocial” 371). Thus, it does not come as a surprise, Marks argues, that intertextual references to Sappho dominate *The Lesbian Body*, both explicitly, when j/e [I] invokes her as a muse, and implicitly, through “the insistence on the physical symptoms of desire, the visceral awareness of the female body, and the endless repetitions” (372). Finally, scholars have stressed Wittig’s dismissal of those genres

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<sup>16</sup> According to psychoanalytical models, the most notable being Freud’s, desire has been considered “inherently masculine” (Grosz, “Refiguring” 176), being conceived as an activity, and activity being correlated exclusively with the masculine. The so-called normal response on the part of the woman is to give up “the (masculine, phallic, anaclitic) desire to love” and to substitute it with “the passive aim of being loved and desired” (178). As a result, according to this system, the notion of female desire is self-contradictory.



traditionally associated with women's writing and *écriture féminine*, such as the novel, the memoir, the autobiography. Instead, Wittig parodies, destabilizes and appropriates those textual genres that “have held the power to shape and reflect [male] language and [male] reality” (Wenzel 284) in regard to body parts and corporeal practices, in particular the medical anatomy, the *blason du corps féminin*, and the pornographic text (Downing, “Sexual Perversion” 205; Martindale 344).

In this chapter, I aim to show how Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* works within, not beyond, power relations. More precisely, I examine how the text verbalizes, engages with, reworks and expands — lesbianizes, in Wittig's words— the concept of desire as a lack, its violence and its anxieties, traditionally associated with patriarchal discourses. After having analyzed the similarities which draw Wittig's text dangerously close to those repressive discourses, I pinpoint its other facets that make it diverge substantially from them. More precisely, by the means of a specific textual structure (anti-essentialist, circular and productive) and the excess of the lesbian body/text, I argue that what is recuperated with *The Lesbian Body* is not the self, as Wenzel phrased it (267), but her affirmation in becoming.

### *The Lesbian Body: A Delicate Balance*

Structurally, *The Lesbian Body* is composed of short “prose poems” (Shaktini “Monique”), separated both semantically and typographically from one another. These alternate with an ongoing enumeration of parts, products, internal and external functions of the ‘lesbian body,’ differentiated from the rest by their large bold capital letters. Generally, the prose poems describe scenes or events which involve an encounter between two lovers who dismember, sunder, dissect, devour, invade, reconstruct, resurrect the other's body. Predominantly, they take the form of an address of the first-person narrative voice *I* [j/e] to the you [tu]. However, it is uncertain whether the couple remains the same throughout the prose poems, or whether the narrator is consistent, as *I* and you are not given names and are not uniformly characterised. Nonetheless, they collectively build up a picture of life on an island which alludes to “the Amazons, to the islands of women, the domains of women, which

formerly existed with their own culture [...] the Amazons of the present and the future [...] women who live among themselves, by themselves and for themselves at all the generally accepted levels: fictional, symbolic, actual” (Wittig, *The Lesbian Body* 9).<sup>17</sup>

### *Inside/Outside*

In my analysis of *The Lesbian Body*, I will refer to Maggie Kilgour’s examination of the relation between inside and outside, which, according to Jacques Derrida, conceptualizes all the antitheses and thus constitutes the foundation of all binary oppositions (103). According to Kilgour, the instance in which this antithesis materializes the most fiercely is that of bodily experience, which asserts the existence of a coherently structured ‘inside’ defined against what lies ‘outside’ the self. While the former is ordinarily regarded as central, familiar and superior, the latter is perceived as peripheric, extraneous and ultimately threatening. However, the precarious nature of this distinction can be easily exposed if one thinks of how the body is continuously impelled to the act of incorporation, in which an external object (e.g. food) is taken inside another, aiming at the preservation of the latter. Incorporation, thus, is triggered by the sense of insufficiency which, at given moments, actualizes as the specific need for an object, meaning that the lack is precisely what generates the desire to fulfil (i.e. desire as a lack). As the body proves its non-autonomy, the relation between inside and outside complicates, winding up comprising “a delicate balance of simultaneous identification and separation” (Kilgour 4). Similarly, the function of incorporation is ambivalent: it depends upon and enforces an absolute division between inside and outside, inasmuch its very purpose is to maintain the bodily boundaries, but in the act itself that opposition disappears, dissolving the structure it strives to produce (4).

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<sup>17</sup> To convey the “simultaneous inclusion in, and yet separation from a larger scheme,” Scanlon employs the term “prose segment” (75). Since I agree with this definition while, at the same time, I recognize the capability of Shaktini’s “prose poem” for acknowledging the lyrical matrix inherent to them, I will employ the terms interchangeably.

*Impulse To (Be) Incorporate(d): To Devour, Dismember, Invade (and Dissolve)*

In *The Lesbian Body*, Wittig relies heavily on strategies of incorporation in order to write lesbian bodies and lesbian desires. Primarily, these include instincts to devour, dismember and invade the other's body. Besides, when sexual intercourse is not overtly expressed, sexual undertones mingle with these modes of incorporation.<sup>18</sup> As far as eating is concerned, Wittig's *I* and you regularly consume each other on well-supplied dining tables or more low-key scenarios: "[the flesh of] m/y severed limbs m/y arms m/y thighs m/y legs [...] meticulously removed and boiled for a long time, they offer it to you surrounded by different sauces on glittering plates each plate bearing a different name to please you. You consume them readily" (105); "*I* begin with the tips of your fingers, *I* chew the phalanges *I* crunch the metacarpals the carpals [...] *I* eat m/y fill of you [...], m/y jaws snap, *I* swallow you, *I* gulp you down [...] The food you are weighs on m/e within m/y stomach" (121-122). Therefore, the sexual or amorous partner becomes edible by the means of a narrative in which cannibalism is not stigmatized but often accompanied by signs of satisfaction: "You chew m/e up [...] you say, delicious" (162).

Another strategy of incorporation comprises the dismemberment of the other's body which, *I* argue, leads to two distinct directions. On the one hand, it is induced by the desire to annihilate the other and thus possess her permanently: "*I* discover that your skin can be lifted layer by layer [...] now *I* hold all of you silent immobilized" (17). On the other, dismemberment functions as a practice to dig a way into the other's body in order to facilitate the invasion:<sup>19</sup> "*I* succeed thus in making your eyeball topple out, [...] *I* insert m/y tongue" (75); "*I* wrench out your teeth one by one [...] you part your lips [...] over your bloodstained gums, *I* insert m/y tongue into each socket in succession [...] m/y lips m/y fingers receive your blood" (127). Occasionally, invasion is achieved through the senses

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<sup>18</sup> Sexual intercourse itself is a less totalizing but still bodily image for incorporation, during which two bodies become one, although the union is temporary and precarious. Significantly, in French 'to consume' and 'to consummate' are the same word (Kilgour 7).

<sup>19</sup> According to the Cambridge Dictionary, "to invade" means: "to enter a country [a place; a body, in reference to diseases] by force in order to take possession of [occupy] it." Or, in other words, to make it part of the self. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/it/dizionario/inglese/invade>.

of sight and hearing since “[w]e ‘take things in’ with our eyes and absorb sounds through our ears” (Kilgour 9): “I see that all the eyes of your body are fixed attentively on [...] m/y body [...] M/y entire body is riddled by your gaze” (134); “Your voice invades m/e further still [...] that hateful voice pursuing m/e tracking m/e down losing m/e undoing m/e finishing m/e off” (107-108).

If, on the one pole of the spectrum, the desire to incorporate and possess the other emerges, on the other, the pleasure of subtraction or dissolution within someone else can be identified: “I am taken with the desire to enter into the darkness of your body your face your limbs” (47-48). This must not be seen as a sheer act of submission. Conversely, from this perspective, the incorporation is carried out in the interest of the part that is incorporated, a desire to fill the lack of the other that, in return, would fill one’s own.

### *Desire as a Lack and Its Nostalgia*

Wittig’s choice may be seen as controversial not only because, among the different methods of incorporation, *The Lesbian Body* appears to favour “the most literal and [...] frequently gothic and grotesque” (Kilgour 5). More importantly, desire prompted and conceived as a lack, an absence, or a hole, which seeks fulfilment and is characterized as “doomed to consumption, incorporation, dissatisfaction, destruction of the object” (Grosz, “Refiguring” 179), has been highly criticized by feminist critics due to its association to repressive patriarchal discourses. According to Elizabeth Grosz, this model<sup>20</sup> has been traditionally both sexualized and heterosexualized (177-178), insofar as the contrast between substance (presence) and lack (absence) has been historically coded in terms of the binary opposition between male and female. This kind of binarism has also generated the notion of authentic and proper selfhood: “the paradigmatic subject of Western modernity [...] the self which needs to be self-identical” (Mawhinney 147) in order to protect its own subjective ‘truth’. To effectively do so, the subject must posit and maintain an antagonistic other, namely everything which

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<sup>20</sup> The tradition that conceives desire as a lack commences with Plato, is expanded upon by Hegel, and is expressed most recently in psychoanalysis, with Freud and Lacan.

cannot be reduced to its own logic. For these reasons, Grosz continues, this tradition must be “thoroughly overhauled if it is to be capable of accommodating women’s desires and those [...] that specify and distinguish lesbianism” (“Refiguring” 176).<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, both the impulse to incorporate the other and that to be incorporated by the other, which structure desire as a lack, rely on “a nostalgia for total unity and oneness” (Kilgour 5). This nostalgia can be seen as urged by the desire for the most intimate possible identification with the other, which expands up to include the idea of the return to “a communion with an original source and a primal identification” (12). However, the latter definition conceals several anxieties which *The Lesbian Body* releases textually and which draw it one step closer to patriarchal discourses. As Kilgour emphasises, many of the major trends of Western thought, such as idealism, scientific rationalism, traditional psychoanalysis, as well as imperialism, all “try to construct a transcendental system or imagine a single body that could contain all meaning” (5). This urgency to ‘uncover’ and arrange all knowledge according to all-encompassing schemes, and thus maintain a situation of centripetal control, can be seen as paranoid. For, if what is inside and thus known is regarded as ‘good’ and what lies outside and thus is unknown is seen as a threat, then, as a defensive mechanism, what is outside “must be subsumed and drawn into the center” (5). If this does not happen, then the self is left physically and psychologically exposed to dangers. What the nostalgia for a state of total incorporation conjures up, thus, is a scenario in which there is “no category of alien outsidership left to threaten the inner stability” (5). Wittig’s bodies can be seen as affected by those same anxieties and employing similar defensive mechanisms.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> For various explorations aimed at reframing the terms traditionally associated with desire as lack, see: Irigaray, Luce. *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Cornell University Press, 1985 and *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Cornell University Press, 1985; Butler, Judith. “The Lesbian Phallus and the Morphological Imaginary.” *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*. Routledge, 1993, pp. 57-9; and de Lauretis, Teresa. *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*. Indiana University Press, 1994.

<sup>22</sup> Hélène Cixous too underlines the anxiety which permeates Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body*. In an interview, while claiming Wittig’s work for the side of feminine writing, she expressed reservations about the kind of body that seems to be written there: “With her, undoubtedly, the body is there! But it is a disturbed body, a body intoxicated with words because she is trying to conjure up the flesh, to evoke it with words: this body, in fact, is very absent. And her anxiety about it is truly the anxiety of hysteria” (Makward 27, qtd. in Lindsay 49).

*Anxious Attempts to Achieve a State of Total Incorporation*

As anticipated, in *The Lesbian Body*, the longing for bodily union is ubiquitous, and is achieved through death, orgasm and/or transcendence: “you pursue m/e throughout m/y tunnels, [...] you are m/yself you are m/yself [...] *I die [...] I fall I fall, I drag you down in this fall this hissing spiral [...] I drag you down, your arms twined round m/e embrace two bodies lost in the silence of the infinite spheres*” (50); “*I am you you are m/e irreversibly m/y best-beloved*” (119).<sup>23</sup> Its achievement, however, does not come unproblematically, and manifestations of its underlying anxieties emerge throughout. For instance, one of the most pressing incentives to attain bodily union is the implied confidence that together the *I* and you would be stronger against the fatal forces coming from outside, themselves aiming at incorporation: “*I perceive all the various winds assailing us [...] The wind enters everywhere, in every hole [...] Under its pressure there is nothing else to do but to attempt to insinuate ourselves one into the other*” (108-109). Frequently, however, the *I* and you fail in the fight, resulting in the separation and often the death of the two bodies: “*The engulfment continues steadily, the touch of the sand is soft against m/y legs [...] the tiniest grain of sand between your belly and m/ine can separate us once for all [...] I love you m/y dying one [...] the sand touches your cheeks, m/y mouth is filled*” (51-52).<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, another strategy the *I* adopts to reach a state of total incorporation and which, nevertheless, reveals her anxiety relies upon the expansion of the body of the other up to include entities such as the sea, the earth and the wind: “*I swim far out to sea [...] to look for you [...] Then I submit to the power of the waves. The water enters by m/y mouth by m/y lungs [...] suddenly it seems to m/e that you are the water which comes and goes in the closest confines of m/y body [...] it seems that you are that which engulfs m/y now and for ever*” (125-126). The you’s massive width

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<sup>23</sup> For more instances, see pp. 38, 68, 81-82, 91, 156.

<sup>24</sup> See also: “*A great wind takes hold of us [...] I struggle with something an enormous flapping wing with invisible claws a kind of thing of immeasurable strength engaged in dragging you away [...] I try to envelop you, an immense repellent force keeps m/e at a distance [...] you struggle against the thing’s movements, now there is a gigantic eddy, you waver your arms extended with increasing difficulty no longer able to support m/e, a violent gust attacks your iliac bones*” (43-44).

appease the *I* since it suggests that there are no threatening forces pressing from outside, but only the familiar you.

Finally, the lists of body parts must be examined as well. As mentioned, the lists recite the innumerable parts, products, and functions of the lesbian body, signalling the material presence of that body in the text (Cleveland). In the English translation from David Le Vay, the entries occupy approximately one page, they are orderly arranged and form a compact block of text (Fig. 1). In the original French, however, the visual presentation is surprisingly different: the lists are set in bold and much larger type, and they are spread throughout in the attempt to occupy the wholeness of two pages (Fig. 2). The original visual disposition, I argue, well aligns with the *horror vacui* which permeates the prose segments. Besides, while it commands attention in the attempt to make the lesbian body visible, the unconventional textual disposition concurrently generates a feeling of disorientation and vulnerability in the reader, who feels as if she could be attacked from different fronts. The intent, I argue, is precisely that of attacking, entering and invading the reader, and filling her crevices with the words in order to ultimately incorporate her as well before she can incorporate words and bodies.<sup>25</sup>

### *Anxious Attempts to Reject a State of Total Incorporation*

While the nostalgia for unity and oneness is imbued with defensive connotations similar to those that drive patriarchal formations, it concurrently activates an opposite kind of anxious responses, equally associated with patriarchal ideas. If, on the one hand, total incorporation can be seen as a communion, on the other, the same idea is “demonized as regression through the loss of human and individual identity” (Kilgour 12). Earlier, the body of the other was deemed as compatible with the *I*'s body. Consequently, incorporation was longed for and pursued. Conversely, from this viewpoint, the other's body is regarded as different, thus poisonous and unwanted. Therefore, incorporation is rejected

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<sup>25</sup> In this paragraph, I have employed the feminine pronoun to refer to Wittig's reader in order to show how the dynamics between the *I* and you are replicated in the interaction between the author and the reader. Such mirroring, however, does not preclude Wittig's array of readers from including other genders as well.

insofar as one's own specificity would get not expanded by a similar other, but lost within its difference ("what am I" 50).

In *The Lesbian Body*, the *I* and you often show signs of this anxiety of incorporating and being incorporated against their will. For instance, the addressee often physically resists incorporation: "You resist" (37); "I take you by surprise, I tackle you, I take possession of you [...] You resist" (71); "you repel m/e with all your will-power" (75). On her side, the *I* often appears frightened by the you: "you file your teeth [...] you sharpen your teeth [...] your pointed teeth" (135); and she uses the vocabulary of the siege in reference to incorporation: "The mud reaches the muscles of m/y thighs, it touches m/y sex [...] M/y entire body is overwhelmed. First to fall is m/y anus. Some glutei soon follow [...] I lose heart [...] I have no share in this systematic transformation you impose on m/e" (72). Occasionally, the *I* expresses her fear to be objectified, reduce to a jewel: "M/y clitoris detached [...] ready to adorn one of your fingers in the setting of a ring" (162); or to a decorative piece of furniture:

*I* am no longer nourished, m/y lungs are not oxygenated, m/y breathing is increasingly more difficult. *I* see how completely emptied with no more thickness than a geographical map m/y skin is going to be stretched out taut by you m/y organs all flat falling spontaneously m/y bones turned into powder crumbling, m/y entire body now absolutely ready to be fastened with drawing-pins on your wall, may you be accursed [...] you whom *I* clearly see standing sometimes passing your fingers over m/y flattened body. (126)

### *The Process of Emesis*

The desire for communion and the fear of regression, as well as their respective anxieties, are closely intertwined in *The Lesbian Body*'s prose poems. The process of emesis might seem exemplifying in this regard, insofar as it presupposes incorporation as well as (r)ejection. However, I believe that it exceeds the simple combination of these contradictory impulses, and that its unfolding discloses a larger plan that Wittig employs to assault the patriarchal discourses she has struggled with so far.

*I* devour [you] [...] then I look at you and *I* am overwhelmed with great pity to see you so mutilated deprived of both your arms your bust bloodied [...] *I* am suddenly revolted, *I*



vomit you up [...] You become very pale at this point you throw yourself back with a great cry [...] you say it is unbearable to see m/e vomit you up, *I am overcome by greater pity than ever, I begin to eat you again as fast as I can m/y so adored one.* (121-122)

The “great pity” the *I* feels after having eaten the you constitutes a leak, an emotionally charged excess which breaks the linearity of the patriarchal process because, for a moment, she doubts precisely those modes of incorporation she has employed so far. The ejection of the other is not caused by unexpected incompatibility, but by a self-reflexive instant. Although pity is just an exception in the text, I argue that emesis opens a way to interpret Wittig’s structuring of *The Lesbian Body* as a resistive mechanism that functions on endless repetitions and displaced circularity, and which continuously produces lesbian bodies in the process.

### *A Narrative of Tenderized Flesh*

#### *Why Violence Anyway?*

Wittig, I argue, is aware of the kind of anxieties that permeate her text. Consequently, she would seem to consciously employ that same violence that has historically oppressed women and lesbians by the means of phallogentrism. What is it that makes this violence necessary? In writing a lesbian text, it seems that “a narrative of tenderness [...] instead of tenderized flesh” (Kim 203) could have been written instead. Wittig brings two reasons to justify the insistent presence of violence in *The Lesbian Body*. On the one hand, she claims, violence was necessary insofar as “[this] is always the case with a new form [the lesbian text]: it threatens and does violence to the older ones” (Wittig, “Some Remarks” 45). On the other, violence aimed at contrasting the mainstream literary representation of lesbian love as “the mildest kind of love” (45). Despite Wittig’s subversive intentions, the question remains of what makes *that* kind of violence necessary, so similar to the violent patriarchal modes of incorporation.

