Intersubjectivity and the Transcendence of Sex

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abstract

In the introduction to *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir cautions against the dangers of "inauthentic flight" in the face of patriarchal domination. "Clearly", she writes, "no woman can claim without bad faith to be situated beyond her sex." Yet, in the decades since, the transcendence of sex has become a fixture of feminism. In 1981, in a talk which borrows its title from *The Second Sex*'s most famous aphorism—"one is not born a woman"—Monique Wittig argued that "'Lesbian' is... beyond the categories of sex." Can Wittig's proclamation be squared with Beauvoir's admonition against inauthentic flight?

In this essay, I argue against an incompatibilist interpretation of Beauvoir and Wittig, as exemplified by Butler's 'Variations on Sex and Gender'. This interpretation depends on a particular reading of Beauvoir contra Sartre on freedom and transcendence that is contravened by much of the former's own writing. Accordingly, drawing on the work of Kate Kirkpatrick, I contend that Beauvoir leaves room for the *ontological freedom* to transcend one's sex. However, Beauvoir still provides the theoretical resources for a critique of Wittig through her existentialist ethics, and, in particular, her figure of "the passionate man" in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

01—what's the return policy on the transcendence of sex?

In *The Second Sex*'s introduction, Simone de Beauvoir cautions against the dangers of "inauthentic flight" in the face of patriarchal domination.[1] "Clearly", she writes, "no woman can claim without bad faith to be situated beyond her sex."

The book's most famous line–"one is not born, but rather becomes, woman"–appears a volume later.[2] The aphorism has a storied history of decontextualized recitation in support of varied, often conflicting, feminisms, each seeking a foundation in the authority of one of the movement's greatest thinkers. In 1981, Monique Wittig joined this history through the title of her essay *One is Not Born a Woman*. The essay turns Beauvoir against the category of sex,[3] a stark difference from American second-wave feminisms that read into the quote the hints of what would become the sex/gender distinction.[4]

The denaturalization of sex, guided by Wittig, leads naturally to the next question: what might we–ought we–*do* with it? For Wittig, the answer lies in

the "subjective, cognitive practice" of rendering the reality and experience of women, person by person, legible.[5]

> ...a new personal and subjective definition for all humankind can only be found beyond the categories of sex... the advent of individual subjects demands first destroying the categories of sex, ending the use of them.[6]

A lofty aim, and a tendentiously circular one, insofar as the pervasiveness of sex–whose reproduction we are continually conscripted in service of–may seem total. Or: how can the categories of sex be destroyed before the subjective frame has been established, as Wittig suggests is necessary? Tension with Beauvoir looms, as how can we, having already always been constructed as women and men, take ourselves to be beyond our sex?

Yet, defying the apparent impossibility of this task, Wittig has an exemplar of its realization:

> Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically.[7]

The Straight Mind, a talk Wittig gave three years earlier, reveals that her vision of sex transcendence as embodied by lesbianism is not (merely) aspirational, or a political rallying cry for other lesbian-feminists but, to some extent, a descriptive picture of lesbian lived experience:

> ... it would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, live with women, for "woman" has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems.[8]

Thus the apparent contradiction between Wittig's "'lesbian' is beyond the categories of sex" and Beauvoir's "no woman can claim to be situated beyond her sex" is resolved by Wittig's own most famous aphorism: *lesbians are not women*.

But this is too easy; Wittig's declaration does not make it so. Lesbians are not only gendered but coercively *re*gendered, subject to violence intended to reestablish them in their patriarchally ordained role: corrective rape, forced pregnancy, nonconsensual marriages, and so on: these enforcers of compulsory heterosexuality demonstrate that lesbians are not beyond their sex, at least if this is taken to mean that a Wittigian self-understanding as not-women relieves them of their subjugation under patriarchy. Furthermore, lesbians, especially white lesbians, have often been complicit in upholding the gender binary, self-abnegating for scraps of social acceptance.

Bluntly, if I ordered the transcendence of sex and *this* came in the mail, I'd be rather put out.

