Thinking Wittig's Differences: "Or, Failing That, Invent"

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The loss of Monique Wittig's live voice and future texts in January 2003 made me deeply sad, especially so for those closest to her, who loved her. My own sadness has taken the form of a profound political, intellectual, historical, and literary melancholia. Wittig's impact on literature, feminism, philosophy, lesbian and queer theory, and more has been extensive and inimitable. Wittig was a thinker and poet whom I admired, and also a colleague and a famous person whom I happened to know. She was on the periphery of my private life, but at the heart of my poetic one. Wittig's voice, particularly her poetic voice, has always been a vital part of my thinking and my conversations about feminism, universality, foundationalism, and psychoanalysis; about heterocentrism, queer theory, and postcolonial and antiracist thinking; indeed, about the possibility of political alliances across all of these often conflicted discursive fields. But Wittig and I rarely encountered each other directly. Hardly ever. Except once upon a time . . .

In what follows I take the risk of "anecdotal theory" to explore three encounters with Monique Wittig and her work.[1] I will not talk about my poetically tortured encounters with *Les guérillères* as I wrote my MA thesis on Wittig in 1977; or about the utter muteness I experienced on first hearing Wittig declare at the 1978 MLA that "lesbians are not women"; or about the impatient incomprehension I felt when Simone de Beauvoir insisted on reading out loud to me some of Wittig's most difficult writing during my visits to Beauvoir's studio in Paris in 1979.[2] Rather, I want to insist on those encounters I had with Wittig that changed me, and my thinking, across three decades. I do so to focus on three controversial questions that I believe must continue to be at the heart of the conversations, debates, and, yes, disagree-

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ments among feminist and queer theorists as we move forward: the questions of sexual difference, of universalism, and of motherhood. As I do so, I keep in mind something that Carolyn Heilbrun said long ago: "When a subject is highly controversial, and any question about sex is that, one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold."[3]

First Encounter: The Question of Sexual Difference

It's 1979: the morning of the huge "The Future of Difference" conference that I was chairing at Barnard College in New York City.[4] In the photo included here, you see me deep in conversation with Monique Wittig—well, sort of deep in conversation with her. I had invited Wittig to the conference to explain to the six hundred feminist registrants what was going on in Paris: why, for example, were the two groups Questions Féministes and Psychanalyse et Politique so violently opposed to each other? In my youthful naïveté, I felt that the intellectual and political differences between the two and their approaches to gender and politics were so important, and so complicated, that only a genuine player could explain them. But there were two problems that morning: (1) I woke up with a classic case of laryngitis—I was unable to say a word; and (2) Wittig was very upset with me. As I walked into the Barnard Women's Center ready to struggle mutely through the morning, Wittig walked straight up to me and started scolding me in the fastest French I had ever heard. She assured me that she had left France "because there were no feminists there," and she was furious with me for using the word *difference* in the conference's title. The term *difference* is obviously so historically and epistemologically loaded in post-post-structuralist thought that I limit myself here to its resonant meaning in 1979: biological sexual difference as embodied and performed by the majority of men and women in the world.[5] An anonymous photographer caught that first moment when all I was trying to communicate to Wittig was that I could not communicate with her (fig. 1). Finally, I just gave up and listened. I will never forget the intelligence and passion of Wittig's fury with me.

Today, more than twenty-five years later, the question of the future of sexual difference remains very much on my mind, albeit with very different valences. Of course, I understand much better today Wittig's intellectual impatience with Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis and indeed with all of high French post-structuralist thought. Today I embrace her insistence on struggling against all of the historically overdetermined, falsely naturalized binary categories of knowledge that have most oppressed humankind, including, up-front and foremost, "men" and "women." Today I am much better able to admire Wittig's tenacity

Figure 1: Alice Jardine and Monique Wittig, "Scholar and the Feminist Conference: The Future of Difference," Barnard College, April 1979.

at insisting on the way patriarchal institutions — particularly the family — have enslaved those who do not reject its heterocentric foundations. But I am still today in many ways having my silent debate with Wittig about the status of the question of sexual difference in a transmodern global environment. What do I mean by *transmodern*?