One possible answer may lie in Freud's work. *The Lesbian Body* seems to work according to a mechanism that resembles Freud's repetition compulsion,<sup>26</sup> a psychological phenomenon characterized by a tendency to "endlessly repeat patterns of behaviour which were difficult or distressing in earlier life" (Grant and Crawley 38). In this view, Wittig is repeating the violence that was inflicted on women and lesbians as a way of mastering those anxieties, in order to work through them and relieve the original trauma. While in *Les Guérillères* women and lesbians engage in bloody battles against the patriarchy in order to get rid of its physical presence, in *The Lesbian Body* they do the same to eradicate the psychological traces it has left behind. According to Eloit and Hemmings, "what haunts," i.e. patriarchal discourses and modes of repression in this case, "produces a critical necessity to stay with ghosts" (351). Hence, Wittig stays with patriarchal anxieties and its violence in order to start from "their dis-ease and their failure [...] to fully disappear" (352).

This may be partly true, but such an explanation does not exhaust the implications of Wittig's project nor its reach. As Downing states, Wittig refuses Freudianism as an explicatory framework.<sup>27</sup> If her text reproduces "Freudian ideas, motifs and imagery," Downing argues, is *exclusively* to "debunk their authority as singular truths and to pluralize their meanings" ("Sexual Perversion" 204). These interpretations should be combined. Wittig's employment of patriarchal discourses should be regarded partly as a bequest of patriarchal oppression's inheritance and partly as a reaction to it. Therefore, what is relevant here is not to what extent Wittig's text is implicated by and reproduces those patriarchal structures and its violence; rather, what matters are the strategies she develops in order to exceed them, i.e. to dig a way out while being positioned within. As a matter of fact, repetition does not necessarily correspond to sameness. Rather, it is always meaningful, insofar as it is "a similarity within a field of difference [...] the recognition of both the similarity and the difference" (Rogers 584).

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<sup>26</sup> Sigmund Freud introduced the concept in 1914 in an article titled "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through" (Standard Edition, vol. XII, pp. 147-56) and discussed it at length in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920).

<sup>27</sup> In her essay "One Is Not Born a Woman," Wittig clarifies that women are oppressed as a class as a result of male domination, not as individuals as a result of unconscious sexual repression.

### *Patriarchal Violence Versus Wittig's Violence*

Hence, the violence in *The Lesbian Body*, while it might seem to reproduce the very violence Wittig repudiates, is different in three fundamental ways (Kim 200). First, it is reciprocal, and so is incorporation (Downing, "Sexual Perversion" 205). Across the different prose poems, power fluctuates among the various agents interchangeably. Occasionally, power dynamics alter even intrinsically,<sup>28</sup> thus making ambivalent "who is incorporating whom" (Scanlon 80). In so doing, Wittig's text "dislocates power from one central source," opposing the normative patriarchal order in which the heterosexual male has constructed an "all-powerful and self-perpetuating [identity]" (85). Besides, the incorporated part exercises her agency insofar as it *gives consent* to the other's desire to incorporate:

You allow m/e to draw you to m/e to slash greedily at your throat [...], you allow m/e to lay bare the muscles of your cheeks, you allow m/e to incise the whole length of your arms inside and out, you allow m/e to sever your breasts [...], you allow m/e to make an opening all round your belly, you allow m/e to see your viscera all steaming yellow white green, [...] you allow m/e to touch your bladder, you allow m/e to flay both your thighs. (Wittig, *The Lesbian Body* 150-151)

Second, unlike patriarchal violence, which has silenced women and lesbians, Wittig's violence produces speech. The *I* and *you*'s voices are heard in every prose segment, in countless declinations: "victorious voice" (19); "strident voice" (20, 113); "very loud voice" (32, 117); "very low voice" (97, 136); "soft voice" (78); "voice tenuous and modulated" (66); "frenetic voice" (126); "a long ululation" (64); as well as in songs (19; 80; 84, 102). Moreover, the sense of hearing, the vocal cords as well as all the sounds the lesbian body can produce occupy consistent space on a list (128).<sup>29</sup> Finally, Wittig's violence, which results in death most of the time, lacks finality and leads to

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<sup>28</sup> "I set about eating you, [...] m/y teeth seek the lobe, they begin to gnaw at it, [...] I look at you from inside yourself, I lose m/yself, I go astray, [...] I become quite small, now I am a fly, [...] I am a prisoner" (24); "M/y slow inexorable invasion of you [...] I seek to be absorbed by you during m/y writhings in your interior" (89-90).

<sup>29</sup> "HEARING THE VOCAL CORDS THE CRIES THE WAILING THE MURMURS THE HOARSENESS THE SOBS THE SHRIEKS THE VOCIFERATIONS THE WORDS THE MODULATIONS THE SONGS THE STRIDENCIES THE LAUGHS THE VOCAL OUTBURSTS" (128).

resurrection: “I assemble you part by part, I reconstruct you” (80); “looking into your eyes I revive with prodigious speed” (20); and also:

I gather you up piece by piece. I reassemble you. I lick each of your parts sullied by the earth. I speak to you. [...] all of a sudden the pieces fall together, you don't have a finger or a fragment missing. Then I begin to breathe into your half-open mouth into your nose your ears your vulva, I breathe without ceasing lying here on you naked in the black earth.  
(113)

Therefore, *The Lesbian Body* dissolves steady heterosexist power positions and hierarchies by the means of reciprocity and it grants lesbians their voices. In this way, it resolves Grosz's preoccupations by disengaging desire as a lack from its historical association with the denigration of the female other. It is, however, the last of the previous three points which demands the closest attention, as it permits the first two to concretize. The fact that Wittig's violence lacks finality will occupy the ending third of this chapter. More specifically, I will analyse *The Lesbian Body*'s textual structure that Wittig develops in order to enable a multiplicity of mutable bodies to concretize.

### *The Ontology of Lack*

In order to understand the far-reaching implications of Wittig's subversive reworking of desire as a lack and its violence, I refer to Michelle Mawhinney's contribution “Rethinking Desire: The Ontology Of Lack And The Edible Other.” Rather than rejecting the conception of desire understood in terms of lack altogether, Mawhinney distinguishes the very different implications of the “ontology of lack,” as defined by Grosz (“Refiguring” 175), and the notion of lack itself. She emphasizes the “contingent nature,” the “historical rather than inevitable status” of the association of lack and negativity with the denigration of the other in western philosophy and cultural practice (148). She contends it was precisely the *ontologization* of lack that led to the general process of ‘othering’ that, in turn, has *historically* structured desire around a singular signifier, the phallus, and has ultimately generated the binary and heterosexist model of presence and absence. In the following, I examine

how Wittig, although adopting the modes typical of the conception of desire as a lack, has avoided its ontologization, i.e. avoided imposing a teleological closure on the system, for “invoking this final closure and unity is effectively an act of violence, of assimilation, in which difference is *absorbed*” (149). As everything is incorporated into this logic, the specific ‘otherness’ of the other is not recognized—or rather, it is measured as ‘other’ only in relation to the self.

According to Martindale, Wittig’s lesbian body aspires to be ‘finished’ as lesbian. In defence of this thesis, he brings several “signs of closure” (348) which rely mostly on the text’s attempts to ‘contain’ the lesbian body. For instance, Wittig’s instructional tone in the “Author’s note,” he states, summarizes the text’s intent rather than trusting the reader to infer the project (353), while the series of lists tellingly commences and ends with “THE LESBIAN BODY” (28, 153), precisely in the effort to enclose it entirely. According to him, the continuous and persistent disintegration becomes “a mark of stasis rather than fluidity” (348), and Wittig’s bodies exist in “a state of change that is, somehow, arrested” (350). I do agree with Martindale in claiming that in *The Lesbian Body* there are several “signs of closure,” the nostalgia Kilgour describes being one among them. However, there is a difference between aspire to closure and actually pursue and attain it. Contrarily to Martindale’s assertion that in *The Lesbian Body* the normative principle is merely reversed (354), I argue that Wittig avoids a definitive closure, i.e. the ontologization, of the lesbian body and subject. In her text, Wittig does not aim to develop a stable and integrated sense of the (lesbian) self; rather, her project points toward plurality.

### *The Joke of The Self*

The structure of the text as well as its reverberations on the level of meaning, I argue, constitute Wittig’s most forceful resistive strategy, insofar as they allow *The Lesbian Body* to achieve multiplicity. As we have seen, Martindale contends that Wittig’s textual structure is circular but sterile in its repetition. Alternatively, several scholars embrace the idea that a teleological development from the first scenes to the lasts is identifiable, inasmuch as the lesbian body which endures several turns

of fragmentation and recombination eventually finds itself “no longer nowhere” (Shaktini, “Monique” 88). The lesbian body formed under patriarchal rule has been dismantled and reassembled according to a new order of meaning. Therefore, the textual structure, albeit its many somersaults, would be linear, with a beginning and a conclusion, a “triumphant destination” (Campbell 24). Evidently, both these paths lead to a definitive closure: Martindale’s towards a gloomy one, Shaktini and others towards an overly positive and utopical one. Contrarily, I believe that Wittig’s subversive poetics retains its resistive potential precisely thanks to the unfinished status of the lesbian body. The textual structure I propose to interpret *The Lesbian Body* is circular, but productive in its recurrence.

In her piece “Some Remarks on *The Lesbian Body*,” included in Shaktini’s collection of essays, Wittig describes her text as “a kind of paradox but not really, a kind of joke but not really, a kind of impossibility but not really” (46). The title itself is explicatory in this regard due to its irony. “The Lesbian Body” implies the existence of a singular entity that contains all bodies of lesbians. The irony lies in the fact that, while the intent was to abduct that body from patriarchal discourses, Wittig has never wanted to secure it once and for all. See, for instance, the only attempt of the *I* to pretend to be integral:

*I am an integral body blocked off from itself, I do not hear m/y blood circulate m/y heart beat, I do not experience the writhing of m/y viscera, I have not the smallest shiver in m/y hair in m/y nape in m/y back or in m/y loins, no throbbing grips m/e in m/y clitoris, I am perfectly at ease, I am unchoked, I am untouched at any point of m/y body and at this point in m/y discourse I laugh with fierce insane silent laughter m/y most unknown one. (139)*

In *The Lesbian Body*, the integrity and singularity of the lesbian body is a performance, a joke, and one which cannot even be held for too long. If there is something as ‘the’ lesbian body it is only in “its protean metamorphic power, the endless multiplicity by which it produces ever more singularities” (Campbell 20). On the one hand, Wittig’s achievement lies in the release of the lesbian body from the singularity that patriarchal restraints had imposed on it. On the other, Wittig does not

demand a crystallization of that body according to new parameters, however more suitable, but she assists the production of multiple declinations of this fleeing plurality.

### *An Eternally Returning Textual Structure*

Wittig's textual structure is thus ironically anti-essentialist, as well as circular in a productive kind of way. Due to its deaths and resurrections, Ostrovsky has compared it to "the circle of life" (73), while Campbell preferred to define its flow as a "spiralling" since "with each reading the reverberations are richer" (24). I believe that Gilles Deleuze could be of great help here. In particular, I refer to Deleuze's reinterpretation of Nietzsche's idea of eternal recurrence, insofar as, I argue, it accurately mirrors Wittig's concerns in *The Lesbian Body*. Deleuze regards eternal recurrence as "a mode of thought" (Leigh 222), "a *technique* that enables the circulation of difference" (Olney 194). According to him, what is at stake in the Nietzschean idea is not the ceaseless return of the *same*, but the movement that produces everything that *differs*. "[C]lothed repetition" (*Difference* 84), as Deleuze defines the kind of repetition that can be found in the eternal return, is the repetition of the difference which returns and can return only in the act of differing from itself. As an instance to explain the concept, Deleuze proposes art in various forms as "a perfect conduit for repetition with a difference because no artistic use of an element is ever truly equivalent to other uses" (Price 99). For Deleuze:

Repetition can always be 'represented' as extreme resemblance or perfect equivalence, but the fact that one can pass by degrees from one thing to another does not prevent their being different in kind. (*Difference* 2)

Within this process, the concepts of difference and repetition as developed by Deleuze<sup>30</sup> are "logically and metaphysically prior to any concept of identity" (Price 99). The "full vitality" of difference (Olney 190) is achievable exclusively when 'being' is understood as a flux, rather than as a fixity. Instead of an eternal recurrence that returns a self "that is capable of constituting itself as

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<sup>30</sup> To the development of these concepts, Deleuze dedicates whole chapters in *Difference and Repetition*: "Chapter I: Difference in Itself" (28-69) and "Chapter II: Repetition for Itself" (70-128).

Being” (191), what is returned is a subject freed from “the clutches of [the Self], be it the conscious Ego or a grammatical I” (Leigh 219).<sup>31</sup> Therefore, conforming to Wittig’s language, the concept of self-sameness is “eviscerated” (Olney 191). In this way, Deleuze’s interpretation resists the dualism of dialectic and encourages to oppose “every conception of affirmation which would find its foundation in Being” (*Nietzsche* 220). However, each subject is tied to the world in which she emerges, and even her most creative act cannot truly obliterate the limits of that world (Olney 193), as much as to repeat is not to birth a thing out of nothing. Nonetheless, this connection does not have to necessarily produce despair and resignation. A subject may “accept her historicity and yet [...] autonomously assert her agency” (Mann 114) by the means of the recurrence of difference. According to Olney, in Deleuze’s interpretation:

recurrence initiates a political life that is neither beholden to an imagined past nor dependent on an impossible degree of freedom. This establishes the potential for *action*, which introduces genuinely new activity into the world without asserting a sovereign subjectivity capable of ‘creating’ such action. (180)

If Wittig’s discourse had been completely overcome by patriarchal anxieties, what the reader would have witnessed was a “closed circle of eternal sameness” (Adorno and Horkheimer 190), which reflects the paranoid need to establish control. Conversely, Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body* is not “a mockery of what it has already been” (Olney 195); rather, its subversive poetics arranges “the endlessly renewed performance of desire as metamorphic” (Campbell 3), or, in Deleuze’s phrasing, the repetition of the different. What Wittig’s work offers is not an ontological certainty of the ‘I’ that signifies “the waning of life,” but an affirmation of desire that serves as “the genesis of life” (Olney 194). In the process, Wittig’s violence —already very different from patriarchal violence— takes on a crucial function: it leads to death (in all its forms) and in this way enables resurrection, the very incipit of the return of difference. Deleuze defines it as “necessary destruction” (*Difference* 53), a

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<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, in line with Wittig’s textual strategy to bisect personal pronouns and adjectives, Deleuze asserts that “[i]t is as though the *I* were fractured from one end to the other” (*Difference* 86).



redemption achieved in “its self-eradicating form” (Olney 194), what Wittig’s *I* and you seem to be familiar with:

you ask m/e how many times it will be necessary to depart once more to travel to find a place to live, you ask m/e if *I* wish to die and at the moment *I* say yes your strong hand falls on m/e, darkness covers m/y eyes, *I* feel the cold spreading up m/y thighs. (118)

Therefore, even though Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body* bears the traces of patriarchal anxieties, their presence does not exhaust all that can be found there. In fact, Wittig engages with them by the means of repetition, and, through their enactment, she expands already existing meanings as well as creates new ones. More importantly, she activates a process that continuously generates lesbian bodies and affirms their agency in the becoming. According to Deleuze, the eternal return may be compared to “a circle in which difference is at the centre and sameness is at the periphery” (*Difference* 55). In *The Lesbian Body*, the circumference (i.e. the periphery) is constituted by the recurrent pattern the *I* and you follow in their encounters. First, the two separate desiring bodies are identified. Secondly, they engage in the dismemberment, invasion or incorporation of each other’s bodies. Thirdly, they achieve a state of fusion, death or sexual fulfilment. Lastly, the remaking of the two bodies begins by the means of resurrection or the *I*’s seeking of the you who is unseen or completely absent:

There is no trace of you. Your face your body your silhouette are lost. In your place there is a void. [...] *I* seek you but without knowing it. [...] *I* search, *I* question m/yself in the silence in the lack of traces, *I* question an absence so strange that it makes a hole within m/y body [...] you arrive. (35-36)

In each prose poem, only a frame is shown to the reader, rarely the full circle. Contrarily, the various shapes the lesbian bodies assume are often celebrated and accurately depicted. While the circumference of the circle is made of sameness, its center comprises difference (*Difference* 55). In Wittig’s work, quite unmistakably, what lies at the center is the lesbian body. According to Deleuze, difference becomes “a divergence or a decentering,” and consequently the eternal return “leads to

multiple centers of meaning that give depth to the world of difference” (55). Therefore, by the means of the displacement of the center, i.e. the lesbian body that continuously differs from itself, Wittig achieves multiplicity. Hence, lesbian bodies become wolves (Wittig, *The Lesbian Body* 22), horses (56), sharks (64-65), “black swans swim in the solitary lake” (36), protozoa (45), the Moon (49-50), the rain (142), islands (92), or instruments of death and rebirth (16). In this regard, several scholars have underlined how the *I*’s refusal to name the beloved is crucial in preserving her multiplicity.<sup>32</sup> By withholding a single name, Wittig “gains the space for many” (Oberman 169) and permits the you to be summoned by others as well (Cope 86).