It is therefore easy to read Beauvoir and Wittig against each other, with Beauvoir presciently discounting, both in the introduction and later, in her chapter *The Lesbian*, what Wittig later endorses. In this essay, I explore this

reading, and the evidence for it, but argue it depends on a reading of Beauvoir that is not forced. Instead, revisiting Beauvoir and Sartre's concepts of *freedom and transcendence* through the work of Kate Kirkpatrick, I advance an alternate reading under which Beauvoir is read as endorsing an ontology that permits the transcendence of sex while emphasizing the importance of authenticity in this pursuit. In Beauvoir and Sartre's visions of freedom-as-transcendence, we find the paradoxical possibility of an immanent transcendence grounded not in disembodied imagining but embodied *re*imagining.

02—YOU HAVE A LINGERING ATTACHMENT TO BEING. I'M AFRAID IT'S TERMINAL.

Judith Butler's 'Variations on Sex and Gender' is one of the earliest readings of Beauvoir through Wittig. Butler dwells on *one becomes woman*, writing that, in light of "contemporary findings on the linguistic construction of personal agency"[9]—the implicit reference here is Foucault's critique of the Cartesian *cogito* as founded on a socially-ordained assumption of its own rationality[10], among others—that

> If Beauvoir's claim is to have cogency, if it is true that we "become" our genders through some kind of volitional and appropriative set of acts, then she must mean something other than an unsituated Cartesian act.[11]

A contrast is drawn here between Beauvoir and Sartre, whose commitment in *Being and Nothingness* to the ontological status of consciousness separate from the body is the subject of much scholarly debate. According to Butler, "Beauvoir does not so much refute Sartre as take him at his non-Cartesian best."[12] Or: Beauvoir makes concrete the Sartrean paradox between body as corporeal and body as the site of consciousness by reframing the tension not as between being "in" and "beyond" the body, but between the body as natural and the body as accultured.

> The movement from sex to gender is internal to embodied life, a sculpting of the original body into a cultural form. To mix Sartrian phraseology with Beauvoir's, we might say that to "exist" one's body in culturally concrete terms means, at least partially, to become one's gender.[13]

The tension here bears metaphysical significance, for if human existence is always gendered then "to stray outside of established gender is... to put one's very existence into question."[14] How is the destruction of sex to be carried out if the destruction of sex is also the destruction of the embodied self—since the self is always embodied, the self *simpliciter*? For Butler, it is not.

> The pursuit of disembodiment is necessarily deceived because the body can never really be denied; its denial becomes the condition of its emergence in alien form. Disembodiment becomes a way of existing one's body in the mode of denial.[15]

The use of the word *denial* here is significant; Beauvoir herself construes the claim to be situated beyond one's sex as a non-liberatory denial. The interpretation for Wittigian transcendence is made explicit in the remainder of the essay, as Butler describes Wittig's program as "profoundly humanistic in its call for an eradication of sex."[16] An implicit parallel connects Wittig and Sartre at his Cartesian worst, insofar as both are identified–Wittig, here, and Sartre, in Derrida's *The Ends of Man*–as symptomatic of a lingering attachment–or, more aptly, *aspiration*–to disembodied Being, and to Man.[17]

More concretely, the error Wittig makes is that the transcendence she envisions is still a binary relation. That 'lesbian' might be defined contra to the binary opposition between 'man' and 'woman' does not mean it surpasses binary oppositions altogether, for it risks founding itself in an opposition with heterosexuality. For Butler, lesbianism does *not* exist purely in opposition to heterosexuality[18]: as they argue in *Gender Trouble* lesbians engage in the 'perversion' of heterosexual roles through butchfemme dynamics.[19] In her attempts to transcend sex, "Wittig has entered into a utopian ground that leaves the rest of us situated souls waiting impatiently this side of her liberating imaginary space,"[20] and this utopian ground, unreasonably self-assured of its own possibility, finds itself to be merely the reterritorialization of the Cartesian.

Finally, Butler concludes.