First, contrary to the vast majority of academic and journalistic writing, for me the word *postmodernism* designates quite simply a specific era of human history — roughly 1951–91 — during which there were major paradigm shifts on a global scale. These shifts, still very much in evidence throughout our current transmodern predicament, were produced at the intersections of advanced postindustrial capital, science, technology, new environmental challenges, formal decolonization, and major movements for human liberation. Neither simply "good" nor "bad," postmodernism encouraged complex, destabilized subjectivities, new infrastructures for representation, and a chaos of communicability that made it increasingly difficult to sort out what was "true" from what was "false" in any given context. For the record, I hold *post-structuralism* to refer to a couple of generations of intellectuals, primarily in France, who were trying to make sense of such radical transformations often by embracing and even by celebrating them for their potential breaks with the old order of things that had already brought

the world to the brink of extinction halfway through the twentieth century. While there is no doubt that the postmodern era opened up all kinds of potentials for subjects not white/male/straight/Christian, it is also and simultaneously true that postmodernism itself came about largely *because* of the words and actions of formerly disenfranchised but fully identity-prone subjects. *Transmodernism*, then, refers to the post-1991 global situation we are just beginning to recognize as new and thoroughly unsettling to most normative, First World thought patterns and assumptions about subjectivity, representation, and verifiability. I would argue that as a worldwide epistemological environment, transmodernism is as yet almost impossible to understand. In many ways, it is but a deepening and widening of the postmodern condition. In other ways, its emergent differences from postmodernism are linked to specific world-changing, historical events (Tiananmen Square, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the first Gulf war, the political solidification of neoconservatism and evangelical Christianity in the United States). While certain phenomena point to its attributes (subjective hybridity rather than doubleness, for example; technological affinity to the computer and its webs rather than to the TV and its broadcasts), we do not yet know what its long-term effects will be.

When thinking about sexual difference from within these chaotic transmodern test patterns of new subjectivities, representations, and truth fictions, I would urge caution on the part of those of us who tend to think first in the abstract—caution along the lines of Hal Foster's and Craig Owens's visionary warnings to the art world of the 1970s and 1980s about the dangers of mistaking the dancers for the dances, of riding the epistemological waves we happen to catch because they feel liberating in the moment.[6] We might do well to be careful that the slow but steady rerouting of the genomic men/women switchboard does not leave us and our conversations kicked out of what we might call the authority industry. As in the early days of the feminist critique of post-structuralism, when Rosi Braidotti and others reminded us that the attack against certain forms of Truth did not mean that truth had disappeared, we need to be careful regarding Difference and difference as well.[7] Might not there be a way to keep everyone—or at least more rather than fewer of us—in the conversation without being too universalist, or too foundationalist, or too metaphysical, or too straight, or too gay, or too ethnocentric by focusing on the heterogeneity of the human, not to say the posthuman, even as we move beyond heterocentrism?

That is, while we may certainly want to celebrate the disappearance of the essentialist terms *woman* and *man* (as in "the essential woman" and "the essential man") in the 1980s and of *women* and *men* (as in "all women" and "all men") in the 1990s, and while we are also celebrating the proliferation of gender performativities, we might also do well to resist operating within a logic of uncon-

scious denial. As the feminist, queer scientists and historians of science I listen to are saying: our future realities of the twenty-first century demand noncategorical, dynamic thinking along various directional lines of force at once. These scientific intellectuals insist that the vast majority of humans are sexually dimorphic and that to deny that is to be theoretically self-destructive. But they also insist that what is still unclear and in need of more investigation is the question of what the genomic fact of dimorphism has to do with the actual, infinitely variable embodiments of both so-called majority and minority individuals and their social practices.[8] Like those most attuned to the history and epistemology of science and medicine, I too believe that what we need to heed are the pathways of embodiment open to us as individuals and as groups as well as the cumulative interplays of accountability and agency that crisscross these embodiments across history and culture. At the heart of this conversation, of course, is the tension over the explanatory power of feminist psychoanalytic theories of subjectivity. Feminism "met" queer theory some ten years ago, but in many respects it is as if we could not get past the introductions.[9] How can anyone committed to struggles for social justice, especially around issues of women, gender, and sexuality, say "I" and "we" in the right tone of voice with any efficacy? I wish I could ask Wittig right now how we might take the psycho-scientific concept of embodiment "seriously" enough so that all of us attempting to undo the deadly dynamics of the sex-gender system in this transmodern world could still speak and be heard.