## *Conclusion*

### *Monstruous Children and Literary War Machines*

In this chapter, I analysed how Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body* engages with the concept of desire as a lack, historically associated with patriarchal discourses, and how the violence and anxieties related to them are reworked and expanded. Wittig’s bodies are anxious and employ several textual strategies in order to cope with their anxieties. However, while they demonstrate to long for closure by a certain degree—as closure would erase anxiety as a result—they never actually attain nor pursue it. Conversely, Wittig’s lesbian bodies stay with their anxieties by enacting them over and over again by the means of a textual structure that resembles Deleuze’s interpretation of the Nietzschean eternal return. “[E]ach fragment [prose poem; prose segment] has been duplicated in a slightly different form and meaning” (“Some Remarks” 48), explains Wittig, and describes “a moment [...] a state of being that can happen to everyone and that cannot last” (47). By addressing the difference within an apparent self-replicating sameness, Wittig exposes and pursues “the break in the circle” (Olney 191), while, by refusing to recuperate an integral and stable lesbian self, she embraces the fluidity of

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<sup>32</sup> See, for instance: “*I shall not utter your adorable name. Such is the interdict you have laid on m/e, so be it*” (19); “*Unnameable one [...] you unnameable unnamed, she whose name I may not utter [...] not once I swear to you will I utter your name*” (46); “*I will not say your name. It shall not issue borne on the air, it shall not make its way outside of m/e. I am silent*” (63); “*I do not call your name m/y most forbidden one*” (87); “*I am she who holds the secret of your name. I retain its syllables behind m/y closed mouth*” (130).

subjectivity. Not only anxious and plural, Wittig's lesbian bodies are also violent. Nonetheless, their violence differs from patriarchal violence insofar as it is reciprocal and produces speech. More importantly, violence is preserved and backed up by resurrection to maintain such a circular process in place. On a smaller scale, the you and *I*'s desire for circularity, rather than finality, manifests emblematically in their beseeching to be eaten and spit out, i.e. to be destroyed and again discharged as a new body:

*I seek to be absorbed by you during m/y writhings in your interior to be spat out rejected vomited entirely, I implore you 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. (90)*

Interestingly, Deleuze's subversive approach when confronting philosophers within the rationalist tradition consists in "show[ing] how the cogs in his machinery operate [...] enter[ing] them and get them with child, a child that is undeniably theirs, but that is a monster" (Deleuze, qtd. in Leigh 207). Wittig works similarly.<sup>33</sup> On the one hand, her lesbian bodies have indisputably been given birth within patriarchal repressive discourse. On the other, they are monstrously extraneous and resistive to them.<sup>34</sup> Wittig's lesbian bodies, their behaviours, inclinations and desires ultimately diverge from patriarchal discourses. Nonetheless, they generate from their premises. Similarly, *The Lesbian Body* should not be celebrated as utopic textual place where lesbians can live completely detached from the rest. Contrarily, its textual resistances serve as a "Trojan horse [...] the wooden horse, off color, outsized, barbaric" (Wittig, *The Straight Mind* 68; Jardine 459; Zerilli), which Wittig evokes, echoing Deleuze and Guattari's "war machine" (*Nomadology*), as a figure that seems to be safely located outside but is, instead, "unavoidable, everywhere, inside and outside" (Cope 77). As a

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<sup>33</sup> Although neither Deleuze and Guattari nor Monique Wittig mention each other in their respective works, scholars have noted similarities between their ideas, though mainly in regard to Wittig's theoretical essays and not her fiction (see, for instance, Braidotti, "Becoming Woman"). If *The Lesbian Body* has not been analysed specifically in relation to or through Deleuze and Guattari's theories yet, it is because the works belong to two different traditions and because Wittig, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, has been initially labelled as too essentialist to justify further affiliation with post-structuralism. However, a rereading of her works, which resulted in Shaktini's *On Monique Wittig*, opened the way to such interpretations (see p. 14 of this thesis).

<sup>34</sup> In *The Lesbian Body*, the *I* often address the you precisely with monstrous appellatives: "adored monster" (38); "you monster" (41); "I adore you like a goddess monstrous with rottenness" (140). For more on Wittig's resistive monstrosity see Scanlon.

result, *The Lesbian Body* becomes a contested terrain of negotiation with patriarchal dictates and society, as well as a site of production of lesbian bodies. This interpretation does not assume a direct chain of influence but rather a rhizomatic relationship between lines of thought elaborating similar strategies of resistance. This reading seeks neither to place Wittig within the tradition of white, male French philosophy and psychoanalysis, nor to impute to Deleuze and Guattari a willful feminist aim. It is instead to apply Deleuzian and Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts as a framework for a close reading of *The Lesbian Body*, thereby demonstrating how Wittig's work can be considered as a concrete example of a textual act of resistance and literary war machine, thus speaking to the broader aim of this thesis.

### *Leaky Lesbian Bodies*

I would like to close describing another feature of Wittig's lesbian bodies, which I briefly mentioned in relation to pity as an emotionally charged excess: their leakiness. If pity was an exception in *The Lesbian Body*, leakiness also surfaces concretely as corporeality. According to Olney, Deleuze breaks from Heidegger's reading of Nietzsche and suggests that the crucial element in eternal return is not memory, aimed at preserving a sense of the self-same, but waste (191). What Wittig describes so accurately in *The Lesbian Body*, refusing any "cleansed narratives of the self" (Foltz 204), is precisely that: the waste, an excess of the body which cannot be contained and leaks out:

THE LESBIAN BODY THE JUICE THE SPITTLE THE SALIVA THE SNOT THE  
SWEAT THE TEARS THE WAX THE URINE THE FAECES THE EXCREMENT THE  
BLOOD THE LIMPH THE JELLY THE WATER THE CHYLE THE CHYME THE  
HUMOURS THE SECRETIONS. (28)

The second entry of the list translated with 'the juice' by David Le Vay corresponds to 'la cyprine' in the original French, a formal and exotic term for vaginal fluid. In *The Lesbian Body*, cyprine swells until it can no longer be contained (Shaktini, "Monique" 86), for instance when it ends up forming the sea the you and I sail to reach "the shining radiant isles [...] the green Cytheras [...]"

the dark and gilded Lesbos” (Wittig, *The Lesbian Body* 26). As the cyprine —as well as other kinds of bodily material and secretions— expands and leaks out of the body, breaking down its boundaries, it is as if it textually evades the structure of the single prose poem. In so doing, it floods and germinates in other crevices, giving birth to new lesbian bodies as well as new prose poems to recount them. In other words, from a material point of view, it is the leaky lesbian body that engenders new texts that, in turn, engender new lesbian bodies and new leakages. To conclude, however anxious, violent, desiring, leaky and productive, Wittig’s lesbian bodies are always on the move, willingly unfinished, and continuously and joyfully in search of one another, and that is precisely how *The Lesbian Body* ends: “I seek you m/y radiant one across the throng” (165).

THE LESBIAN BODY THE JUICE THE  
 SPITTLE THE SALIVA THE SNOT  
 THE SWEAT THE TEARS THE WAX  
 THE URINE THE FAECES THE  
 EXCREMENTS THE BLOOD THE  
 LYMPH THE JELLY THE WATER  
 THE CHYLE THE CHYME THE  
 HUMOURS THE SECRETIONS THE  
 PUS THE DISCHARGES THE SUP-  
 PURATIONS THE BILE THE JUICES  
 THE ACIDS THE FLUIDS THE  
 FLUXES THE FOAM THE SULPHUR  
 THE UREA THE MILK THE  
 ALBUMEN THE OXYGEN THE  
 FLATULENCE THE POUCHES THE  
 PARIETES THE MEMBRANES THE  
 PERITONEUM, THE OMENTUM,  
 THE PLEURA THE VAGINA THE  
 VEINS THE ARTERIES THE VESSELS  
 THE NERVES

28

Spores start from your epidermis. Your pores produce them in thousands, *I* watch the tiny explosions, *I* see how the spores descend at the end of hairy filaments without becoming detached from them, the stalks shoot, the spores develop and become rounded, the innumerable spheres clashing together create stridences clicking aeolian harp vibrations. Slowly you stand erect your arms extended before you your thighs rigid your entire body in movement, you move forward supported by the flight of the spheres expanding in the air. Your every movement produces a harmony of sounds which make the ears shift in all directions. *I* follow you, *I* move forward in your gigantic shadow scaled down prolonged by the spheres. In thousands they blur your outline or else make it appear stippled when they catch the sun in the course of their gyrations. At each of your strides you pass above several women walking. Your matchless music fixes them on the spot, then one or other seized with convulsions falls in a heap to the ground. Some begin to shriek. You superb you do not halt. *I* have difficulty in following you. Now *I* run beneath you, your jostling spheres gleaming in the sun give m/e vertigo but breathless as *I* am *I* laugh freely, *I* announce you to the immobilized ones that they may watch your coming, *I* baptise you for centuries of centuries, so be it.

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Figure 1. Wittig, Monique. *The Lesbian Body*. Beacon Press, 1975. English Edition.

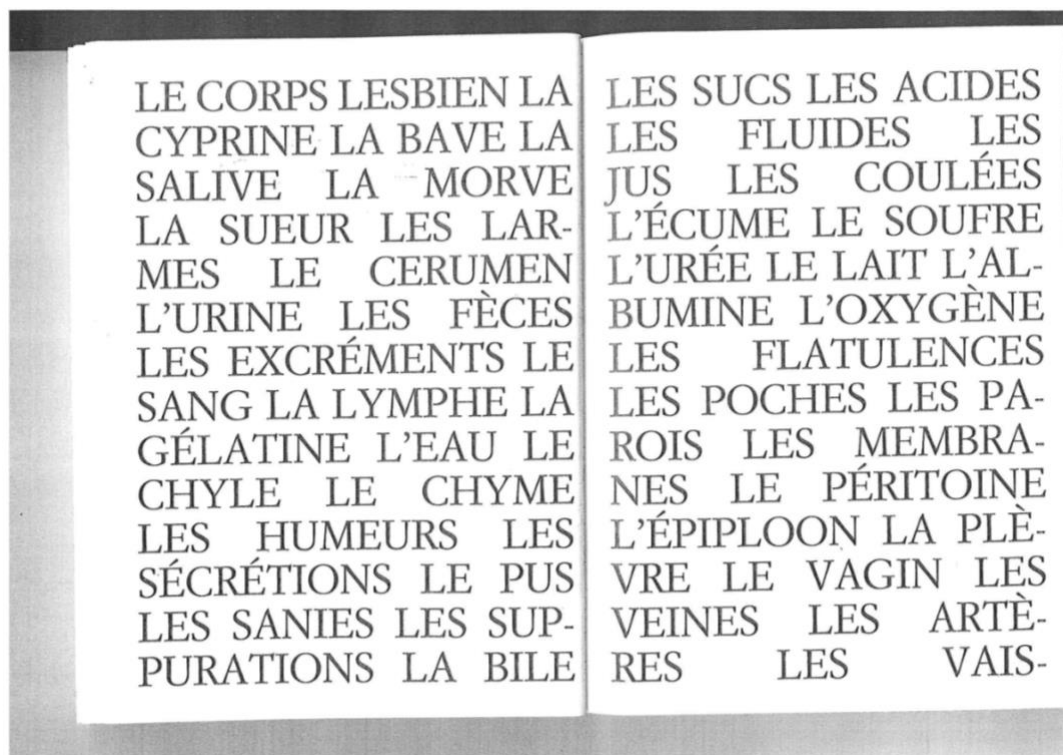


Figure 2. Wittig, Monique. *Le corps lesbien*. Les Éditions de Minuit, 1973. French Edition.

## *Toxic Bodies, Purified Identities: Dacia Maraini's Lettere a Marina*

### *Dacia Maraini 'dalla parte delle donne': The Novel in Context*

Featuring a sixty-year-long career as a novelist, playwright, and poet, Dacia Maraini (1936-) is currently one of the leading figures of the Italian literary panorama, holding a reputation as a committed activist for women's rights and her works figuring among the most original expressions of Italian feminist literature. Although Maraini has never used the term 'feminist' to describe herself, preferring the adverbial phrase 'dalla parte delle donne,' the testimonies to her advocacy to feminist issues are numerous. According to Rodica Diaconescu-Blumenfeld, the late 1960s marked the onset of Maraini's activism (4): from the campaigns and surveys carried out in support of the legalisation of abortion during the 1970s, to the foundation of the Roman feminist theatre association *La Maddalena*, or from the staging of her first feminist play *Manifesto dal carcere* (1969) to the enquiries on women's prisons for the daily *Paese Sera*, from which her novel *Memorie di una ladra* (1973) is drawn. By the means of her literary works, Maraini has explored the female condition as well as exposed the social proscriptions which regulate adherence to coherent socio-sexual behaviour rooted in naturalized gender identity. As Gabriele argues, Maraini's characters were disputing the limits of patriarchal laws, specifically in the regulation of female sexuality, even before Adrienne Rich published in 1980 her seminal article "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," while, at the same time, engaging in a process of denaturalisation and reconfiguration of the same.

As anticipated in the introduction to this thesis, Maraini's novel *Lettere a Marina* appeared in 1981, a decidedly significant period for Italian lesbians in terms of political organization and public visibility. Accredited for the representation of the taboo topics of female homosexual desires and relationships, Maraini's novel exposes the process of sexualisation through the workings of societal disciplinary powers and challenges it by staging non-binary sexual practices that break down the normative ideal. *Lettere a Marina* consists of a series of 78 unsent letters that Bianca writes to Marina,

her former lover, once their relationship has come to an end. Even though Bianca starts writing with the intention of interpreting her involvement with Marina, she quickly feels the urge to delve more deeply into her own past, touching upon her family and social circle, her love affairs, her sexuality, as well as her inability to finish the book which she is currently working on as a professional writer. This chapter stems from Dacia Maraini's assertion, articulated in her collection of essays *La bionda, la bruna e l'asino* (1987) written between the 1970s and 1980s, that "[i]l mondo della sessualità si è ampliato, è diventato complesso, polimorfo, sfaccettato, variegato, con doppi tripli e quadrupli fondi" (10-11).<sup>35</sup>

A considerable number of critical studies have been made to Maraini's poetics and engagement with feminist issues in general as well as *Lettere a Marina* in particular. Bruce Merry's early attempt to read Maraini's *Lettere a Marina* as the revelation of a feminist utopia has been heavily criticized for its naivete, that is, its failure to acknowledge both its explicit portrayal of lesbianism and its depiction of female-to-female relationality in terms other than the idealized mutual tenderness often attributed to it (Ballaro 179-180). Dissenting from Merry's account of the *Lettere* as the celebration of the universal, platonic, sympathetic, and 'naturally' profound intimacy between women (217), later readings of the novel have emphasized its textual manifestations of women's desires "not only in the form of tenderness or ecstasy but, just as often, in possessiveness and violence" (Ballaro 179).<sup>36</sup> As far as criticism focusing specifically on gender and sexuality is concerned,<sup>37</sup> Masland has discussed the Irigarayan 'economy of fluids' subtending the narrative style, while Dagnino has explored the psychoanalytical and erotic implications inherent to the mother-daughter relationship. Moreover, Morelli has emphasized Bianca's queer attitude towards her sexuality. Throughout this chapter, I will primarily engage with the latter scholars' readings, while

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<sup>35</sup> "[t]he world of sexuality has expanded, it has become complex, polymorphic, multifaceted, variegated, with double, triple and quadruple grounds" (10-11).

<sup>36</sup> For an account of the violence affecting Bianca and Marina's relationship, see Casadio pp. 6-7; for another account of *Lettere a Marina* as a rejection of an essentialist lesbian utopia, see Gabriele pp. 246-247.

<sup>37</sup> Studies have also been made on different issues, such as the recuperation of a female genealogy in the novel (Sumeli Weinberg; Picchietti), its subversion of the epistolary genre (Salsini), and the semi-autobiographical theme of abortion (Lucamante).



also mentioning Ballaro's and Gabriele's analyses, they too concerned with gender and sexuality, in order to analyse what will become clear in the next paragraph.

*Utopic Retreats (?): the Southern Italian Seaside Town of T.*

Due to its marine and isolated setting, Bianca's retreat from Rome to the Southern seaside town of T. (100) might resemble *The Lesbian Body's* allusion to the Amazons, the islands of women (9), as Wittig describes them. Enumerating the reasons that triggered her departure,<sup>38</sup> Bianca implicitly discloses her hope that the unfamiliar environment, detached from the circle of her acquaintances and society as a whole, would bring her relief from the pain and discomfort which the "sbadata corsa degli ultimi anni" (5)<sup>39</sup> has engendered. However, just as Wittig's text, Maraini's *Lettere a Marina* does not provide its heroine with the antiseptic, i.e. utopian, environment unfettered from repressive influences. On the contrary, Bianca's engagement with her desires, past and present, is constantly affected by and embroiled with intrusive external pressures as well as interiorized obstructing patterns.

Therefore, here, as in the previous chapter, I analyze the 'lesbian' as neither simply subsumed by nor unimplicated in those very discourses it might seem or want to exist beyond. As a matter of fact, *Lettere a Marina's* resistive potential does not function by virtue of a complete rupture from those discourses and structures of power; rather, it is precisely its impulse to continuously evoke and confront those discourses and structures that strengthen its resistances —a position even more explicit here than in Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*. According to Teresa de Lauretis, the 'eccentric' or 'ex-centric' lesbian subject, as a result of exclusion and self-dislocation, is able to actualize a re-inscription of her identity in "a reclaimed space, full of contradictions, carved out [...] in the

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<sup>38</sup> "[S]ono qui per sfuggire a una figlia che mi vuole mangiare. [...] Sono qui anche per scrivere il mio libro. Sono qui per sfuggire alla tentazione di farmi uccidere da un figlio che mi accampa nell'utero" (21); "I am here to escape a daughter who wants to eat me. [...] I'm also here to write my book. I am here to escape the temptation to be killed by a son who encamps me in my womb" (21).

<sup>39</sup> "careless race of the recent years" (5).

interstices of the heteronormative order” (56-57). In this chapter, I aim to analyze the contradictions at play in Maraini’s *Lettere a Marina*, as well as its refusal to resolve them. More specifically, I examine how the novel calls into question patriarchal discourses and separatist lesbian ideologies alike. After having analyzed the novel’s opposition to those discourses, I underline how, for Bianca, Marina and their lesbian relationship serve as a point of departure to disentangle herself from the sexual and social essentialism, functioning as a self-reflexive practice. In this way, Bianca maps out an alternative way of being sexed, which remains open to endless negotiations, while the novel succeeds in queering the traditional lesbian plot.

### *Provincial Compulsory Heterosexuality: Women Should Not Walk Alone*

As anticipated, the Southern seaside town of T. does not grant Bianca the enclosed setting she may have wished for. The residents repeatedly hint at the fact that she is alone: “mi chiede: è sola? non capisco bene cosa vuol dire sola senza figli sola senza marito sola senza madri padri sorelle?” (20).<sup>40</sup> After the inquiry, the newsagent smiles at her with “un’aria complice paterna” (20)<sup>41</sup>; her neighbour Basilia concludes that she must be hiding something, “una pena d’amore non corrisposto una malattia” (21)<sup>42</sup>; a passer-by, after claiming that a woman should not be walking the street alone, ironically ends up harassing her (69).<sup>43</sup> These characters’ ongoing preoccupation toward Bianca’s marital status alludes, on the one hand, to the patriarchal conception of women as dependent on men, particularly for their need of protection; on the other, it discloses the residents’ criticism towards Bianca’s social opaqueness and non-conformity to the role assigned to women within patriarchy, which coincides to reproductive sexuality. Eventually, these capillary utterances are devoted,

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<sup>40</sup> “[h]e asks me: are you alone? I don’t understand what it means alone without children alone without husband alone without mothers fathers sisters?” (20).

<sup>41</sup> “a complicit paternal way of doing” (20).

<sup>42</sup> A pain of unrequited love a disease” (21).

<sup>43</sup> See also: the cinema cashier looking suspiciously at Bianca when she asks for one ticket only (68); a female shop-owner trying to figure out why, being approximately her same age, Bianca is still unmarried and childless (175); the doctor suggesting that, to retrieve from her sickness, Bianca would need company, since “la solitudine corrompe i nervi” (195) [“the loneliness corrupts the nerves”].

voluntarily or not, to reabsorbing Bianca's excess into the (hetero-)normative grid, as to maintain in place that institution defined by Adrienne Rich as 'compulsory heterosexuality,' whose objective is the control of women's bodies and practices.