> The political program for overcoming binary restrictions ought to be concerned, then, with cultural innovation rather than myths of transcendence.[21]

By complicating Wittig's simplistic portrayal of lesbianism as a "purification of homosexuality" and showing, by appeal to lesbian lived experience, that "numerous lesbian and gay discourses... are positioned in subversive or resignificatory relationships to heterosexual cultural configurations", Butler provides a necessary addition to Wittig's approach.[22]

Yet there is room for critique. The overarching attitude in 'Variations on Sex and Gender'–that the error of transcendence belongs to Sartre, and to Wittig, but the promise of cultural innovation belongs to Butler, Foucault, and to Beauvoir–carries with it readings of both *transcendence against innovation* and *freedom against transcendence*, and positions Beauvoir within those oppositions. Whether or not this is a reading Butler themself took—unlikely, and anyways unimportant—it thereby enters itself into conversation with debates over Beauvoir's attitudes on freedom and transcendence, not merely for those committed to exegetical fidelity–I have never managed to muster such a commitment–but for all those (and here I find myself numbered) who expect Beauvoir *has more to teach us*, we who are engaged in the transcendence of our sex.[23]

For, in the half-century since Wittig's *lesbians are not women*, it has proven as resonant as it has discordant with lesbian lived experience. Among my

friends are those who describe their gender as "lesbian", dykes that prefer the pronoun "he", butches and femmes who eschew the label "woman"–not to mention the infinite array of perversions and subversions of gender occurring both within and beyond the confines of lesbianism under the transgender umbrella. And among these people–many of whom are scattered across South Asia and subject to extreme forms of regendering that remain theoretical for those of us more privileged–as many find Butler's Foucauldian angle "inadequate to account for resistance and transformation"[24] as see Wittig's reading as impossible, or merely a reification of a new oppositional binary.

Must these all be, for Beauvoir, inauthentic flights? Or, for this myriad–united only in a shared self-identification with the project of transcending their sex–might she have more to say?

03—THE INNER AND REALIZING NEGATION IS ALWAYS A *RE*IMAGINARY FORCE

The answer to this question lies in what is meant by *freedom* and *transcendence*. If Sartre–here and elsewhere–is taken as synecdoche for the last gasps of humanism, with Beauvoir playing an antagonistic role, then revisiting their approach to these twin concepts may prove fruitful ground for troubling the Butlerian reading. This task is taken up by Kate Kirkpatrick in "Beauvoir and Sartre's 'disagreement about freedom'".

Kirkpatrick reviews Sartre's *The Imaginary* and *Being and Nothingness* alongside Beauvoir's *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, dispelling the myth that the pair's views on freedom can be neatly cleaved by the former's attachment to the Cartesian *cogito*. She begins by disambiguating three related but distinct theses about existentialist freedom:

> The *stoic freedom thesis*... whatever one's circumstances, one has inalienable metaphysical freedom to choose one's attitude in reaction to those circumstances.
>
> The *freedom-as-transcendence thesis*... consciousness realizes freedom through imagination and action–through different modes of apprehending and modifying the givens of the real.
>
> The *situated freedom thesis*...: whatever one's circumstances, one has inalienable metaphysical freedom to choose one's reaction to those circumstances, but not all situations confer the same power to exercise that freedom in action and to obtain the desired realization of your freedom.[25]

Of these, the second is particularly relevant. This sense of freedom is developed by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*, starting from his definition that "consciousness is a being such that in its being, its being is in question in so far as this being implies a being other than itself".[26] Consciousness is free because it carries the potential of the irreal, not merely the givens of the real;

this potential is the condition for action. This is not, however, to say that consciousness is free *from* situation: as Sartre writes in *The Imaginary*,

> ...the essential condition for a consciousness to imagine is that it be 'situated in the world'... It is the situation-in-the-world, grasped as a concrete and individual reality of consciousness, that is the motivation for the constitution of any irreal object whatever and the nature of that irreal object is circumscribed by this motivation.[27]

This is what Sartre has in mind when, in *Being and Nothingness*, he defines transcendence as "that inner and realizing negation which reveals the in-itself while determining the being of the for-itself."[28] Thus, though transcendence is founded upon imagination, it is not the disembodied imagination of a prediscursive self–as Butler emphasizes, if any such self exists, then it certainly cannot be observed–but the embodied reimagination of a self doing what it can with what has been done to it. In terms of sex, transcendence is found not in a retreat to a sexless androgyny (such a pursuit is inevitably doomed to recapture), but in the pursuit of reimagining what the sex coercively foisted upon you might mean, or be, or do, or want *instead*–where here the word *instead* necessitates a given to which the imagination is responding.[29]

But this is Sartre. What does Beauvoir think?