Second Encounter: The Question of Universalism

It's 1986: my friend Anne Menke and I are interviewing some fifteen women writers and theorists whose work is well known in France for a collection of interviews eventually published in 1991 as *Shifting Scenes: Interviews on Women, Writing, and Politics in Post-68 France*.[10] I called Wittig in the United States from Paris for an interview over the phone. At the time, I was not surprised by Wittig's emphasis on the importance of revolutionizing literary form or, as she would later put it (echoing Gilles Deleuze), on writing literature as a "war machine," as a Trojan horse.[11] Nor was I surprised by her refusal to answer our questions about writing literature as a woman. But what stunned me — and still in a way does — was her response to our question about making it into the canon or not:

> To say that writers have been excluded from the canon because they are women not only seems to me inexact, but the very idea proceeds from a trend toward theories of victimization. There are few great writers in any century. Each time there was one, not only was she welcome within the

> canon, but she was acclaimed, applauded, and praised in her time—sometimes *especially* because she was a woman. I'm thinking of Sand and Colette. I do not think that real innovators have been passed by. In the university, we ruin the purpose of what we do if we make a special category for women—especially when teaching. When we do that as feminists, we ourselves turn the canon into a male edifice.[12]

Now *this* was an encounter I would not forget. Hers was the lone voice among the fifteen people interviewed. She was a writer: not a woman writer (I was prepared for that), but also not a lesbian writer or a feminist writer. She was, quite simply, a *great* writer. And, according to her, great writers have always made it into the canon—and still do.

All of this was, I admit, hard for me to take after all the work in the United States over two decades of feminist literary criticism on how the masculine imaginary had been conceived, performed, and marketed as universal since the beginning of patriarchal time; after all the work on how it would only be through the tracing of unknown and hidden texts, with emphases added or changed, that the pseudo-universality of patriarchal aesthetics could be undone. Yet here was a writer whom I admired enormously saying what my most misogynistic, least gender-conscious, mostly male teachers had always said to me: "Don't waste your time on women's writing of the past. When more women learn to write and think well enough, more of them will be included in the canon."

Wittig, not unlike Beauvoir, wanted to steal universality back from those who had monopolized it. Many of us still are attempting to process what seems to be the necessity of universalizing without forgetting the important teachings of the late twentieth century on the dangers of an unwitting return to the most insidious forms of Western metaphysical presupposition. This was and is the work of the pronouns: *On. Elles. J/e. T/u.* I wish I could ask Wittig right now if the universalizing strategy she practiced in her fiction and theory might not have, along the way, grabbed onto the epistemological wave that was entering the mainstream, transmodern marketplace where feminist female desire has in many respects been all but disappeared from representation—a disappearance seen by Wittig as nonetheless the surest route of escape from the biological imperatives of Western heteronormativity.

Third Encounter: The Question of the Mother

It's 1996: I have just become the adoptive mother of a girl child born and abandoned in the patriarchal countryside of rural mainland China. My actively cho-

sen motherhood has from the beginning been the most radicalizing experience of my life, from within what Luce Irigaray once called the most radical form of intersubjectivity there is.[13] Ever since I became a mother, I have wanted to ask Monique Wittig some questions about the status of mothers in her fiction and theory. Now, sadly, it is too late. But my questions remain nonetheless. This is the third encounter, then: the one that I never had. And these are the questions that I would have liked to ask.