### *Interiorized Commands: Two Faces of the Same Essentialist Discourse*

#### *Patriarchal Silence: Una Ragazza Per Bene*

Nonetheless, the residents' intrusiveness is by no means the most threatening pressure Bianca must deal with. As a matter of fact, throughout her letters, Bianca recounts how during her childhood and adolescence she has been exposed and has eventually internalized several patriarchal dictates. At the time of the writing, she has confronted them to different degrees, but she still carries their burdensome remnants even so. Throughout the letters, Bianca recollects several episodes in which she has been educated to silence, for instance, the time she was living with the grandfather<sup>44</sup> as well as the years spent in a Catholic boarding school, whose politics Bianca describes as follows:

Una ragazza "per bene" doveva parlare il meno possibile sorridere molto ma non vezzosamente con dolcezza remissiva e timidezza doveva stare a occhi bassi mai guardare dritto negli occhi qualcuno era maleducato mai chiedere qualcosa ma aspettare che gli altri offrano mai ridere sguaiatamente mai mettere in mostra il proprio corpo mai toccarsi mai e poi mai toccare le altre e così via era un catalogo di comandamenti che non finiva più. (55)<sup>45</sup>

Gradually, the reader understands that the denied access to speech has impeded Bianca —and several others, as she had found out during the meetings of the "piccolo gruppo" (40)<sup>46</sup>— to react to episodes

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<sup>44</sup> "[G]li anni di silenzi alla tavola del nonno quel piegare la voce a un soffio per chiedere il sale o l'acqua" (26) ["[T]he years of silence at grandfather's table the bending the voice to a whisper to ask for salt or water"].

<sup>45</sup> "A 'decent' girl had to talk as little as possible smile a lot but not charmingly with submissive sweetness and shyness she had to keep her eyes down never look someone straight in the eye it was rude never ask for something but wait for others to offer never laugh coarsely never show one's own body never touch oneself never, never touch the other girls and so on it was a catalog of commandments that never ended" (55).

<sup>46</sup> "small group" (40). Bianca refers to her 'Gruppo di Autocoscienza,' a political practice aimed at raising feminist self-awareness born within the first Italian feminist collectives in the late sixties and early seventies, within the general framework of anti-authoritarian movements. Bianca specifies: "[h]o parlato tante volte [...] con loro. [...] È il piccolo gruppo che mi ha ridato voglia di scrivere mi ha riportato a galla cose che credevo morte e sepolte. [...] il piccolo gruppo che mi ha abituata a dire di me con una faccia di donna" (40) ["I have spoken many times [...] with them. [...] It is the small group that made me want to write again it brought back to me things that I thought were dead and buried. [...] The

of violence, for instance, the time in which her brother's friend attempted to rape her: "[n]on sono riuscita a spicciare una parola né ho pensato di chiedere aiuto" (126).<sup>47</sup>

### *Patriarchal Taboo: Chi Vuoi Sposare Tu?*

However, Bianca's interiorization of the patriarchal dictates manifests most evidently by the means of her anxiety related to the incest taboo with the mother. In a letter, Bianca recalls her mother's "pelle lunare," "bocca di geranio," "alito dalle ali di libellula," her body "stretto in un vestito lungo di velluto nero da cui le braccia uscivano come morbidi serpenti piumati" (129),<sup>48</sup> admitting that her sight would arouse in her violent emotions (91) and concluding that:

[i]n qualche momento di quella crescita dei sensi devo avere capito che l'incesto col padre è meno terribile e lacerante di quello con la madre. Chi vuoi sposare tu? Mamma. Non si può. Allora papà. (129)<sup>49</sup>

In her reading of *Lettere a Marina*, Pauline Dagnino offers an interesting psychoanalytic account of the mother-daughter relationship and especially of its development within the (hetero-)normative system. Referring to Naomi Scheman's contribution, she explains that relationships are learned initially from the child's original attachment to the mother. However, as part of taking her place in a social system dominated by male values, the female child is required to forego what she has learned in the original attachment and replace it with an attachment to the father. According to Scheman, the latter is "positively necessary in establishing her heterosexuality by breaking her

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small group that got me used to talk about myself with a woman's face" (40). For more information, see: Lonzi, Carla. "Significato dell'autocoscienza nei gruppi femministi." In: *Sputiamo su Hegel. La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale e altri scritti*, Scritti di Rivolta femminile, 1974, pp. 141-147.

<sup>47</sup> I was unable to utter a word nor did I think of asking for help" (126). By the means of the incorporation of a story that Bianca reads in the newspaper at the time of the narration, Maraini underscores that episodes of violence such as the one Bianca suffered are not a matter of the past: "[u]na bambina di sei anni è stata violentata da un uomo di 32. [...] La bambina non ha detto niente a nessuno [...] E tu? con i tuoi stupidissimi cinque anni di educazione al silenzio e alla soggezione resti lì muta incatenata forzatamente complice [...] Un silenzio paralizzante" (95-96) ["a six-year-old girl was raped by a 32-year-old man. [...] The girl didn't say anything to anyone [...] And you? with your stupid five years of education to silence and fear you remain there mute chained forcibly accomplice [...] A paralyzing silence"].

<sup>48</sup> "silvery skin," "geranium mouth," "breath with dragonfly wings," her body "tight in a long black velvet dress from which the arms came out like soft feathered snakes" (129).

<sup>49</sup> "[a]t some moment of that growth of the senses I must have understood that the incest with the father is less terrible and lacerating than that with the mother. Who do you want to marry? Mom. You cannot. Then dad" (129).

attachment to her mother beyond recollection” (69). As a result of this shift, the female girl learns to repress all knowledge of her origins in the maternal and to forego active desire, which becomes passive and remains in fantasy (185). Evidently, Bianca suffers from this prohibition enforced by the incest taboo under patriarchal law, and recalls how communication between women in her own family was, and partly still is, like committing incest:

Con mia sorella come con mia madre anche se le amo moltissimo non riesco a parlare. Dire qualcosa di me anche quando ero piccola era come fare incesto. L'intimità con loro appena aprivo un varco al silenzio rischiava di diventare carnale, atroce. (35)<sup>50</sup>

### *Separatist Lesbian Ideology*

Lastly, Bianca has to deal with another pressure coming from the opposite front. Although isolated in the seaside town of T., Bianca regularly recalls the admonishments of her lesbian community, imbued with a separatist ideology whose radical nature is apparent in her friend Chantal's position. From Chantal's brief declarations, transcribed in the letters, the reader perceives Bianca's uneasiness with the figure which emerges, that of the 'pure' lesbian, she who actively refuses to associate with men —sexually as well as socially— and therefore is alleged to be unimplicated in oppression. According to Chantal, being with a man is either “un atto di intelligenza col nemico” (22),<sup>51</sup> or simply a crime (115), while Bianca's hesitation when it comes to homosexual intercourse would make her a traitor (47). Although less soberly, Marina accuses Bianca of similar negligence (146). Bianca is profoundly affected by these precepts: “[mi] sentiv[o] in colpa delle [mie] dipendenze dei [miei] lacci che ombelico a ombelico [mi] legano ad amanti padri mariti figli” (147)<sup>52</sup>; and compares herself to Hypermnestra, who could not assassinate her husband during their wedding night and therefore betrayed her sisters, the Danaides (23). She describes this treacherous tenderness as:

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<sup>50</sup> “With my sister as with my mother, even though I love them very much, I can't speak. Saying something about myself even when I was little was like committing incest. The intimacy with them as soon as I opened a way to silence risked becoming carnal, atrocious” (35). See also: “C'era una continua incombente minaccia di incesto da cui io mi difendevo col silenzio e la paura il rifiuto di lei [la madre] di me” (129) [“There was a continuous looming threat of incest from which I defended myself with silence and fear the rejection of her [the mother] of me”].

<sup>51</sup> “an act of intelligence with the enemy” (22).

<sup>52</sup> “[I] felt guilty of [my] addictions of [my] laces that tie [me] navel to navel to lovers fathers husbands children” (147).

una macchia antica nella mia storia di donna [...] Una prima volta amante del padre e una seconda volta amante del figlio ecco il tradimento come dice Chantal nei riguardi delle Danaidi che continuano ad andare alla fonte con grossi vasi di terracotta sulle spalle. (24)<sup>53</sup>

So far, I have underlined how Bianca is ambushed by and suffers from both patriarchal dictates and her lesbian community's separatist ideology. As Bianca herself eventually realizes, those are but the two faces of the same essentialist discourse, lurking in heterosexual and homosexual manifestations alike. However, as anticipated, *Lettere a Marina* is not limited to pinpoint the pitfalls of those discourses; rather, it actively engages in a process of denaturalisation and reconfiguration of the same. In the following, I examine the novel's strategies to counter those repressive discourses. Specifically, I analyze the ambivalent representation of Bianca and Marina's lesbian relationship; the staging of several queer characters, sexualities, practices, and relationalities; as well as the significance of Bianca's act of writing. These, I argue, work to unsettle rather than to consolidate the boundaries around identity, emphasizing the novel's plasticity and transformability as well as expanding its erotic potential.

### *Denaturalisation and Reconfiguration*

#### *Difference and Sameness*

According to Morelli, Marina's body has been defined as "a constitutive element of the text" as well as "a site of ambiguity" (106). Similarly to Wittig's *I and you*, Bianca and Marina's relationship is characterized by the simultaneous presence of the desire for communion and the fear of regression (Casadio 7-8), predominantly staged through the metaphor of cannibalism. This tension is further complicated by Bianca's perception of Marina, and especially Marina's body, as expression, at the same time, of difference and sameness. On the one hand, Marina is different from Bianca because of

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<sup>53</sup> "an ancient stain in my story as a woman [...] A first time lover of the father and a second time lover of the son here is the betrayal as Chantal says towards the Danaids who continue to go to the spring with large terracotta pots on their shoulders" (24).

her physical appearance, her attitude towards her own body and her personality.<sup>54</sup> Difference is seen as a reason for attraction,<sup>55</sup> but the possibility to actually love what is different is questioned:

Ci rincorriamo perché diverse e vogliamo anche il nostro uguale. Anzi vogliamo soprattutto il nostro uguale [...] che non riusciamo a incontrare in noi assieme per la prima iniziale diversità che credo permettimi affascinari entrambi. (86)<sup>56</sup>

On the other hand, Marina is also the same for the very fact that she possesses a woman's body. Unsurprisingly, by cause of the incest prohibition, every time Bianca comes face to face to Marina's sex, her fear arises, becoming an obsessive motif in the text (32-34, 47, 133). More precisely, Bianca's conflict stems from her consciousness that loving Marina's body, so similar to her own, forces her into a discomfoting confrontation with herself, an "unnerving encounter with her origins" (Ballaro 184), that is, the mother:

[i]n fondo al tuo sesso aperto c'era mia madre, ecco forse era lì tutto l'orrore in una rimossa lontanissima tentazione di incesto. Il tuo corpo era diverso staccato da me riconoscibile e io potevo abbracciarlo e carezzarlo. Così mi dicevo. Ma pure quando me lo trovavo vicino alla faccia non riuscivo a non pensare che si trattava del cuore carnoso e sanguigno di una madre che avevo amato e perduto in un qualche sogno lontanissimo e questa consapevolezza mi annichilava. (33-34)<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Marina's skin and hair are dark, and the adjective 'bruno' is used to refer to many parts of her body which, in addition, is robust and strong. She is "capricciosamente innamorata di [sé]" (20) ["capriciously in love with [herself]"], extrovert and impulsive. Conversely, Bianca is pale, she used to have freckles (184), her hair is blond, and she depicts herself as a child as "stralunata magra e impaurita" (186) ["dazed thin and frightened"].

<sup>55</sup> "Il guaio è che Giorgia e io ci assomigliamo troppo per essere attratte l'una dall'altra. Non c'è curiosità nella nostra amicizia. Tu invece hai il potere di sorprendermi ogni momento. Non finirò mai di conoscerti e questo mi rende curiosa. Ho voglia di frugare dentro di te con occhi sottomarini" (108) ["The trouble is that Giorgia and I are too much alike to be attracted to each other. There is no curiosity in our friendship. Instead, you have the power to surprise me every moment. I'll never stop getting to know you and that makes me curious. I want to rummage inside you with submarine eyes"].

<sup>56</sup> "We run after each other because we are different and we also want our equal. Actually, we want above all our equal [...] who we are unable to meet in us together for the first initial diversity that I believe fascinates us both" (86).

<sup>57</sup> "[a]t the bottom of your open sex there was my mother, so perhaps all the horror was there in a far removed temptation of incest. Your body was different detached from me recognizable and I could hug and caress it. I would tell myself so. But even when I would find it close to my face I couldn't help thinking that it was the fleshy and bloody heart of a mother I had loved and lost in some distant dream and this awareness annihilated me" (33-34).

As a result, Bianca's attitude towards Marina's body is very much ambivalent: "[i]l tuo corpo che mi attira e mi respinge mi seduce e mi annoia e a volte ho desiderato carezzare fino a sciogliermi di delizia a volte ho desiderato fare a pezzi" (117).<sup>58</sup>

### *The Game of the Mother-Daughter*

Another case that supports the suggestion of incest inherent to Bianca and Marina's relationship is what the former defines "il gioco della mamma e della figlia" (53).<sup>59</sup> In the descriptions of Bianca and Marina's erotic encounters, the use of nursing imagery, as part of the metaphor of cannibalism,<sup>60</sup> is frequent.<sup>61</sup> For instance, Bianca recalls that she played along with Marina's fantasy one night when they arrived at a hotel that refuses to serve them anything to eat because of the late hour:

Avevi fame e non c'era niente da mangiare. [...] Posso bere il tuo latte? Ti sei accucciata fra le mie braccia e hai preso a succhiarmi il seno. Era il gioco della mamma e della figlia. [...] E io ti carezzavo i capelli come si carezzano a una neonata. Ci siamo addormentate così abbracciate coi capelli umidi appiccicati alle guance un leggero odore di latte materno e pelle sfregata col borotalco. (53)<sup>62</sup>

This episode, far from being an isolated case, actualizes the novel's several instances in which Bianca refers to Marina as the daughter and to herself as the mother —although the roles are sometimes interchangeable: "il collo che mi fa male — lì dove hai piantato i tuoi denti di figlia" (5); "Comunque sono sicura che quando l'avrai tra le mani ti sarai già trovata un'altra madre da divorare" (22).<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> "[y]our body that attracts and rejects me that seduces and bores me and that at times I have wanted to caress until I melt with delight at times I have wanted to tear to pieces" (117).

<sup>59</sup> "the mother and daughter's game" (53).

<sup>60</sup> Insofar as milk becomes flesh, indicating something absorbed from the other which becomes one's own.

<sup>61</sup> Even though Bianca's desire to nurture is directed predominantly towards Marina, exceptions can be identified. One example is that of Massimo Giorgio, her friend Fiammetta's brother, who lived at Bianca's apartment for a while: "[e]ro contenta che gli piacessero le cose cucinate da me — questo vizio del nutrimento la gioia di nutrire [...] Non riesco a sottrarmi a questo mio istinto di nutrice quando ho un ospite in casa" (141-142) ["I was happy that he liked the things I cooked — this vice of nourishment the joy of feeding [...] I cannot escape my nurturer's instinct when I have a guest in the house"].

<sup>62</sup> "You were hungry and there was nothing to eat. [...] Can I drink your milk? You crouched into my arms and started sucking my breast. It was the mother and daughter's game. [...] And I caressed your hair as you caress a baby girl. We fell asleep so embraced with moist hair on the cheeks a slight smell of mother's milk and skin rubbed with talcum powder" (53).

<sup>63</sup> My neck that hurts — there where you planted your daughter's teeth" (5); "However, I am sure that when you have her in your hands you will already have found another mother to devour" (22).



### *Dagnino's Pre-Cultural Mother-Child Symbiosis*

For these reasons, according to Dagnino, *Lettere a Marina* suggests that the relationship between Bianca and Marina re-enacts the mother and child symbiosis before the child has received the conditioning of culture and knowledge of the cultural taboos (191). By the means of her involvement with Marina, located “[o]n the other side of the incest prohibition” (191), beyond the cultural taboos, Bianca is able to experience her own loss of identity, the excess of her being that had never been contained by her social roles (191). As a result, she argues, Bianca works through her anxiety and recreates the conditions of the active desire present in the daughter’s original attachment to the mother in Freud’s pre-Oedipal phase (185). According to Dagnino, Bianca’s recuperation is confirmed by Marina’s serving as a gate that opens the way to a series of mothers beyond her own:

[I]a cosa più antica di te: fa pensare a gonne lunghe nere di paese a dolci fatti col miele e il grano a piedi deformati dentro scarpe di cuoio duro a odore di incenso e caciocavallo al pepe [...] la madre della madre della madre della madre di mia madre che apre la porta su un fondo buio. (110-111)<sup>64</sup>

### *Rejection of a Pre-Symbolic State*

Even though I see its appeal, I hesitate to settle completely with Dagnino’s reading. Several feminist formulations consider the regression into a pre-verbal, pre-cultural semiotic as the only form of resistance to the patriarchal symbolic. However, such a position could be seen as complicit to the patriarchal system that has repeatedly confine women in a liminal province, outside of culture.<sup>65</sup> While I agree with Dagnino in stating that there is a kind of recuperation, which I will discuss later, I argue that Bianca’s deep-seated anxiety of incest is not resolved by virtue of her relationship with Marina. Contrarily, the preservation of Bianca’s anxiety stands precisely as a resistive gear, preventing her from ultimately lapsing into a pre-symbolic state. On the one hand, her transgressive

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<sup>64</sup> “[t]he oldest thing about you: it suggests long black country skirts sweets made with honey and wheat deformed feet in hard leather shoes smell of incense and peppered caciocavallo [...] the mother of the mother of the mother of my mother’s mother who opens the door on a dark background” (110-111).

<sup>65</sup> On the pre-cultural semiotic, see Kristeva. On the perils that the dwelling in the pre-cultural may cause to women, see Butler, *Gender Trouble* 101-119.

desire for Marina brought her into the relationship. On the other, the continuation of the relationship in the here and now, within culture and society, has been granted by Bianca's ability to turn her anxiety against those patriarchal constrictions that have generated it in the first place: "[e] però mi ribellavo... Mi ribellavo baciandoti dove mi sentivo più annullata esplosa e persa in mille frammenti" (34).<sup>66</sup> Bianca's desire reveals to be effectively resistive only if accompanied by that unpacified anxiety, which functions as a rescue net. In this way, Maraini develops an alternative scenario where, refreshingly, patriarchal strictures are challenged without lapsing into an undifferentiated maternal amalgam. Consequently, Bianca can keep exploring the differences within Marina's sameness, attentive to the complexities in tension within their relationship. As a matter of fact, and as Marina explains to Bianca, the suggestion of incest is part of their relationship, but it does not exhaust it completely:

[s]ono una figlia incestuosa [...] questo non cambierà mai... il tuo latte è solo una parte di te così come l'affetto-nutrizione ma tu sei il tuo seno non soltanto il latte ed è quello che amo e desidero e che desidero mi ami e desideri. (85)<sup>67</sup>

### *Queer Sexualities, Practices, and Relationality*

Moreover, as anticipated, Bianca is besieged by guilt because of her continuing attraction to men: even though she is aware of the normative constraints of compulsory heterosexuality, she cannot give them up for a 'pure' lesbian identity. While meditating on lesbianism, Bianca mentions psychoanalyst Charlotte Wolff who, in her 1936's work, linked homosexual women to their tomboy childhoods and gendered play. Demonstrating her distaste for simplistic answers, Bianca ironically summarizes Wolff's formula: "[t]i arrampicavi sugli alberi giocavi alla guerra? allora sei omosessuale. Giocavi con le bambole imitavi tua madre in cucina? allora sei eterosessuale" (88).<sup>68</sup> Marina, Bianca argues,

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<sup>66</sup> "[a]nd yet I rebelled... I rebelled kissing you where I felt most annihilated, exploded and lost in a thousand fragments" (34).