Kirkpatrick describes how revisionary approaches to the study of Sartre and Beauvoir–charitably motivated by the important need to distinguish Beauvoir as a philosopher in her own right–have led to the broad adoption of the incompatibilist view: Sartre embraced absolute freedom while Beauvoir pursued situated freedom, necessary for an existentialist feminism.

> One answer, advanced in Sonia Kruks' 'Simone de Beauvoir and the Limits to Freedom'... is that Sartre endorsed an 'absolute' or stoic freedom... whereas Beauvoir began to advance a different conception, 'situated freedom'... On Kruks' reading, Sartre understands the subject to be a "pure in-itself", whereas Beauvoir's view is closer to Merleau-Ponty's in that the subject is an "embodied consciousness, a socially situated and conditioned freedom".[30]

Kirkpatrick complicates this understanding, both by citing Sartre scholars who contend Sartre himself rejects the stoic freedom thesis in the final parts of *Being and Nothingness*, and by arguing that Beauvoir and Sartre in fact agreed about both the *freedom-as-transcendence thesis* and the *situated freedom thesis*, contrary to readings which deny Beauvoir the former and Sartre the latter. For instance, in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, Beauvoir writes that

> Only I can create the tie that unites me to the other. I create it from the fact that I am not a thing, but a project of self toward the other, a transcendence.[31]

The "tie" here is imagination, uniting us to the other through the process of interpretation. But interpretation is always *re*interpretation, for what, says Beauvoir, we transcend is ourselves.[32]

So Beauvoir is open to the possibility of transcendence. But this transcendence is not unencumbered; not only does she recognize, as does Sartre, that our situation bears on what we have the power to realize (see the *situated freedom thesis*), but for Beauvoir so do the intersubjective bonds of interdependence linking us. This is crucial, for these bonds are at the core of Beauvoir's existential ethics–and, as Kirkpatrick argues, the case for a divergence between Beauvoir and Sartre is much firmer on issues of *moral freedom*. In both *Pyrrhus and Cinéas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir emphasizes that though none can escape the condition of ontological freedom, *moral* freedom is not found alone. Thus Kirkpatrick's triplicate theses of freedom become a quadruplicate, with the fourth being the grounds for Beauvoir and Sartre's disagreement.

> Moral freedom, on Beauvoir's account, involves "willing oneself free"... One cannot will not to be free: each human consciousness is free and their freedom discloses being as it realizes itself. But one can fail to will oneself and others free—for example, by vainly desiring to be, to escape the cycle of transcendence, or by seeing the other merely as an object of my consciousness.[33]

Kirkpatrick's case that Sartre differs from Beauvoir on the *moral freedom thesis* turns on omission; in his early writings, Sartre rarely discusses moral freedom, and when he does, it is not as a basis for ethics (e.g. in *Existentialism is a Humanism*). This omission is noxious because, for Beauvoir, such omissions or deprioritizations of intersubjectivity will necessitate bad faith.

If Kirkpatrick is correct that these are the grounds for distinction between Sartre and Beauvoir–and I think she is–then to dispel the worry that the Wittigan vision contains the Sartrean error of stoic humanism, it is not enough to give an account of the transcendence of sex in ontological terms: we must examine its intersubjective dimensions. After all, the answer to the question of *what more Beauvoir has to tell us* depends on *us* as much as it does Beauvoir.

04—'LINED LIPS AND SPIKED BATS'; INTERSUBJECTIVITY AND MORAL FREEDOM

Girls Living Outside Society's Shit, or G.L.O.S.S., was a transfeminist punk rock band from Olympia, Washington. The introductory song of their demo–also including *Masculine Artifice*, *Lined Lips and Spiked Bats*, and *Give Violence a Chance,* among others–begins as follows:

> They told us we were girls
> How we talk, dress, look, and cry
> They told us we were girls
> So we claimed our female lives
> Now they tell us we aren't girls

Our femininity doesn't fit
We're fucking future girls
Living outside society's shit[34]

G.L.O.S.S. is not a collective of queer theorists–strictly speaking, it is not anything: the group, very fittingly, amicably separated immediately once offered a record deal–but their lyrics offer a concrete realization, in trans terms, of the conditions rendering autonomy possible according to poststructuralism, the aphorism *overdetermination is always underdetermination*.