In her fiction and theory, Wittig quite successfully stole the universal without celebrating the masculinity that has been attached to it for so long. I have applauded her insistence on all kinds of visible communities of "elles" as she refused to deny the material violence that words can do to anyone. I have admired her tireless struggle against the tyranny of the heteronormative family and her celebration of human relationship through intention, choice, solidarity, and love. But there is one thing that has bothered me: where do mothers fit into her thinking? Perhaps they do not? Mothers are remarkably absent from Wittig's literary inventions—sometimes hovering outside the classroom door or squatting while anonymously giving birth. But they are never agents, never desiring subjects. *Children* exist in her inventions—although where they came from is a bit mysterious, and sometimes they are but encumbrances, burdensome shadows to vaguely maternal figures. Sometimes the term *mother* itself is so destabilized that it has nothing at all to do with children. Not to mention fathers. To be sure, the terms *mother* and *father* are loaded in the context of contemporary queer kinship theory. The great divide between procreative identity and sexual identity is dated, and the placing of the procreative mandate at the heart of kinship theory is now largely defunct but for the ultraconservatives still in control, though, also, it is to be hoped, on their way out. Anthropologists such as Kath Weston, in books like *Families We Choose*, continue the assault on the theoretical privilege accorded to the biogenetically grounded determination of kin and empirically document exciting new kinds of kinship and kinship systems that gay/bi/trans/lesbian/feminist people are introducing to the world.[14]

At the same time, since the early 1990s, the period I see as moving from the postmodern to the transmodern, "difference feminism"—with its insistence on the sustained analysis of motherhood as crucial to feminist vision—has begun to disappear just as Wittig had hoped. In its place there have emerged new concepts and claims, indeed new celebrations, of, for instance, "female masculinity"—a fascinating yet strangely familiar construction.[15] Now, at the same time that I love these new forms of freedom, I, along with others, wonder whether such things as female masculinity are but new twists on a familiar male individualism bent fore-

most on escaping the mother. It seems that this female masculinity is often framed as queer no matter who is performing it and that queer is often defined as that which mothers are not. Queer theory tends to subsume maternity and paternity under parenthood, and motherhood is conflated with biological, procreative sexuality tied almost definitively to the heterosexual family. The mother thus becomes a figure of heteronormativity, the traditional family, and coercive procreative rules and practices of all kinds. In the process, motherhood is often denied any embodiment that is not politically nefarious and regressive, although fatherhood is most often elided as well, both swallowed up by the supposedly more capacious and accommodating discourse of parenthood. The gesture, for all its liberational import, is troubling to me, living as I do in a place and time—the United States in 2007—for which the mother continues to be the "designated parent" in important legal contexts and for which over 90 percent of child care is still done by mothers and other women.[16] Until that material reality changes, I would hope that theory, even in its attempts to debunk insidious binarisms and fixed identity categories, would be more attentive to continuing protocols and practices.

A few feminist voices attempting to be part of these conversations about "who's minding the kids" can, however, still be heard above the fray—carefully but firmly objecting to the disappearing of the mother in a good deal of our most important queer fiction and theory. For example, Susan Fraiman, in her recent *Cool Men and the Second Sex*, argues that motherhood has become the antithesis of queerness, whose own normativity appears more and more masculine, however reconfigured or reprocessed. Fraiman claims that "typically it is first-generation feminist scholarship of the late 1970's and early 1980's that gets thrust into this [maternal] role, being handily maternalized for semantic as well as structural reasons: because mothers were central to its lexicon, because these scholars have been our teachers and our models, and because they are now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the menopausal generation."[17] That is to say, these now "maternal" if not "matronly" women are not so cool any more, are "out of date." Biddy Martin has been even more direct. She has spoken out against what she sees as queer theory's recuperation of the masculine and repudiation of the feminine, its tendency to see the female as inherently foundationalist, "as a capitulation, a swamp, something maternal, ensnared, and ensnaring."[18]