<sup>67</sup> "I am an incestuous daughter [...] this will never change... your milk is only a part of you as it is the affection-nutrition but you are your breasts not just the milk and that's what I love and want and what I want that love and desire me" (85).

<sup>68</sup> "[d]id you climb trees, did you play war? then you are homosexual. Did you play with dolls and imitate your mother in the kitchen? then you are heterosexual" (88).

had not played with guns but with dolls, while she herself had played with dolls and engaged in male-gendered behaviour. Even though those pages are the most telling regarding Maraini's rejection of essentialism<sup>69</sup> —of a clear-cut separation between hetero and homosexual identity, male and female nature,— several others small-scale instances, characters' practices, and relational modes can be found throughout the novel in support of it. As a first instance, at the end of the novel, notwithstanding her accusations towards Bianca's incapacity to renounce to men altogether, the reader finds Marina 'guilty' of the same fault, having an affair with a male student: "uno studente di Padova che si chiama Gerardo [...] Ho fatto un salto nel letto. Come Gerardo? E Guiomar? E le teorie sulla 'inimicizia naturale' del membro virile?" (197).<sup>70</sup>

### *Queer Marco and Queer Marina*

Furthermore, Marco, Bianca's lover before Marina, actively contradicts those attributes conventionally associated with male identity within patriarchal culture, especially by the means of the antithesis Bianca's letters assemble between him and those men defined as "mezzi-cazzi" (72), "invasori" (43), "energumeni di mezza età [...] padroni del mondo cacciatori per abitudine," that obscenely devour "i corpi dolci delle loro mamme delle loro sorelle delle loro mogli e figlie innamorate" (71-72).<sup>71</sup> Marco, albeit reprehensible for different reasons, does not cultivate the desire to dominate women, the objective which, according to Maraini, patriarchy instructs the man to pursue, rendering him "il mostruoso carnefice dalla panica piena di proiettili che spara nel ventre delle donne con foga punitrice" (29).<sup>72</sup> Instead, he lives of women as a butterfly lives of flowers (29), i.e. with grace and lightness, delineating a different way of finding pleasure in sexual encounters. If, according

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<sup>69</sup> See also Bianca's meditation on Plato's legend (86-87).

<sup>70</sup> "A student from Padua named Gerardo [...] I jumped [for surprise]. Gerardo? And Guiomar? And the theories on the 'natural enmity' of the virile member?" (197).

<sup>71</sup> "half-cocks" (72), "invaders" (43), "middle-aged thugs [...] masters of the world hunters by habit," that obscenely devour "the sweet bodies of their mothers of their sisters of their wives and daughters who are in love with them" (71-72).

<sup>72</sup> "the monstrous butcher with a belly full of bullets that shoots in the womb of women with punishing rush" (29).

to patriarchy, the male sexual organ would be described as “[l]o scettro la spada il bastone la vanga il fucile il cannone” (29),<sup>73</sup> Bianca recounts Marco’s physicality and attitude as follows:

[l]a prima volta che ho fatto l’amore con lui ho pensato che era impotente [...] il membro raggricciato minuscolo incapace di tenersi in piedi [...] Lui però Marco —il proprietario di quel membro bambino— non soffriva di tremori paure. Ne rideva ci giocava. (29)<sup>74</sup>

### *Queer Relationality: Overturning of the Circuits in Which Desire Functions*

In addition, *Lettere a Marina* tackles essential stances and patriarchal injunctions also in its articulations of the circuits in which desire functions. According to Elizabeth Grosz, under patriarchy, women serve only as “objects, commodities, or goods [...] as the excuse, the intermediary as it were, the linkage point between one man and another” (“Refiguring” 178). Maraini, I argue, reverses this structure<sup>75</sup> without, at the same time, rendering it the exclusive relational mode in the novel. More specifically, Bianca admits that she has always been attracted to the female lovers of her lovers (154), referring to her father’s lovers, Marco’s wife Miriam and, later, his new lover Bruna,<sup>76</sup> Marina’s lover Guiomar, as well as Damiano’s stepmother who he has an affair with. Often, this attraction, enabled by the man’s functioning as a connection, leads Bianca to arrange a meeting with the other woman, frequently discarding the man eventually.<sup>77</sup>

The system, however, does not crystallize according to these new, but perhaps alarmingly familiar, parameters. Contrarily, it introduces this new mode of relationality, which privileges women; maintains the older ones, which, according to Grosz, privileges men; as well as effectuates

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<sup>73</sup> “[t]he scepter the sword the stick the spade the gun the cannon” (29).

<sup>74</sup> “[t]he first time I made love with him I thought he was impotent [...] the tiny wrinkled member unable to stand up [...] He, however, Marco —the owner of that childish member— did not suffer from tremors and fears. He laughed at it and played with it” (29).

<sup>75</sup> For more on this overturning and the correlation in this regard between *Lettere a Marina* and Dacia Maraini’s collection of poems *Mangiarmi pure* (1978), see Casadio p. 17. On the poem ‘Lui lei e io,’ on which these assumptions are partly based, see also Federici.

<sup>76</sup> “Le mani di Marco su quelle ginocchia. E io ci avrei appoggiato le mie sopra. Avevo una voglia spasmodica di aprirle a forza quelle ginocchia ed entrarle dentro con la testa cacciarmi nel suo ventre facendomi cullare dal buio” (67) [“Marco’s hands on those knees. And I would have put my hands on his. I has a spasmodic desire to forcefully open those knees and enter her with my head get into her belly being lulled by the darkness”].

<sup>77</sup> Con questo nuovo legame mi liberavo definitivamente di Marco e della tentazione di cercalo. Ora avevo degli obblighi di lealtà verso di lei. Non potevo vederlo senza tradirla e non avevo nessuna intenzione di tradirla” (67) [“With this new bond I was definitively getting rid of Marco and the temptation to reach him. I now had obligations of loyalty to her. I could not see him without betraying her and I had no intention of betraying her”].

a mingling between the two by preserving their coexistence. Women are not only the objects of exchange in a men's world, while men are not treated in such a way either —as Chantal would have wished for. By avoiding gendered objectification of both male and female, Bianca advocates for a more equal kind of relationality, whose poles, i.e. the male and female, are moved closer until they blend together and find a shared space in Bianca's sexual fantasy:

Per un momento ho avuto accanto Damiano con le sue azzurre maliziosità. Poi ho sentito i tuoi [di Marina] seni contro le guance. Ho chiuso gli occhi e mi sono lasciata cullare da questa strana fantasia androgina. (128)<sup>78</sup>

*Not Just Another Coming Out Narrative: Open-Ended Texts and Identity as a Blank Page*

The last strategy the novel employs to counter essentialist repressive discourses is embodied by Bianca's self-reflexive act of writing. In her article on *Lettere a Marina*, Ballaro explains she has found a listing for Maraini's novel described in the bibliography as the “coming out lesbico di una femminista” (178).<sup>79</sup> From the beginning, Bianca states she must remind Marina of their story because she has forgotten it, and perhaps even Bianca herself has forgotten it. She must also tell Marina all the things she has never wanted to hear: “[t]u amavi una donna senza storia nata ogni giorno dalla pancia buia del tempo nuda e nuova per te” (3).<sup>80</sup> Having lost her story, Bianca has lost her sense of self too, which she is now trying to retrieve through the act of writing. She is, as Adriana Cavarero would have put it, in search of “the *text* of her identity,” and as such “she finds herself being someone who has suddenly become no one” (36-37). By writing the letters, a recuperation certainly happens, as Dagnino and Sumeli Weinberg have argued —of the mother and a female genealogy, respectively. However, this recuperation can hardly be compared with the kind of recuperation the reader witnesses in a coming out narrative, insofar as Bianca does not unproblematically label herself as a lesbian, nor does the text present the key peculiarities of the genre.

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<sup>78</sup> “For a moment I had Damiano next to me with his blue mischievousness. Then I felt your [Marina's] breasts against my cheeks. I closed my eyes and let myself be lulled by this weird androgynous fantasy” (128).

<sup>79</sup> “the lesbian coming out of a feminist” (178). The listing is contained in *Bibliografia sul lesbismo*. Libreria delle donne, 1988, p. 12.

<sup>80</sup> “[y]ou loved a woman without a story born every day from the dark belly of time naked and new for you” (3).

As anticipated in the introduction, the wide corpus of the so-called ‘coming out literature’ regards history as a linear process of progressive development and functions according to a process of uncovering essential homosexuality. One’s past is conceived as having always contained the ‘true self’ that only needed to be discovered. Clearly, Bianca does not uncover any essential identity, neither her history can be seen as linear or progressive. If, on the one hand, there is a recuperation of her past experiences, both pleasant and traumatic ones, on the other, Bianca insists on refusing to pin down precisely what it is that is recuperated, by continuously questioning and adding layers to her memories. As the fixity of meaning is denied, Bianca’s letters do not recreate an orderly past that grants a coherent synthesis of identity. Contrarily, Bianca’s identity is proposed as a blank page (a role suggested by her own name), which, as also Ballaro suggests, allows “the inscription of a tale, if not an exclusive and definitive one, of alternative desire” (Ballaro 185-186).

Therefore, identity is open-ended and unfinished, as are the narratives that Bianca produces, i.e. her own novel and her epistolary correspondence. As the narration ends, having finished her novel, Bianca admits her dislike towards it: “[a] casa ho riletto un pezzo del romanzo. Mi è sembrato bruttissimo” (203).<sup>81</sup> According to this dismissive judgement, Bianca defines it “[u]n gioco di rimandi che finisce nel vuoto” (102),<sup>82</sup> without specifying what she will do with it, discard or rewrite it all over again. Similarly, the letters, although finished and addressed to Marina, will not be sent. Instead, Bianca will bring them with her on the train to re-read them. This, like Bianca’s heading to Sicily instead of going back to Rome, is another indication of the non-coincidence between the point of departure and arrival suggesting non-closure —of both the texts and the sexual identities portrayed therein.

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<sup>81</sup> “[a]t home I reread a piece of the novel. It seemed very ugly” (203).

<sup>82</sup> “[a] game of references that ends in the void” (102).

### *Conclusion: A Purifying Non-Closure*

In this chapter, I analyzed how Dacia Maraini's *Lettere a Marina* traces the trajectories of a desire which does not submit to either the dictates of the patriarchal system or the equally repressive mandates of separatist lesbian ideology, while being greatly affected by them, nonetheless. As Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*, Maraini's *Lettere a Marina* effectuates its resistance from within, not beyond, power relations. The provincial town of T., far from granting the idyllic utopian environment Merry has argued for, constantly exercises pressure on Bianca, in the attempt to neutralize her social unintelligibility and relocate her within the ranks of Rich's compulsory heterosexuality. However, the novel, and especially the figure of Marina, permits Bianca to resist those external pressures as well as other deep-internalized dictates. Bianca addresses the letters to Marina, providing the pretext that she has forgotten about their relationship and that the letters are meant to remind her. However, they end up incorporating more topics than anticipated, including several of Bianca's experiences from her childhood and adolescence. As Bianca recuperates not only pleasurable memories but also traumatic ones, she finally reacts to the violence inflicted on her, employing that same (written) speech, i.e. her voice, she had previously been denied access to. However, what is recuperated through the act of writing is not completely transparent and, as happens in Bianca's novel, the non-coincidence between the point of departure and arrival suggests non-closure —of both the texts and the sexual identities portrayed therein.

Moreover, the figure of Marina permits Bianca to re-enact the erotically charged mother-daughter relationship, prohibited under patriarchal law. However, this re-enactment does not force Bianca to lapse into the pre-symbolic domain, confining their lesbian relationship in the periphery of consciousness and culture, as many feminists had argued for. Instead, by the means of the preservation of her sexual anxiety, Bianca succeeds in maintaining Marina's ambivalence in place, as well as retaining the complexity of their relationship. Furthermore, as a result of the perpetuation of her desire for Marina, Bianca challenges lesbian separatist essentialism as well. By avoiding the gendered objectification of both male and female, Bianca advocates for a more equal kind of

relationality, whose poles, i.e. the male and female, are moved closer until they blend together in the shared space of Bianca's androgynous sexual fantasy. In addition to her critique of essentialism, Bianca piles up her reflections on theoretical studies, e.g. Wolff's formula, and the description of Marco's queer masculinity.

Associated to Marina are often images of watery purification —presumably from patriarchy, ideologies, and essentialism: “[t]u eri la marina splendente che mi trovavo davanti nel momento giusto per fare un bagno purificatore” (33).<sup>83</sup> However, as their relationship becomes too toxic to handle, Bianca feels the urge to walk away from her. While she is staying in the town of T., the readers come to understand that Bianca is undergoing another purification, getting rid, among other things, of Marina's influence: “una parte di me che mi è estranea” (22).<sup>84</sup> Approximately in the middle of the novel, Bianca writes: “[è] un periodo che mi si rompe tutto: [...] mi si è rotto un dente mi si è fermato l'orologio mi si è spezzata la catenina d'oro” (100),<sup>85</sup> Marina's symbolic gift.<sup>86</sup> By the means of this passage, readers realize Bianca is gradually breaking free from her former lover. While Bianca is going through this process of purification, the sea, in turn, gets polluted and eventually it is not allowed to swim anymore (171, 189). As Marina has absorbed Bianca's pain in the first instance, leading her towards purification, the sea has done the same once Bianca had retreated in the town of T. The sea, however, may easily be seen as but Marina in disguise, given the watery semantic her name has carried throughout the novel. This is confirmed by Bianca's farewell to the sea, which comes precisely in the last letter and thus coincides with her farewell to Marina.<sup>87</sup> Therefore, I argue that Marina has allowed Bianca to undergo a process of purification twice, functioning as a centrifuge,

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<sup>83</sup> “[y]ou were the shining sea that I found myself in front of at the right time to take a purifying bath” (33).

<sup>84</sup> “a part of myself that is foreign to me” (22).

<sup>85</sup> “[i]t's a time when everything breaks: [...] my tooth broke my watch stopped my gold chain broke” (100).

<sup>86</sup> “Ti ho detto tante volte di non mandarmi regali. [...] Tu non vuoi farmi dei regali tu vuoi chiudermi con piccoli segni magici dentro il cerchio della tua volontà” (19) [“I have told you many times not to send me gifts. [...] You don't want to give me gifts you want to enclose me with little magic signs within the circle of your will”].

<sup>87</sup> In this regard, it is significant to notice the violence the sea causes Bianca during their last meeting, as Marina did in the last period of their relationship: “[p]oi mi sono diretta verso il mare. Nero e pacifico mandava un odore di olio acido. Ho camminato lungo la spiaggia affondando i piedi nelle alghe secche inciampando nelle bucce di cocomero nei barattoli vuoti di plastica. *Una bottiglia rotta mi ha ferito il tallone*” (202, my emphasis) [“[t]hen I headed for the sea. Black and peaceful it smelled of sour oil. I walked along the beach sinking my feet in dried seaweed tripping over watermelon peels in empty plastic jars. *A broken bottle hurt my heel*”].



which, through movement —of memory, of creativity— expels toxic and repressive influences, Marina’s too. As a result, far from being exclusively negatively connotated, I argue that Marina works as an activating, restorative, and renewing force that pushes Bianca towards self-reflexivity and especially movement, even though their relationship has already ended:

Chiudo gli occhi e penso di sentirti arrivare. Apri la porta entri. Porti una delle tue camicie da Pulcinella larga scivolosa una gonna di seta blu e i sandali francescani. [...] Vieni vicina al letto. Mi guardi beffarda. Ti chini. Mi sfiori le labbra. E io apro gli occhi. E la casa d’incanto riprende a funzionare a vivere e io ho di nuovo voglia di giocare. (195)<sup>88</sup>

To conclude, for Bianca, her lesbian relationship with Marina has functioned as the departure point of a movement that involves continual destruction and renovation and that, ultimately, has fostered self-awareness<sup>89</sup> and, even perhaps only partial, liberation from essentialist repressive ideologies. If lesbian identity constitutes the point of departure, we, nonetheless, are not granted to know where it could end, in what direction it will expand out of the reach of the novel itself. By stretching the, at least initially, central lesbian identity, Bianca problematizes identitarian fixity and its alleged manifestation through corporeal and sexual acts. Most importantly still, by queering lesbian identity in this way, Bianca attests to the myriad of possibilities and transformability of sexuality itself, echoing Grosz’s call for “the proliferation of sexualities beyond the notion of two” (209).

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<sup>88</sup> “I close my eyes and think I hear you coming. You open the door enter. You wear one of your loose slippery Pulcinella shirts a blue silk skirt and Franciscan sandals. [...] You come close to the bed. You look at me mockingly. You bend down. You touch my lips. And I open my eyes. And the house magically starts working again and I again want to play” (195).

<sup>89</sup> See, as an instance, Bianca’s realization: “È buffo accorgersi dopo quarant’anni che si portano le stesse scarpe con la stessa noncuranza imbecille di chi è nato dentro che ci stanno strette. Sono un numero più corto e non lo sapevamo. Ti guardi i piedi e li trovi rattappiti pieni di calli nati dalla costrizione intorpiditi ed esangui. Ti accorgi che il tuo modo di camminare è sempre stato doloroso anche se spedito. Provi a toglierti le scarpe e non riesci più a camminare perché quella costrizione era diventata parte del tuo modo di incedere parte del tuo stile della tua visione del mondo” (38) [“It’s funny to notice after forty years that those same shoes, which you wore with the same foolish nonchalance of those who are born inside them, fit tightly. They are one size smaller and we didn’t know it. You look at your feet and find them shrunken full of calluses born out of constriction numb and bloodless. You realize that your way of walking has always been painful although quick. You try to take off your shoes and you can’t walk anymore because that constriction had become part of your way of walking part of your style of your world view”].

## *Textual Bodies, Desiring Narratives: Carole Maso's Aureole: An Erotic Sequence*

### *Carole Maso and Aureole: Some Premises*

“We were working on an erotic song cycle” the dying Ava Klein remembers in Carole Maso’s *AVA*, recalling its tentative titles throughout the novel [...] In a sense, *Aureole* is the song cycle Ava Klein didn’t live to complete, musical in its lyrical style and decidedly erotic.