Through raw shouts and guitar riffs, G.L.O.S.S. tells us, in not so many words, that gender is unstable from the start, already complicated by the host of contradictory meanings it collects. Gender is an expectation–how girls talk, dress, look, and cry–that can be left unmet, but also an inescapable curse, a biological necessity. It is in the liminal space generated by these contradictions, the "'remainder' or 'outside' which discursive production inevitably implies"[35], that they were able to exert autonomy over their gendered selves through transfemininity. Writes Thomas Busch: "because the symbolic law constitutes gendered identity through prohibition, the very 'reality' of the subject, in being 'normalized,' made 'coherent,' is produced as a repudiation.[36]

This is just to say that poststructuralist visions of freedom find resonance in queer life. But though this framing has been the dominant theoretical backdrop of queer studies, in recent years it has been joined by a resurgence of appeals to the language of phenomenological existentialism, old framings finding purchase in a new generation of lives under siege. These, and Wittig's discussions of lesbianism–provide ample material for examining projects of sex transcendence under the lens of Beauvoirian moral freedom.

The concept of *gender identity*, despite its status as the dominant social metaphysics of transness and gender nonconformity, is vulnerable to charges of essentialism.[37] Florence Ashley's *What Is It Like to Have a Gender Identity* attempts to formulate a non-essentialist account of gender identity through the use of existentialist and phenomenological language. According to Ashley, "gender identity is constituted by gender subjectivity through a process of phenomenological synthesis", "but this constitutive relationship is underdetermined."[38] This evokes, on one hand, Sartre's contention that "the motivation for the constitution of any irreal object" (here, gender identity) is the situation-in-the-world and, on the other, Beauvoir's insistence that "only I can create the tie that unites me to the other" (meaning is underdetermined–Beauvoir might say *un*determined–from situation).

Ashley, therefore, is formulating an account of gender identity that founds itself in freedom-as-transcendence as applied to sex. Yet, in a departure from Beauvoir, Ashley resists the use of the concept of "authenticity"[39]. That issues

of bad faith do not unwind ontological status–concretely, an inauthentic gender identity, based in resistance to one's freedom, is still, unfortunately, a gender identity–is a thesis with which Beauvoir would certainly agree. Instead, Ashley errs in the same vein as Sartre: through their omission.

Ashley's resistance to the language of authenticity is more than reasonable: transfeminine people have long been subjected to accusations of being uniquely reductionist about femininity and womanhood. Interrogations of "authenticity"–ironically themselves conducted in bad faith–have therefore been used to justify violence and persecution. Nonetheless, by neglecting issues of moral freedom in the transcendence of sex as entirely inseparable from the fact of ontological freedom, Ashley divorces their project from Beauvoir's maxim that "our freedoms support each other like stones in an arch."[40] Their error, then, is retreating from the concept of authenticity wholesale, rather than demanding, as Beauvoir–and transfeminists–do, that it is applied in good faith, and to *everyone*–cis and trans alike.[41]

In 'On Bad Faith and Authenticity: Rethinking Genderless Subjectivity', Megan Burke provides an alternate approach, outlining a "reading of agender and genderless first-person avowals [that] underscores their ethical significance."[42] Burke, like us, is concerned with Beauvoir's charge that "no woman can claim without bad faith to be situated beyond her sex." Writing against a complete abnegation of authenticity, however, they reflect on the need for feminist interrogations of gender identity that start by taking first-person avowals seriously:

> It is not that [feminist suspicions and critiques of genderlessness] [need] to be replaced with an embrace of all genderless claims. It is that the suspicion should not amount to an outright dismissal of authentic first-person avowals.[43]