Whether one agrees with Fraiman, Martin, and others or not, reinforcing some motherhood versus parenthood or feminist versus queer binary is most definitely not productive in the long term. Nor is the kind of theoretical rigidity helpful that wants to throw out the baby with the family bathwater. As someone who has worked hard for many years to break down the binaries that polarize and often paralyze progressive thought, I cannot but wonder what Wittig would have

thought of all of this and of her place, her work's place, in the encounters and partings of feminism and queer theory.[19] Wittig's work has been vital for many of us (though arguably more within feminism than queer theory) who have been trying in various ways to transform the world or invent new ones, and yet I find her relative and by now perhaps irrevocable silence on the powerful symbolic instances of motherhood—and fatherhood—perplexing. In trying to imagine how Wittig might have responded to my impertinent questions about motherhood, I find myself turning to poetry, drawn all the way back to Cherríe Moraga's now classic, powerfully queer poetic meditation on the mother:

> *What Is Left*
> Mamá
> I use you
> like the belt
> pressed inside your grip
> seething for contact
>
> I take
> what I know
> from you and want
> to whip this world
> into shape
> the damage
> has defined me
> as the space you provide
> for me in your bed
> . . .
> I was not to raise an arm against you
>
> But today
> I promise you
> I *will* fight back
>
> Strip the belt from your hands
>
> and take you
>
> into
> my arms.[20]

I believe that if we as feminist and as queer theorists are going to avoid the devastating kind of breakdown in conversation that took place in the 1980s between

white feminists and the feminists of color excluded by white feminist epistemology, we must hold these three questions together before us as long and as carefully as we possibly can: (1) What is the status of biological sexual difference as mediated by the gender constructions still most operative across current global, psychosocial realities? In other words, while we embrace the complexities of postidentity theory, how can we also continue to insist on the material, embodied contingencies of classed, raced, sexed *differences*? (2) What are the promises and liabilities of adhering to a discursive reclamation of a universal (neutral) authoritative nonidentity (the French "on" or in English, "one," for instance) that tends to subsume under itself multiple, nondiscursive, lived identities in the world? How can we best continue the search for new universalisms not contaminated by the sovereign indifference of patriarchal authority?[21] (3) What are the stakes involved in recognizing or denying the long-embedded specificities of mothering and fathering in the world today? Do we have the theoretical courage to understand the historical rage of men toward women, particularly toward those mothers, both biological and cultural, who attempt to operate outside heteropatriarchal law? Is it all simply a matter of parenting? Or is there a danger that by glossing *mother* and *father* as archaic signifiers, by not subjecting them to the same sort of transvaluative operations that have attended *queer* and, much closer to Wittig, *lesbian*, we gloss over the referential suffering of mothers, fathers, and their children as well?

I do not believe that the questions that I am raising and exploring here through my real and imaginary encounters with Monique Wittig and her work are questions that only a self-described heterosexual could possibly ask. Just as I think that Anglo-whites need to participate actively with people of color in analyzing white privilege vis-à-vis racism, so too do I think that heterosexuals need to participate actively in the BGLT and queer analysis (for all the undeniable tensions between the two) of heteronormativity vis-à-vis sexism in the broadest sense of the term. I worry, however, that both of these efforts are failing right now and that much-needed conversations are becoming more difficult than ever. There is a backing away from the difficulty of these conversations, a kind of renewed segregation of thought that astonishes me.

I can only hope that in the very near future we will all find the courage to follow Monique Wittig's lead . . . and *invent*.

Notes

I want to thank my friends Brad Epps, Brian Martin, and Nancy Miller for their hours of generously patient debate and fiercely accurate editing while I was finishing this work.

1. Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).
2. Monique Wittig, *Les guérillères* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1969; New York: Avon, 1973).
3. Carolyn Heilbrun, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (New York: Knopf, 1973), ix.
4. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine, eds., *The Future of Difference* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980).
5. *Difference* was also a term at the heart of the theories of Psychanalyse et Politique — the rival group of Wittig's Questions Féministes.
6. See, for example, Hal Foster, "Signs Taken for Wonders," *Art in America* (June 1986), 80–91; Foster, "Between Modernism and the Media," in *Recodings* (New York: New Press, 1999), 33–58; Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism," in *Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: Godine, 1984), 203–35; and Owens, "Posing," in *Difference: On Representation and Sexuality* (New York: New Museum, 1985), 7–18.
7. Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
8. See, for example, Nancy Krieger, "Genders, Sexes, and Health: What Are the Connections — and Why Does It Matter?" *International Journal of Epidemiology* 32 (2003): 652–57.
9. *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*, ed. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997). For example, there have been feminist psychoanalytic attempts over the past decade to theorize broadly across issues of sexual differentiation that have been quickly labeled as not queer friendly because of their continued reliance on Freud.
10. The full interview with Wittig was published in *Shifting Scenes: Interviews on Women, Writing, and Politics in Post-68 France*, ed. Alice Jardine and Anne Menke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 192–95. Excerpts of the interview with Wittig were first published in "Exploding the Issue: 'French' 'Women' 'Writers' and 'The Canon'? Fourteen Interviews," ed. Alice Jardine and Anne Menke, *Yale French Studies* 75 (1988): 229–58. Reprinted in *Displacements: Women, Tradition, Literatures in French*, ed. Joan DeJean and Nancy K. Miller (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 305–7.
11. Monique Wittig, "The Trojan Horse," in *The Straight Mind* (Boston: Beacon, 1992), 68–75.
12. Jardine and Menke, *Shifting Scenes*, 193.
13. For an account of how motherhood has affected my intellectual and political work, see Alice Jardine, "Dolphins, Dying Rooms, and Destabilized Demographics: Or, Loving Anna in a Transmodern World," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 21 (2002): 333–45.
14. Kath Weston, *The Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). For an overview of twentieth-century scholarship on kinship systems, see Michael G. Peletz, "Kinship Studies in Late Twentieth-Century Anthro-

pology," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24 (1995): 343–72. For some of the best recent work on rethinking queer kinship, see Mary Bernstein and Renate Reimann, *Queer Families, Queer Politics: Challenging Culture and the State* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001); Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Butler, "Global Violence, Sexual Politics," in *Queer Ideas* (New York: Feminist Press of the City University of New York, 2003), 197–214; Butler, "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?" *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13 (2002): 14–44; Sarah Franklin and Susan McKinnon, eds., *Relative Values: Reconfiguring Kinship Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values: Debunking the Myth of the Nuclear Family* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

15. For an important account of female masculinity, see Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998).
16. See, for example, "Who's Minding the Kids? Childcare Arrangements: Winter 2002," in *Current Population Reports*, by Julia Overturf Johnson (Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005). This study was completed before the debate over same-sex marriage became mainstream and before gay marriage itself became legal in Massachusetts in 2004. It will be interesting to see how the language does or does not change in the next study, given the current intense debates in GLBT and queer studies about normality, legitimacy, and radical sexuality.
17. Susan Fraiman, *Cool Men and the Second Sex* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 122.
18. Biddy Martin, *Femininity Played Straight: The Significance of Being Lesbian* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 72.
19. See, for example, Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, eds., *Men in Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1987).
20. Cherríe Moraga, "What Is Left," in *Loving in the War Years* (Boston: South End, 1983), 16. The author wishes to thank Cherríe Moraga and South End Press for allowing the use of this poem.
21. It sometimes seems as if many of the questions raised in the long debate between feminism and post-structuralism in the 1980s have resurfaced in the new millennium. I borrow the phrase "sovereign indifference" from Nancy K. Miller's 1982 retort to Michel Foucault in "The Text's Heroine: A Feminist Critic and Her Fictions," in *Conflicts in Feminism*, ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (New York: Routledge, 1990), 118. Below I deliberately rewrite a phrase that Miller used in the same article as part of her feminist dialogue with French post-structuralism—"by glossing 'woman' as an archaic signifier, it glosses over the referential suffering of women" (114)—for the dialogue that I hope might take place between feminist and queer theory in 2007 and beyond.