(Moore 1)

American author of Italian descent, Carole Maso (1955-) has been said to “bridge second- and third-wave feminism” (Bona 187). As Bona affirms, while they recognized the generation of their “mothers” as achieving important strides in freedom from traditional, i.e. heteronormative and patriarchal, constraints, the “daughters” sought to transform such achievements not only through challenging existing structures but also through performing subversive acts of writing in an even greater extent than the former. *Ghost Dance*, Maso’s first novel, was published in 1986, after what she called her “apprenticeship years” during which she “learned to write by writing” (Harris 105). In the following years, Maso published several other novels, such as *The Art Lover* (1990); *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat* (1994); *AVA* (1993); and *Defiance* (1998), as well as collections of short stories, essays, and a memoir. Moreover, Maso is the recipient of numerous awards and fellowships including, most recently, the 2018 Berlin Prize, and she is the ongoing Director of Creative Writing at Brown University. Although Maso’s work has been received with growing critical acclaim for her avant-garde prose, her collection of short stories *Aureole: An Erotic Sequence* (1996) has attracted considerably less critical attention when compared to her other fictional works. Written in “a kind of waking dream, an erotic hallucination” (Maso, *Break* 114), *Aureole* has been described as an erotic novel about “an American woman coming to terms with her sexuality” (Chevaillier 57); focused on “evoking the tactile and sensual properties of language itself” (Nelson 401); and, by the

author herself, as a celebration of “the resplendence of language and desire [...] a work of reverie and ruin. Pleasure. Oblivion. Joy” (*Break* 114).

As the epigraph indicates, continuity can be traced between Maso’s works. Particularly, according to Moore, *Aureole* stems from those strands of desire, yet to be untangled, exposed in the author’s previous work *AVA*, or what, in other words, could not find its own place within the novel, but still needed to be said.<sup>90</sup> However, according to Grant Stirling, this continuity should be extended up to include also Maso’s earlier novels, which would constitute the common predecessors of both *AVA* and *Aureole*.

### *Exhausting Heteronarrative: The American Woman in the Chinese Hat*

In his contribution “Exhausting Heteronarrative: *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat*,” Stirling lays down the arguments for a progressive reading of Maso’s works, deeming the critical positioning of *The American Woman* as dictated by a continuation of the preoccupations exposed in *The Art Lover* and as a necessary step to take —its writing— to compose the subsequent *AVA* and *Aureole*.<sup>91</sup> As Stirling underlines, *The Art Lover* is concerned with the process of aestheticization, eventually concluding that it offers neither a durable retreat from the vicissitudes of the world nor an unproblematic means of representing their nature in order to mitigate the pain (1). *The American Woman* extends this interrogation, focusing more narrowly upon the themes of gender and sexuality, as well as how they are both coded in the conventions of literary plot to illustrate how the social institution of literary narrative shapes female subjectivities (2).

More specifically, following Judith Roof and Teresa de Lauretis, Stirling applies the concept of “heteroideology” (Roof, *Come* xxii), that is, the binary logic of exclusion and hierarchy that defines Western metaphysics, to the narrative domain. Insofar as narrative coincides with sexuality,<sup>92</sup> this

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<sup>90</sup> For an analysis of a similar kind of continuity between Dacia Maraini’s work *Mangiarmi pure* (1978) and *Lettere a Marina* (1981), see Casadio pp. 16-17.

<sup>91</sup> Even though *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat* was published a year after *AVA*, its composition dates back to a few years earlier (Harris 106).

<sup>92</sup> According to Roof, “to have sexuality is to have narrative; to have narrative is to have sexuality” (xxiv).

paradigm mandates “a mapping of differences, and specifically, first and foremost, of sexual differences” (de Lauretis, *Alice* 121). This leads to the assignment of the “figuratively ‘biological’ or in any case (re)productive function” (Roof xiv) of narrative, meaning that its teleological aim is the creation of meaning. This is achieved through the coming together of the heterogeneous elements of the narrative—coded as male and female. Unsurprisingly, this union does not occur according to egalitarian terms; rather, the heterosexual trajectory of the narrative plot demands the subordination—“subsum[ption]” (Stirling 5), if thought in the terminology of incorporation—of female to male (often through marriage or death), therefore assigning to Woman as a narrative construct (de Lauretis, *Alice* 5-6) the function of “an end-point of the (re)production of meaning” (Stirling 5). As a result, he defines “heteronarrative” as “a culturally prescribed script of narrative closure that entails the positioning of woman as the locus through which closure is enacted” (4). As a result, any relationship that is not based on this heterosexual paradigm impedes the meaning-making progress of narrative (5) and is thus discarded. Accordingly, Marilyn Farwell has affirmed that narrative “is everything but lesbian,” the latter being “a logical impossibility,” existing “only in negative relation to the spaces they are not afforded in existing narrative paradigm” (*Heterosexual* 15).

In *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat*, both hetero and homosexual relationships are presented. However, while Catherine’s lesbian relationship with Lola is interrupted at the beginning of the novel, her heterosexual relationship with Lucien is carried forward up to the end, causing her death and thus bringing the heterosexual plot to its completion. Nonetheless, despite its adherence to patriarchal constraints concerning the narrative structure, Stirling argues that *The American Woman* has cleared the path for the “revisions of endings, beginnings, patterns of progression” (2; Hirsch 8) and other disruptive strategies that emerge into the transgressive poetics of Maso’s next works, namely *AVA* and *Aureole* (Stirling 2). By means of the exposure of, and willingness to interrogate, “the biases that inhabit narrative” (16), *The American Woman* suggests that the liberation of desire should not happen solely at the level of the content. Contrarily, it should, to be thoroughly effective, affect the formal elements of language as well. In this chapter, I close-read *Aureole*, the product of

the latter assumption Maso has matured by writing *The American Woman*, and specifically its “search for a new language for desire” (Moore 2). In my analysis, I will often refer to Maso’s collection of essays *Break Every Rule: Essays on Language, Longing, & Moments of Desire* (2000), written in different moments of her career and eventually collectively published,<sup>93</sup> in order to support my close reading with Maso’s own opinions and considerations.<sup>94</sup>

### *A Subversive Form for A Subversive Lesbian Desire*

Carrying on the project that *The American Woman with The Chinese Hat* only began, *Aureole*, as I will demonstrate, is entirely driven by “desire’s magical and subversive qualities” (Maso, *Break* 115). In the following, I will explain how the excessive, fluid, and inclusive characterizations of non-normative desires succeed in locating lesbian subjectivities not in negative, but positive relation to the collection’s narrative spaces. As Maso could not recognize herself and her conception of desire —“far messier, more voracious, stranger” (115)— in any existing or prescribed shape, she developed “new logics, a logic of passion, a logic of the body” (122). On the level of the form, a corresponding (il)logic style enters the stage of the narration, as desire imposes:

its swellings, its ruptures, its erasures, its motions. Sometimes wild, sometimes elusive, playful, wayward [...] [and its] various swellings and verges and delays and elongations and collapses. (115, 118)

### *Corporeal, Social, and Textual Excess*

#### *Entangled Textuality and Sexuality*

Throughout my study, one of the main concepts related to the lesbian subjectivities, bodies, and desires arisen so far has been that of excess. In Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body*, the concept was strictly

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<sup>93</sup> More specifically, I refer to the following essays: “Notes of a Lyric Artist Working in Prose” (21-54); “Precious, Disappearing Things: on AVA” (64-71); “Except Joy: on *Aureole*” (114-136); “Break Every Rule” (157-160); and “Rupture, Verge, and Precipice” (161-191).

<sup>94</sup> More specifically, I refer to the following essays: “Notes of a Lyric Artist Working in Prose” (21-54); “Precious, Disappearing Things: on AVA” (64-71); “Except Joy: on *Aureole*” (114-136); “Break Every Rule” (157-160); and “Rupture, Verge, and Precipice” (161-191).

associated with that of leakiness, an emotionally charged leakiness or, more often, a corporeal one. In Maraini's *Lettere a Marina*, Bianca's excess was addressed in regard to the socially and culturally prescribed norms and linked to a more open notion of relationality. Contrary to the dominant aesthetic of containment of the feminine, no bodily secretion in Wittig's text is left unsung, while Bianca bypasses the boundaries of her prescribed social role and the prohibition of the mother-daughter cultural taboo. Easily claiming its place in this conversation, Maso's *Aureole* manifests another type of excess: that of textuality itself, insofar as its rhetorical devices — such as repetition, accumulation, enumeration, expansion, and metaphor as well as an overuse of descriptive adjectives— allow the formal level to mirror the content of the representation.

This mirroring is caused and corroborated by Maso's belief in the tight coincidence of textuality and sexuality, of language and the body:

Language for me has always been a profoundly sensual experience. Language *is* emotion, language *is* feeling, language *is* body. It is not merely the sign for something, but rather also a thing in itself. (*Break* 116)

In an interview hosted by Victoria Frenke Harris, Maso explains how, even though many writers are writing about sex, they often fail to transmit the sensual aspect to their style (5). As opposed to them, Maso explains, she has tried to comprehend how the “insistences and urgencies [of desire] might dictate the shape of line” (Maso, *Break* 121), to feel “the sexual energy of the sentence” (120-121), “the sexual intoxication of [...] the page or the narrative” (115), “[t]he derangement of syntax” (120). As a result, in *Aureole*, the body enters the language, transforming the page and imposing “its own intelligence” (70).

#### “*The Women Wash Lentils*”

Perhaps, *Aureole*'s first short story, “The Women Wash Lentils” (1-25), illustrates this correspondence between written language and the body better than the author's reflections on it. The chapter concerns two young women in Paris, discussing French slang, though it is more likely an

erotic fantasy invented by two older women, pretending to be in Paris and taking on the roles of two straight girls having their first lesbian experience.<sup>95</sup> Throughout the short story, exploring a foreign language becomes synonymous with exploring a foreign body (Moore 2), and an equivalency is established between lovemaking and language making: “they explore each word, as they explore each other” (Maso, *Aureole* 7); “[w]e make love to each lovely line” (7). In addition, once set up, the correspondence is iterated throughout the whole collection, constituting an example of Maso’s use of the rhetorical devices previously mentioned: “we write it on the sheet with our bodies” (126); “they make their way to the bed at the end of the long beach and sentence, far” (42); and:

[...] moving the lips over a book  
as if over a woman in awe  
as if in prayer

peeling her dress off as if it were papyrus  
(152)

Within this equivalency, reading becomes an aphrodisiacal act: “[t]hey open a book. They open each other” (9); “[w]hen [...] she slowly opens the legs of the woman she also opens a book and read: [...] They are lost in the long syllables of desire” (1); and sexual energy becomes a goal to achieve in writing: “I’d like to do with any sentence what I’m about to do to you” (7).

Since “The Women Wash Lentils” is constituted by mostly orderly sentences and standard paragraphing, it should be said that it articulates the connection between textuality and sexuality only by means of its contents. Nonetheless, from the second short story “Her Ink-Stained Hands” (27-36), the reader realizes the metaphor has already been absorbed and is enacted directly on the formal level. In *Aureole*, the language simulates the various physical states of desire as its sentences “moan, babble, stutter, shout” (Moore 2) and thus function “more bodily, more physically, more passionately” (Maso,

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<sup>95</sup> “They’re so young they haven’t become anything. And neither of them has ever been with a woman yet, *I say*, slowly opening her legs. And they know they’re already lost. They know once they start they’ll never stop” (5, my emphasis). More than being addressed to the reader, these sentences seem to be addressed to the narrator’s lover, in the attempt to conjure up the fantasy’s scenario.

*Break* 118). As a result, Maso's textual excessiveness manifests in *Aureole*'s failure to maintain the desire —an already subversive lesbian desire— away from the language, which gets contaminated, breaks up into fragments, lists, two-word paragraphs, and is embodied by means of several narrative strategies, such as “[e]njambment, flux, [...] the elision of the object, the detached clause, the use of arpeggios, a changing dynamics, dangling participles, various aphasias” (Maso, *Break* 118).

### *Mutable Bodies, Fluid Selves*

#### *The Woman on the Bridge*

Another concept that has repeatedly appeared in the previous chapters is that of fluidity —of bodies, identities, and texts. As seen, Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* insists on the idea that there cannot be such thing as a singular entity that contains all bodies of lesbians —as the title itself ironically implies. Hence, Wittig abandons any attempt to pin it down once and for all, celebrating its fluid metamorphic power instead. Similarly, Maraini's *Lettere* does not grant Bianca a coherent synthesis of identity; rather, it proposes identity as a blank page, capable of continuous innovations, just as the texts Bianca writes. Maso's *Aureole* is saturated with these same fluid properties, especially regarding the notions of character, self and the other, as well as the storyteller.<sup>96</sup> Preliminary, a figure that illustrates this fluidity is that of the “woman on the bridge” (Maso, *Aureole* 112, 115, 131, 143-144), who throughout the collection is alternatively regarded as the first narrative person; the object of a mystical encounter, thus denied internal focalization; and the author. Regularly, Maso speculates on the woman's origin and identity, while she, nonetheless, keeps escaping her:

Who is that woman on the bridge who in different places and guises continually reappears? In the beginning of this project, I thought I knew; by the end I have no idea. A woman moving along the relentless trajectory of her desire, transformed over and over by it. (Maso, *Break* 129)<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> For instance, the storyteller is explicitly regarded “as [a] chameleon. Fluid, mutable” (Maso, *Break* 33).

<sup>97</sup> See also: “How will I find her — without a recognizable plot? How will I find her — as she changes shape and place, without warning? How will I recognize her as she wanders through every genre — that passion terrain? [...] How will I ever locate her without the usual landmarks? How will I find her as she blithely moves in and out obscurity, of shadow and light?” (Maso, *Break* 128-129).



Evidently, this mutability concerns also other characters —or figures.<sup>98</sup> As the author explains, there is no central character in the collection moving through conflict and following a relatively straight line of progression up to the end of the narrative. As a matter of fact, according to Maso, the notion of a stable, static being developing in the traditional ways would have made “little sense” (*Break* 128) in *Aureole*’s erotic horizon. Rather, *Aureole*’s figures are “refracted, escaping and elusive [i.e. fluid], casting light and shadow in all directions” (128): a dissolution or fragmentation of self and other easily comparable to those examined in Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body*. As in Wittig’s work, however, the loss of self does not correspond to an absolute and final death. Conversely, the experience of death in the domain of eroticism is “always only proximate —simultaneously rupturing and maintaining the limits of individual existence” (Surkis 19). In other words, such fluid identities are able to engage “a ‘living contradiction’: a split subject, who simultaneously enjoys [...] the consistency of his selfhood and its collapse, its fall” (Barthes, *Pleasure* 21).<sup>99</sup> This contradictory balance is achieved through different formal techniques, such as, for instance, “the unfinished sentence, [...] the melting of one sentence into another, the melting of corporeal boundaries, the dissolving of a subjective cohesion [...] Blurring, changes in focus, and contradictions” (Maso, *Break* 118), as well as “[t]he oxymoronic, the parabolic,” which serve as “fortification against the dissolution, or warning, of what might happen if one strayed too far from story” (118).

In addition, these formal techniques are mirrored at the level of the content by means of semantic patterns that *Aureole* shares with Wittig’s and Maraini’s texts, such as the reciprocity between the self and the other: “[m]y hands hovering near but not on you [...] Your hands hovering near but not on me” (4);<sup>100</sup> the ambivalence of the lover: “she / is light and dark / she / is salty and sweet / she / she, she...” (102, 141); the stress on a perpetual state of becoming: “[w]here you are so

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<sup>98</sup> As Moore explains, it might be more appropriate to speak of ‘figures’ than ‘characters’ in *Aureole*, as they are “more like figures in a painting, or fantasy figures, than characters in a conventional novel” (2).

<sup>99</sup> This quote from Barthes effectively translates the theoretical framework adopted in this thesis —one which maintains the category of lesbian identity as valid, while at the same time continually questioning its boundaries by means of queer approaches— to the erotic and sexual domains.

<sup>100</sup> See also: “I feed off your fingers. / You feed off my fingers” (91, 100); “You put a cool rag on my head / I put a cool rag on your head” (93, 131).

beautiful and in the state of becoming” (10);<sup>101</sup> the desire of not being: “[s]he speaks of childhood in the country. I’d like to have you then — when we’re so young we haven’t become anything yet” (4).

### *The Practice of ‘As If’*

Another motif that often recurs is that of transformation. In Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body*, the human literally mutates into the animal while, in Maraini’s *Lettere a Marina*, Marina’s body blends with plants and animals by means of iterated metaphorical interventions (Casadio 13-16). Similarly, in Maso’s *Aureole*, the lovers metamorphose: “[w]e were always changing shape, a broken pier, flowers in a barrel, flames” (174, 176); “[y]ou turn me to ash / You turn me to smoke / You turn me over and over again” (134), as do, for instance, rivers in “Except Joy”: “I marvel as the Seine turns into the Ganges, or the Hudson River” (Maso, *Break* 115). In *Aureole*, however, the transformation is frequently only hypothetical, and the images, simultaneously evoked, only partially juxtapose. More often than not, they are advanced by means of the conjunction ‘as if’:

as if in a prayer      gorgeous reiteration  
stranded [...]

rubbing a hand on a belly as if a magic lamp

it’s *as if, as if*—

‘it’s like magic’  
(152, emphasis in the original)

In her *Nomadic Subjects*, Rosi Braidotti has talked at length of the philosophy and practice of ‘as if’ (27) as a means to forge “alternative figurations” (24) as well as to assemble a language able to produce “affirmative representations” (24) of non-normative subjectivities. This would constitute a way out of the old schemes of thought, committed to the task of subverting conventional views and

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<sup>101</sup> See also: “How you braid and unbraided me” (95, 139); “How you do and undo me / How you ravel and unravel me” (137, 141).

representations of human, and especially of female, subjectivity. “It is,” Braidotti explains, “*as if* some experiences were reminiscent or evocative of others” (26), thus emphasizing their quality of interconnectedness and framing the practice of ‘as if’ as a declaration “of fluid boundaries, a practice of intervals, interfaces, and interstices” (28). What emerges as empowering and politically effective of this practice is its potential to open an “in-between space” (28) where “alternative forms of agency can be engendered” (28). Maso employs almost identical terms: “[t]his is what art does for me: it opens new places” (*Break* 129).

### *The In-Between Queer Space*

The concept of the ‘in-between space,’ the liminal place or stage carved out by the intercession of the ‘as if,’ is crucial to Maso’s *Aureole*. More specifically, this space is explicitly invoked as the space of sexuality (Capo 297; *Aureole* 21): “the space [...] [i]n the cleft of your breasts. In the crevice, the cleavage” (*Aureole* 10):

I want you in the liminal stage. In the in-between place. It means in a doorway, in a dawn.  
When the lights go out, but before the performance begins. In the most vulnerable, in the  
most tentative. In the place where one thing is about to change into another. In the hovering.  
(3)

Soon enough, however, the author charges this place with additional implications. Language, for instance, is among the most apparent: “the hanging, gorgeous, strange place between poetry and prose” (4, 21); “between fiction and essay (13); “between language and meaning” (10, 21); “between English and French” (21); “before the metaphor” (13); and, as mentioned, Maso regularly operates a combination of the domains of sexuality and textuality: “[i]n the extraordinary space, the fragile space — in the place right before the heart breaks, or the line” (12). Moreover, the space enables an expansion of identity: “the liminal space [...] [w]here both writer and reader are for a while endlessly possible — fluid, luminous, clairvoyant, intensely alive, close to death, reckless” (xi); “where they

hover in between being one kind of person and another” (5); “[i]n the blurring between me and you” (18).

In *Aureole*, therefore, the fleeting sexual and linguistic bliss only materializes in a displaced and differed mode.<sup>102</sup> Within patriarchal logic, this mode is ‘forbidden’ due to its hybrid nature, which implicitly disrupts the accepted binary structure expressivity relies on. Maso refuses to adhere to these injunctions, and instead conjures up a place:

where pleasures and arousals spread in a lateral radiance, in a kind of prolonged ecstatic.  
In an aureole of desire. At once diffused, specific, and inclusive [...] an extended moment  
of suspended sexuality where anything might occur. (*Break* 127, 131)

A place, in other words, that due to its destabilizing and resistive properties, as well as its encouragement for “new identity constructions for the reader as well as the writer [...] [n]ew patterns of thought and ways of perceiving, new visions of world, renewed hope” (*Break* 132), is rendered perfectly queer.<sup>103</sup>

### *Queer Novel as an ‘Erotic Sequence’*

Furthermore, fluidity is traceable in Maso’s conception of the novel and plot as well as in *Aureole*’s overall perception of time. By referring to filmmaker Andrey Tarkovsky, who, in his book *Sculpting in Time* (1987 [1985]), stated to find “poetic links, the logic of poetry in cinema, extraordinarily pleasing” (17), Maso substantiates her intention to go down that same path, following the poetic, rather than the prosaic. “[T]raditional writing,” i.e. traditional prose writing, she argues following Tarkovsky, is built on the linear, rigidly logical development of the plot, which usually involves an arbitrarily forcing of events into a sequence according to abstract notions of order and rests on “a

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<sup>102</sup> See also: “The reiteration of the odd phrase [...] that asserts itself and floats, existing mysteriously and autonomously in a text or above a bed” (Maso, *Break* 120); “A leaping and staying in one place at the same time” (34).

<sup>103</sup> For works on queer space, see: Brent Ingram, Gordon, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter (eds). *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance*. Bay Press, 1997; Bell, David, and Gill Valentine (eds). *Mapping Desire: Geographies of Sexuality*. Routledge, 1995; Boone, Joseph et al. (eds). *Queer Frontiers: Millennial Geographies, Genders, and Generations*. University of Wisconsin Press, 2000.

facile interpretation of life's complexities" (Tarkovsky 17; Maso, *Break* 26). Maso's work complete title is *Aureole: An Erotic Sequence*. Interestingly, Maso has chosen to juxtapose the terms 'erotic' and 'sequence' that, apparently, are almost oxymoronic, given the unstable nature of the former and the orderly structure of the latter. The intention, I argue, is not solely that of disorienting, but rather to destabilize and thus re-signify the traditional novel's sequentiality by means of the erotic. Therefore, through the re-moulding, based on desire, of what Maso defines "narratives of coercion, [...] too narrowly conceived" (*Break* 27), the subversive and potentially extreme subject (127) can be expanded beyond the traditional notions of the plot, which, as a consequence, must be "radically reimagined — and become much more open again" (129).<sup>104</sup> The result is "another kind of novel [...] strange, exotic, hybrid" (33):

[a] huge, shifting, unstable, unmanageable canvas. Smudged with lipstick, fingerprints, crumpled, tear-stained, many-paged [...] Container of the uncontainable. Weird, gorgeous vessel. Voluptuous vessel. (24, 32)

### *Queer Time and The Long Haul*

I love the things that continue. That never end. I love the long haul.

Is this the novelist's disposition? The forever.

(Maso, *Break* 48)

Moreover, as Maso explains, in *Aureole* the sense of time is "warped" (*Break* 119) insofar as it is guided by desire's urgencies:

[d]esire's temporality is not generally of development, direction, or movement. Often, the erotic stops or suppresses time [...] Sometimes it warps time, sexual consciousness seeming to inhabit an odd hanging space. (124)

As queer scholar Jack Halberstam has argued, "queer uses of time [and space] develop [...] in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction" (*In a Queer Time* 1).

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<sup>104</sup> The re-imagining of narrative development concerns not only fiction, but also essays' writing: "You think an essay should have a hypothesis, a conclusion, should argue points. You really do bore me" (*Break* 163).

Queerness itself is “an outcome of strange temporalities” (1), and it is constituted by its difference from conventional imperatives of time. In *Aureole*, as lesbian desire, rather than heteronormativity, dictates its conditions, the past and future are absorbed into “the continuous present of the erotic experience” (Maso, *Break* 124), and this fusion is mirrored on the formal level by means of changes in tense within a paragraph and sometimes within a sentence (119).

As past and future are undone within the amalgam of the present, the notions of narrative opening and especially closure are re-thought as well: “[t]his I am certain of: desire does not make a well-made short story. It makes you rethink closure, that’s for sure” (122). As seen, although it manifests several signs of discomfort associated with patriarchal anxieties, Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body* never actually pursues or attains a definitive closure thanks to its circular textual structure. Similarly, Maraini’s *Lettere a Marina* suggests non-closure of both the texts and the sexual identities portrayed therein, through the non-coincidence between the point of departure and arrival. Maso’s *Aureole* achieves the same result through a “recursive style” (Palleau-Papin 100) that connects its short stories peripherally. For instance, the two pieces “Make Me Dazzle” (37-70) and “You Were Dazzle” (169-177) are meant, Maso explains, to be read “on a kind of eternal loop” (*Break* 124). In the former, a woman walking along the beach encounters Aurelie, a bisexual triathlete, and they begin an affair. Dazzled by Aurelie, the woman’s language falls apart and her hazy state of mind is conveyed through the absence of coherent sentences, a disrupted syntax, and an almost preverbal babbling (Moore 3). Similarly, in “You Were Dazzle,” the reader recognizes the same difficulty in forming speech, but the reason is an overwhelming rage and resentment towards the lover, instead of a blinding passion. As the narrator of the second story admits that they were “tangle and pull and gag but we were dazzle” (Maso, *Aureole* 172),<sup>105</sup> a connection between the two stories is established, and becomes clear they portray opposite, but not reciprocally exclusionary, faces of desire from which the lovers move back and forth.

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<sup>105</sup> The sentence is purposely ungrammatical, as it makes sense in the same way their love story does (Moore 5).

Nonetheless, those are not the only short stories linked to each other as, from the first pages, references to previous and subsequent scenes are scattered throughout (Maso, *Break* 125-126):<sup>106</sup>

*Sometimes they [the stories] speak of this love, their own.  
Most of the time they speak of another story. But  
this other story leads back to theirs. And vice versa  
(Maso, Aureole 146)*

Therefore, rejecting the heteronormative, i.e. linear and progressive, narrative development and conception of time, Maso grants *Aureole* an expansion “outside of enclosures” (Harris 4), one that does not obey a prescribed path but, instead, grows according to an “idiosyncratic explosion” (Stirling 14).<sup>107</sup>

For all these reasons —*Aureole*’s textual excessiveness, its displaying of fluid bodies and identities, as well as its queering of space, time, and the novel,— the lesbian subject is able to overstep the codes of sexualized subjectivity prescribed by traditional narrative, refusing and repositioning its constricted stances, and thus creating what Farwell has defined “a lesbian narrative space” (*Heterosexual* 23):

[i]n an ordinary narrative I hardly have time to say how beautiful you are or that I have missed you or that — come quickly, there are finches at the feeder! In a traditional narrative there is hardly any time to hear the lovely offhand things you say in letters or at the beach or at the moment of desire. (Maso, *Break* 67)

### *Subversive But Not Exclusionary Desire*

#### *The Fencing Master*

As Wittig’s and Maraini’s texts do, *Aureole* acknowledges the presence of the patriarchal system, specifically in the regulation of female practices and sexuality. In this regard, the short story

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<sup>106</sup> See, for instance, the references to French women and Paris (Maso, *Aureole* 30, 154, 161); the bisexual triathlete (36, 79); the knots (71, 75, 175); the angel (85, 180); the seaside town off-season (89, 105, 130); the striped shirt (85, 98); the ink-stained hands (27, 205).

<sup>107</sup> See also: “[the novel] may be an instance where the parenthesis can never close” (Maso, *Break* 121); and “this motion of the alphabet / this winding path of desire / moonlit / *circular path of desire*” (Maso, *Aureole* 103, my emphasis).

“Exquisite Hour” (179-199) can be read as an account of the aesthetic crisis the first-person narrative voice—a writer’s—experiences due to her confinement within patriarchal expectations. The fencing master’s, i.e. agent’s or publisher’s, repeated demand for a masterpiece (183, 185, 186, 187, 189) clashes with the narrator’s internal imperative to find an appropriate language for herself. As the narrator turns to drugs in despair, the reader witnesses scenes of patriarchal subjugation:

And from the house redolent with arches the famous bearded doctor<sup>108</sup> announces: “Either she is speaking the truth and all the fathers are vile, or she is a liar and the patriarchal order is safe.”

And she doesn’t stand a ghost of a chance.

“... a vivid imagination.”

“... a flawed moral character.”

(197)

As Bianca from *Lettere a Marina*, the narrator of “Exquisite Hour” recalls how patriarchy has educated women to silence, in order to render them harmless: “[o]ne scarcely remembers such snow — or such silence” (Maso, *Aureole* 199); and speculates on how the world would have been if patriarchy had never existed:

Who knows what might have been — had things been different —  
early on — from the beginning even.

In another world in another time long ago you dreamt. Dreamt  
of dancing all night. Until your shoes were worn —

Without the surveillance of the fathers.

(198)

However, differently from Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body* and Maraini’s *Lettere a Marina*, Maso’s *Aureole*, being written several years later, is less concerned about freeing itself from patriarchal constraints, as many battles have been already won by Maso’s predecessors. As a result, for instance, even though images of incorporation and dissolution are identifiable in *Aureole*, they manifest joyfully, unhooked from the spectres of patriarchal anxiety and violence: “[w]e’ll feast /

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<sup>108</sup> The “famous bearded doctor” is presumably Sigmund Freud, standing as the founder of the whole psychoanalysis.



[...] I'll taste you through your veils. Eat you      suck you      through / your veils" (106); "[s]omething opens that cannot be closed. And I am swollen with it, and I am soaked in it. 'You are so delicious,' I say. '*E toi!*' We are floating" (3, emphasis in the original).<sup>109</sup> As terms such as 'feast' and 'floating' suggest, and the overall mild tone confirms, the characters' state of mind is light weighted and serene, lyrical in the celebration of the pleasurable time spent with the lover. Eventually, a confirmation of the inoffensive position where patriarchy has been relegated in *Aureole*, the fencing master in "Exquisite Hour" is "arrested and disappeared, as it proved, forever" (198), while the narrator finds in Lady Day's voice the determination to forge a new language (Moore 6).

*"Rupture, Verge, and Precipice": A Calling to Coexistence*

In *Breaking Every Rule*'s essay "Rupture, Verge, and Precipice" (161-191), Maso engages in a conversation with patriarchy itself. In other chapters of the collection, patriarchy's existence, when acknowledged, is regarded as an annoying, cumbersome presence, more than an actually threatening one. Only in "Rupture, Verge, and Precipice," however, the tones get aggressive, as Maso lists all patriarchy's weaknesses and faults, especially concerning her writing practice: "You set up, over and over, false dichotomies" (164); "You like to watch. Hold us all in your gaze" (163); "You try to dismiss me as hysterical or reactionary or out of touch because I won't enter that cozy little pact with you anymore" (163).<sup>110</sup> She, however, reverses the traditional hierarchy, exposing how, this time, it is patriarchy itself which feels threatened, full of fears: "You are afraid. You are afraid" (161); "You fear your favorite positions are endangered. Will become obsolete" (164); "you fear the future [...] anything new. Anything that disrupts your sense of security and self. Everything threatens you" (166); eventually affirming that:

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<sup>109</sup> See also: "The move towards a *radiant place*, a place of rigorous disintegration, a place the architecture of the novel allows and makes possible" (Maso, *Break* 45, my emphasis); "The suck of the void. I know you're dizzy honey. I know" (Maso, *Aureole* 182).

<sup>110</sup> See also: "You put me in your unreadable box where I am safe. Where I am quiet. More ladylike. In your disdainful box labelled 'experimental.' Labeled 'do not open.' Labeled 'do not review'" (165).

I, for one, am on to you. You taste for blood [...] You need to reiterate, to reassert your power, your privilege, because it erodes. Let's face it, *you're panicked*. (163, my emphasis)<sup>111</sup>

Despite continuing her sometimes sarcastic invective against patriarchy's oppressive dynamics and hypocrisy,<sup>112</sup> simultaneously Maso calls for a coexistence —not of oppressive and inclusive discourses, but of the 'old' novel and the 'new' one, normative and non-normative desires: "Couldn't we, maybe just possibly, coexist? / Why does my existence threaten yours?" (166). The same openness, I argue, is epitomized by *Aureole*'s representation of homosexual and heterosexual desires alike. As a matter of fact, even though lesbian desire occupies the main portion of the novel,<sup>113</sup> as in Maraini's *Lettere a Marina*, also different patterns of desire are granted their own space, such as in the short stories "Her Ink-Stained Hands" (heterosexual desire which remains unsatisfied due to vows of abstinence), "Dreaming Steven Lighthouse Keeper" (71-84) (voyeurism), and "The Changing Room" (85) (heterosexual one-time stand). As seen in the previous chapter, this allowing sexual possibilities to proliferate constitutes a decidedly queer move that is reflected in what Moore defines as "a style that does justice to the polymorphously perverse energy of eros" (6).

### *Conclusion: Beyond the Last Village*

In this chapter, I analyzed how Maso's works can be read progressively, from *The Art Lover* and *The American Woman with the Chinese Hat* to *AVA* and *Aureole*. Although *The American Woman* adheres to the heteronarrative development prescribed by patriarchal law, which entails the submission of the female to the male element of the narration, it, nonetheless, exposes and interrogates these biases,

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<sup>111</sup> See also, Maso's two wishes: "Wish: that as writers we be aware of our own desire to incorporate, even unconsciously, the demands and anxieties of publishers and reject them, the demands and anxieties of the marketplace" (171); "Wish: that straight white males reconsider the impulse to cover the entire world with their words, fill up every page, every surface, everywhere" (171).

<sup>112</sup> See, for instance: "You romanticize the good old days —the record skipping those nights long ago while you were making love, while you were having real sex with— / Hey, was that me?" (164).

<sup>113</sup> "The girls for once are not ornamental. The girls for once are not just decorative. Incidental. The girls and their gorgeous rituals [...] which make Sappho honey song and hum are not for once relegated to one white wing somewhere. The girls for Sappho are the whole story. Holding their delirious bouquets and visions, open-mouthed" (Maso, *Aureole* 164).

eventually suggesting that the rethinking of desire, especially lesbian desire, should affect not only the content but also the formal elements of language.

The collection of short stories *Aureole* —as well as its predecessor *AVA*— actualizes this belief, by elaborating a subversive writing style that does justice to the likewise subversive qualities of lesbian desire. More specifically, I analyzed how the excess, fluidity, and inclusivity of lesbian bodies, identities, and desires destabilize and displace the conception of lesbian as “a logical impossibility” (Farwell, *Heterosexual* 15) within the narration, producing, instead, instances of what Braidotti has defined “alternative figurations” and “affirmative representations” (24) of these subjectivities. Firstly, contrary to the dominant aesthetic of containment of the feminine, Maso’s *Aureole* manifests the excess of ‘lesbian’ textually. As the tight coincidence of textuality and sexuality is established by means of the first short story “The Women Wash Lentils,” language gets contaminated by the swelling up of desire and persists recreating the body’s physical states throughout the collection, thus exceeding its prescribed domain. Secondly, Maso expands the notion of fluidity, especially of character, space, novel, and time. Indefiniteness and mutability pertain to all *Aureole*’s figures —the most emblematic being the woman on the bridge,— and several formal techniques, as well as semantic patterns, emphasize these fluid properties.

Particularly, the practice of ‘as if,’ a tentative, only hypothetical metamorphosis, functions, as Braidotti argues, to disclose an unstable, queer in-between place: the space of sexuality. In addition, the traditional conceptions of the novel and the plot are queered as well, specifically through the juxtaposition of the sequence and the erotic, thus abandoning any linear, rigidly logical development. Moreover, *Aureole* succeeds in warping the sense of time by operating the merging of past and future into the present, i.e. into the temporality of the erotic experience. In this way, the notions of narrative opening and especially closure are re-thought as well, as *Aureole*’s recursive style ties its fragments together circularly, —the short stories “Make Me Dazzle” and “You Were Dazzle” constitute an example.

Lastly, through the short story “Exquisite Hour” and the essay “Rupture, Verge, and Precipice,” Maso unequivocally acknowledges the presence of and directly engages in a conversation with patriarchy itself. Despite recalling patriarchal injunctions to silence and submission, *Aureole* is evidently less concerned about freeing itself from patriarchal constraints, as its language is already unchallengedly exploring new spaces beyond those traditionally imposed. Maso, instead, points to patriarchy’s fear and calls for a non-oppressive coexistence, further advocated for within the collection itself, as it grants narrative space to a wide range of desires.

In the following, I will discuss *Aureole*’s final short story “In the Last Village” (201-211), which, according to Moore, describes Maso’s

personal paradise, a lesbian utopia populated by her friends and mentors [...] a final state of post-orgasmic bliss, where all aesthetic and erotic difficulties have been resolved. (6)

However, as for Wittig’s and Maraini’s texts, a utopic characterization does not encompass entirely the complexity of *Aureole*. As mentioned, the short stories are connected to each other, and its coda makes no exception. Previously in the narration, two figures “making love [...] in a slow moving boat” embark towards an unmentioned location while the “traveling players wav[e] from the shore” and wish them a good journey (134-135). Presumably, at the end of *Aureole*, the figures—the same ones or different ones— arrive at their destination as the short story opens with the exclamation: “[a]nd look, how we’ve come to this place at last [...] the last village of Z [...] of Zenka, perched on a hill” (201-202). Although, at first, this might seem to suggest a final repose of some sort, after few lines “the dazzling village of A, with its airplanes, sweet apples” (203) is mentioned, underlining once again the narrator’s continuous traversing of the “visionary, mystical, ecstatic alphabet” (Maso, *Break* 136), i.e. her exploration of language, as well as her unwillingness to assign a closure to the novel and its desires. Accordingly, even though the place is initially described as Paradise (Maso, *Aureole* 204), evoking a utopic imagery, soon the narrator revises her impression by stating: “yes, this must

be Paradise [...] or maybe Paris” (209). Therefore, a connection is established between the last and the first short stories,<sup>114</sup> completing *Aureole*’s circular structure.

To conclude, as the narration remains a work in progress, so does Maso’s literary project. *Aureole* has started to explore a new language of desire, perhaps providing an instance of the kind of language Bianca was looking for.<sup>115</sup> As a matter of fact, Maso shares, by analogy, *Lettere a Marina*’s characters’ preoccupation of adopting the conventions of the oppressor, for lack of better words (Maso, *Break* 158), and affirms she is determined “not to speak in destructive or borrowed forms any longer” (67). In her essay “Break Every Rule” (157-160), Maso directly addresses this issue, insisting on the impact that the disruption or upsetting of the textual surface would have on the social and political domains:

If we joyfully violate the language contract, might that not make us braver, stronger, more capable of breaking other oppressive contracts? [...] other contracts (social, political) we have entered with those who have continually tried to dismiss us? [...] Would celebrating through the invention of new kinds of texts —ones that insisted on our own takes of the world, our own visions, our own realities— would this finally convince both us and others that we are autonomous, we are not them, not exactly, but we are nonetheless joyful and free? (159)

Hence, the ‘breaking’ of language assumes explicit social and political valences in Maso’s literary project. Accordingly, *Aureole*’s unfinished status, i.e. the necessity to keep writing ‘queerly,’ mirrors the necessity to persisting claiming more on a social and political level. *Aureole* is a “small progress” (Maso, *Break* 135),<sup>116</sup> and a valuable one, but, as the concluding word of the collection stresses, we are always in need of “more” (Maso, *Aureole* 211).

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<sup>114</sup> See also the references to *The Books of Desire*, amply mentioned in the first short story (Maso, *Aureole* 2, 4, 6, 11, 19, 21) and now once again reappearing in the narration (205, 210).

<sup>115</sup> “Dire di me donna con una lingua maschile è una miserabile contraddizione’ ‘Non conosco altra lingua Chantal’” (Maraini, *Lettere a Marina* 39).

<sup>116</sup> “This is early work, I know. And I’m still a long way off” (Maso, *Break* 136).

## Conclusion

### *Lesbian Discursive Resistances: An Excessive and Fluid Anti-Essentialism*

The lesbian bodies, identities, and desires represented in Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*, Dacia Maraini's *Lettere a Marina*, and Carole Maso's *Aureole: An Erotic Sequence* are inextricably entangled in power relations. For this reason, neither Wittig's Amazons, Maraini's Southern Italian seaside town of T., or Maso's Paris/Paradise are to be deemed as utopic places, where lesbians can dwell unconditionally and safely. The presence of patriarchy and heteronormativity looms over them, affecting, even though to different degrees, the texts' specificities. However, discourse, defined as "the heterogeneous [and discontinuous] collection of utterances" conjuring up a particular concept (Jagose, "Way Out" 279), harbours not only power —patriarchy's, in this case—but also resistance, according to Foucault's theorization. Not only discourse transmits and reinforces power, but it also "undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it" (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 100-101). In other words, resistance is generated by those same premises from which power stemmed in the first place and employs its same weapon, namely discourse. As seen, locating its resistance at a "point of systemic failure" of binary oppositions in order to work its weakness from *within* (Burwell 168) as well as appropriating dominant discourses in order to destabilize them are decidedly queer strategies. Accordingly, in my case studies, lesbian subjectivities generate in the interstices of the heteronormative system and queerly appropriate its discursive practices in order to tell their own stories —even though not without struggle.

As seen, according to Butler, representing reality, i.e the reality of lesbian subjectivities in my case studies, posits "interests and positions that do not yet exist, setting them up, founding them" ("Wittig's" 521). According to Jagose's constructivist view of culture, these texts *make* these bodies, identities, and desires, which were, up to that point, irreconcilable with heteronormative narratives. Anxious, violent, desiring, leaky, and productive are only some of the adjectives I employed in this

thesis to describe the lesbian selves Wittig's, Maraini's, and Maso's texts engender. Despite the variations among my case studies, the lesbian is queered in the sense that it presents elements that firmly oppose the concept of self as an integrated and stable entity. More specifically, the authors' queer anti-essentialist approach to corporeality, identity and sexuality involves primarily the continuous representation of lesbians as excessive and permeated with fluid properties. On the one hand, excessiveness pertains to lesbians in several ways: Wittig's excess of the *I* and the *I*'s pity towards the lover (an emotionally charged excess); the excess of the lesbian bodies that manifests by means of leakages; Bianca's identitarian excess that cannot be contained by traditional social roles and relational modes; as well as the excess of lesbian desire that directly affects the language are some examples. Overall, as demonstrated, the excess attributed to the lesbian bodies, identities, and desires runs counter, in its diverse configurations, to heteronormative and patriarchal notions which limit, constrain and suffocate the female, and erase its emissions. On the other, the fluid features attributed to lesbian subjectivities are essential to enable the lesbian excess to circulate, producing new lesbian bodies, granting identitarian revisions, and allowing lesbian desire to diffuse. Lesbian texts themselves do not remain untouched by fluidity's impact, and diverse narrative strategies are adopted in order to maintain them in a state of non-closure.

More specifically, in Chapter I, I examined how Wittig's *The Lesbian Body* verbalizes, engages with, reworks and expands —lesbianizes, in Wittig's words— the concept of desire as a lack, its violence and its anxieties, traditionally associated with patriarchal discourses. In order to write lesbian selves, Wittig relies heavily on strategies of incorporation, i.e. the instincts to violently devour, dismember and invade the other's body, as well as reveals a nostalgia for a state of total unity and oneness, which can be regarded as paranoid and can ultimately constitute a threat to difference. After having analysed such similarities which draw Wittig's text dangerously close to repressive discourses, I pinpoint certain other facets that make it diverge substantially from them. Wittig's violence is fundamentally different from patriarchal violence since it is reciprocal, produces speech, and leads to resurrection. This last point is particularly significant since it allows the unfolding of the

text's greatest potentiality, that is, the actualization of a multiplicity of mutable bodies. On the one hand, Wittig creates a textual structure that resembles Deleuze's interpretation of the Nietzschean eternal recurrence and addresses the difference within an apparent self-replicating sameness. On the other, she calls attention to the excess of the lesbian body/text, which cannot be contained, leaks out, and is ultimately generative. As a result, what is recuperated with *The Lesbian Body* is not the self, understood as a prediscursive, singular entity that contains all bodies of lesbians, but her affirmation in becoming.

Furthermore, in Chapter II, I analysed the contradictions at play in Maraini's *Lettere a Marina*, as well as its refusal to resolve them. Firstly, I examined the re-enactment of the erotically charged mother-daughter relationship, prohibited under patriarchal law. Such play-acting does not force Bianca to lapse into in the pre-symbolic domain, confining their lesbian relationship in the periphery of consciousness and culture. Instead, by refusing to get rid of her sexual anxiety, Bianca maintains Marina's ambivalence at place, preserving the complexity of their relationship as a result. Moreover, Bianca desists from choosing between her attraction to women or men, discarding what separatist lesbian ideologies regard as a 'pure' lesbian identity. By destabilizing taken-for-granted relations between biological sex, gendered behaviour, and sexual desire as fixed patterns for identity formation, especially through the characters of Bianca, Marina, and Marco, Maraini's *Lettere a Marina* eventually advocates for a more variegated, that is, queer, kind of relationality. Lastly, by writing the letters addressed to Marina, Bianca reacts to the violence inflicted to her. However, what is recuperated through the act of writing is not completely transparent and the non-coincidence between the point of departure and arrival suggests non-closure —of both the texts and the sexual identities portrayed in the novel. Overall, disentangling Bianca from sexual and social essentialism, Marina as well as their lesbian relationship functioned as the departure point of a movement that involves continual destruction and renovation, i.e. watery purifications, and, ultimately, fostered Bianca's self-reflexive practice towards a more complex conception of her own identity.



Lastly, in Chapter III, I analyzed how a progressive reading of Maso's works suggests that the rethinking of desire, especially lesbian desire, should affect not only the content but also the formal elements of language. *Aureole* implements this assumption by elaborating a subversive writing style that does justice to the likewise subversive qualities of lesbian desire. Firstly, once the coincidence of textuality and sexuality is established, *Aureole*'s language gets contaminated by the swelling up of desire and persists recreating the body's physical states throughout the collection, thus overflowing its prescribed domain and manifesting the excess of lesbian textually. Secondly, by means of several formal techniques as well as semantic patterns which assert movement rather than stasis, Maso queers the notions of character, space, and time. Indefiniteness and mutability pertain to all *Aureole*'s figures, as the dissolution or fragmentation of self is crucial to the erotic experience. This fluidity collaborates, as does the practice of 'as if,' to the carving up of an in-between space, what Maso defines as the space of sexuality. There, the sense of time is warped: past and future merge into the present in order to recreate the temporality of the erotic experience. As a result, the traditional conceptions of the novel and the plot are queered as well. By juxtaposing the terms 'erotic' and 'sequence' in the title of the collection, Maso purposely re-signifies the traditional novel's sequentiality, while the notions of narrative opening and especially closure are reworked, as *Aureole*'s recursive style ties its fragments together circularly. Finally, Maso's *Aureole* has started to explore a new language of desire, perhaps providing an instance of the kind of language Bianca from *Lettere a Marina* was looking for.

### *Queer Proliferations: Towards New Alliances*

Therefore, actively engaging with several elements of critique of queer theory, my case studies implement their resistances from within the dynamics of power by means of discourse as well as adopt an anti-essentialist approach by actualizing the excess of lesbian selves and allowing it to circulate by virtue of fluidity. However, as anticipated in the introduction, my project aimed not only to address the similarities and convergencies in the authors' works, but also to trace their differences,

in the prospect to give a sense of what has changed, and perhaps of what has been achieved, in almost 25 years. Among Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*, Maraini's *Lettere a Marina*, and Maso's *Aureole: An Erotic Sequence*, a discrepancy is identifiable as far as the remaining element of critique of queer theory is concerned, namely the idea of the proliferation of sexual possibilities (Grosz, "Experimental" 209). More precisely, however always accounted for, the difference between the texts lays on the extent to which this proliferation is enacted.

Firstly, *The Lesbian Body* gazes, so to say, inwardly. No men are represented, and heterosexual relationships are excluded too as a result. On the one hand, by means of the *I* and *you*'s radically violent ways of loving, Wittig stretches the boundaries of lesbianism problematizing the dominant conceptions that surround lesbian relationships —regarded as a tender and often asexual alliance among women. On the other, the text's continuous production of lesbian bodies, i.e. potential sexual partners, aligns with the idea of the proliferation of sexual possibilities. Moreover, *Lettere a Marina* interrogates the implications of placing lesbian identity in a more turbulent zone, made of contradictory impulses and multiple pressures. By avoiding the pacification of conflicts that coming out lesbian texts often attempt to achieve, Maraini creates for Bianca and Marina a new sexual economy, in which both women and men can be desired, while, desisting gendered objectification of both male and female, she introduces a new mode of relationality that relies precisely on that proliferation. Therefore, from Wittig's text to Maraini's, it is possible to underline a shift from the analysis of the 'inside' of lesbianism to a greater attention to what lies 'outside' of it —even though both located within the frame of 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism. The most considerable leap, however, —which also corresponds to a leap in time as well as from 2<sup>nd</sup> wave feminism to the inception of 3<sup>rd</sup> wave feminism in the 1990s— is that from Maraini's text to Maso's *Aureole*. In the latter, desires fluctuate unconditionally, their validity unquestioned, and the network of sexual possibilities becomes potentially limitless.

### *In Need for More*

This reading is a close observation of how this element of queer critique has rapidly shifted in a such relatively short span of time. More importantly, it is an indicator, among others, of how these texts are constantly looking for an ever-greater openness, whether taken individually or analyzed as a whole. As seen, throughout my chapters, I focused each time on a different aspect of lesbian subjectivity, providing a picture of several different ways in which lesbian can be queered, namely in the body, in the identity, and in the desire. If the texts' achievement lies in the release of lesbian subjectivities from the prescribed boundaries that patriarchal and heteronormative dictates had imposed on them, they, nonetheless, do not demand a crystallization of those subjectivities according to new parameters, however more suitable. Instead, Wittig, Maraini, and Maso develop textual structures that continue producing lesbian subjectivities, suggesting their propagation beyond the texts' pages. In this way, they do not ultimately reproduce oppressive dynamics, merely exchanging old models of exclusion with new ones. Rather, they constantly yearn for more: more bodies, more identities, more desires.

This 'more,' however, does not remain confined into the literary domain. As seen, literature, and especially those works of literature explicitly dissentient to dominant discourses, are necessarily political to the extent that they lay down reconfigurations of the (un)visible elements of reality. Circulating as material products in everyday lives and becoming part of the broader discourse, these texts act on "the cluster of perceptions and practices that shape this common world" (Rancière 10), showing sometimes unknown ways of being and thinking, addressing plurality rather than homogeneity. Metaphorically speaking, the excess of lesbian subjectivities purposely breaches its literary banks, and, in its flow, attempts to leave readers a small part of itself, to be taken into consideration when they will have to make decisions in their everyday lives. In other words, it aims to sensitize and have an impact on readers. However, it asks, at the same time, to be released, to continue circulating and being acknowledged by more and more people, more readers. It is possible, in this way, to clarify Maso's statement that closed Chapter III, that is, we are always in need for

“more” (*Aureole* 211). The necessity to keep writing ‘queerly,’ herself and others, i.e. to produce more works of literature on LGBTQ+ subjectivities as well as more interpretations of them—which, as seen, can be regarded as political actions per se—speaks to the ongoing disparity in terms of visibility, civil rights and discriminatory politics. Maso’s more (as Wittig’s and Maraini’s) is a declaration that we need *to do* more,<sup>117</sup> in order *to obtain* more, i.e. what is needed to secure equality on a social and political level.

### *The Queer Lesbian and Contemporary Society*

Throughout this thesis, I argued for the value of the queer lesbian as a theoretical tool to analyse these works of literature, often approached by means of an essentialist point of view—especially as far as Wittig’s and Maraini’s texts are concerned. The alliance of LGBT studies *and* queer studies has opened up new critical terrains of analysis, illuminating common trails among the texts previously uncharted. More specifically, in these works, lesbian identity is routinely represented not as a unified subject position, but as a mesh of permeable boundaries, unstable, shifting, elusive, and powerfully adaptive, profoundly anti-essentialist. As a consequence of these developments, lesbianism ceases to be a subjectivity with predictable contents, to constitute a total political and self-identification, and yet it figures no less centrally for that shift. It remains a position from which to speak, but it ceases to be the exclusive and continuous ground of identity or politics. Indeed, as Bidy Martin has argued, it “works to unsettle rather than to consolidate the boundaries around [the subject], not to dissolve them altogether but to open them to the fluidities and heterogeneities that make their renegotiation possible” (100).

I would like to conclude by delineating how the queer lesbian can function not only as a valid theoretical tool in the literary analysis, but also as a fruitful positioning in our contemporary society to achieve the purposes mentioned at the end of the latter paragraph, namely, to continue demanding

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<sup>117</sup> In a sense, Wittig’s, Maraini’s, and Maso’s texts facilitate this process insofar as, given their open structures, they seem to invite other writers to continue what they did not finish and should not be finished once and for all.

and hopefully attain *more*, in all its diverse facets. More precisely, the issue the theorization of the queer lesbian would contribute to attenuate is that of today's increasing social and political polarisation. The latter is caused by innumerable factors, whose in-depth delineation unfortunately exceeds the limits of this thesis. One of those factors, however, directly speaks to my project: the rise of identity-group politics. In her book *Political Tribes* (2018), Yale Law School Professor Amy Chua diagnoses the rising tribalism in America and abroad, underlining how, on both the Left and the Right, the main conceptual frameworks have largely shifted in focus from unifying values to group identities:

The Left believes that right-wing tribalism —bigotry, racism— is tearing the country apart. The Right believes that left-wing tribalism —identity politics, political correctness— is tearing the country apart. They are both right. (166)

In the context of LGBTQ+ battles for equality, the consolidation of such rigid positionings works to deepen the binarism between 'us' and 'them,' namely, those who identify with a letter of that acronym and those who do not. This perceived irreconcilability, often inflamed by dominant rhetorics on both sides, inhibits exchange and becomes ultimately counter-productive to those same battles, as opponents are led to think that if someone wins, someone else has to lose. Conversely, the queer lesbian as a theoretical tool does not demand a rigid positioning, insofar as it is not —not completely— based on identity-group politics. It starts from there —from lesbian bodies, identities, desire,— but it opens up and gets willfully contaminated. Yet, it does not lose itself completely, forgetting its own battles as a result. It acts, rather than blindly identify once and for all. It is a minority that fights not to become the majority, but rather to dismantle the majority/minority dynamics.

Moreover, the queer lesbian seeks allies —both inside and outside that acronym,— rather than listing enemies. In this regard, in recent years, as the field developed consistently, more letters were added or proposed to be added to the acronym —which now alternatively figures as LGBTQIAPK or LGBTTQQAAP, in its most extended versions. In this view, a more flexible understanding of subjectivity, such as the kind exposed in my case studies, can be a valuable resource to understand

how these categories can intersect or blend, and work collectively towards inclusivity rather than compartmentalization. Therefore, the queer lesbian does not resolve the contradictions which structure the category of 'lesbian,' but rather it acknowledges and produces "increasingly precise articulations of those contradictions [...] not simply between them but also internal to each" ("Way Out" 277), as Jagose called for. It shifts the attention, going back to the literary domain, from what a lesbian text *is* to what it actually *does*, that is, carving out a space of resistance for lesbian subjects within the politics of power, demanding for 'more,' as well as seeking alliances in the way. And, lastly, it commits completely to that disposition that Teresa de Lauretis has defined as "[the] need to be affirmed but not resolved" (*Soggetti Eccentrici* 181), the need to exist but constantly change.

As far as future research on the topic is concerned, a more exhaustive application of the queer lesbian as a theoretical tool in the literary analysis may consider other axes in addition to those treated in this thesis, such as race and ethnicity, class, and the nation. It has been said, for instance, that Wittig's works frequently point to "the connection between sexual and racial domination" (Woodhull 154), both of which are said to involve economic exploitation through an institution of slavery. Moreover, in *Lettere a Marina*, Bianca's upper-middle-class status and economic independence presumably play a significant role in shaping her non-normative conceptions of gender roles and identity.<sup>118</sup> Furthermore, considering Maso's Italian descent would enable a reading of her works from a transnational and diasporic perspective, thus adding a further dimension to the analysis of the queer lesbian. Otherwise, efforts could be directed towards the chronopolitics of the queer lesbian and her appropriation and remoulding of space, thus expanding the preliminary analysis of those coordinates I advanced in Chapter III of this thesis.

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<sup>118</sup> Bianca's social and economic condition is emphasized especially in comparison to the character of Basilia, the working-class woman Bianca becomes friends with while staying in the Southern town of T.

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