Throughout, Burke retains a commitment to the importance of Beauvoir's charge of bad faith, on the grounds that such a charge can constitute a necessary insistence on the importance of the ethical dimensions of one's gendered meaning-crafting. Self-expressions of gender are meaningful not merely because they explain one's past experience, but because of the commitment they imply–in Beauvoir's terms, because they are framed in terms of moral freedom, not merely ontological freedom-as-transcendence. Drawing on Talia Mae Bettcher's framework of first-person avowals, Burke writes that

> ...the first-person avowal is an ethical disclosure because it is a deep existential and social claim... by refusing the socially mandated avowal of genital-gender status... a trans person discloses something about their self that bears social and personal significance that affects and shapes their existence and relations with others.[44]

Thus, Burke–directly breaking with Ashley and other liberal approaches to gender identity–centers the importance of authenticity in radical politics.

> Authenticity must secure and care for the intersubjective bond... Indeed, from the perspective of *The Second Sex*, authenticity is utterly significant to undoing the social bonds of patriarchal servitude.[45]

Moral freedom is not to will oneself free atomistically: the recognition of intersubjectivity, of the fact that our freedom is intertwined with that of those around us–that "it cannot be realized alone"[46]–requires that we will others free, that we treat the other "as a freedom so that [her] end may be freedom."[47] This, in all things, and so too in the transcendence of sex.

05—THE PASSIONATE MAN; DEGENDERING AS WOMANHOOD'S COUNTERNARRATIVE

Returning, at the end, to Wittig's transcendence of sex. Under the reading of Beauvoir developed here, the important question is not the ontological possibility of lesbian non-womanhood–such possibility is indeed an inescapable burden–but whether or not Wittig's vision engenders moral freedom through its acknowledgement of the intersubjective bond.

The Ethics of Ambiguity is, in large part, a phone book for residents of the existentialist dilemma. Beauvoir sketches a series of responses in bad faith to the tension of moral freedom, beginning with the sub-man, the serious man, and the nihilist. None of these pose significant danger for Wittig. But the next two–*the adventurer* and *the passionate man*–require our focus: these more closely resemble Wittig at her worst. Describing the former, Beauvoir writes:

> The man we call an adventurer... is one who remains indifferent to the content, that is, to the human meaning of his action, who thinks he can assert his own existence without taking into account that of others... he dishonestly refuses to recognize that this subjectivity necessarily transcends itself toward others.[48]

Is Wittig indifferent to the human meaning of her action? Is her understanding of the transcendence of sex an assertion of her existence without taking in account that of others? When Wittig writes that the problem of woman is one "that the lesbians do not have because of a change of perspective", this might seem a reasonable worry. But it is the opposite: like Beauvoir, Wittig thinks transcendence is necessary precisely *because* of how it bears on others:

> If we, as lesbians and gay men, continue to speak of ourselves and to conceive of ourselves as women and as men, we are instrumental in maintaining heterosexuality.[49]

Recall, for Wittig, that heterosexuality–synonymous with categories of sex–proscribe the "new personal and subjective definition for all humankind"[50] to

which she aspires. For Wittig, therefore, it is reflexive appeals to *womanhood* that render lesbian genders a project in bad faith.

But this reveals a second danger: that Wittig views lesbian non-womanhood as enforced by the conditions of patriarchy. If, à la Burke, the Beauvoirian position is that avowals of gender describe deep existential commitments, then viewing a rejection of womanhood as the *only* way to face the definition of womanhood enforced by patriarchy is not an authentic act; instead, it resembles Beauvoir's description of the passionate man:

> [In] the passionate man... too there is a sketch of the synthesis of freedom and its content. But... it is subjectivity which fails to fulfill itself genuinely... The passionate man makes himself a lack of being not that there might *be* being, but in order to be.[51]

The danger of embodying the passionate man is made relevant by Wittig's lapses into attitudes that might seem rather fatalistic:

> ...one feature of lesbian oppression consists precisely of making women out of reach for us, since women belong to men. Thus a lesbian has to be something else, a not-woman, a not-man...[52]

One interpretation of Wittig here is that womanhood is *denied* to lesbians by patriarchy, and that lesbians ought to embrace non-womanhood because it is the only way to realize their subjectivity under these conditions. Under this reading, it is difficult to read Wittig as fulfilled in her subjectivity. However, I choose–whether in bias or charity–to read Wittig less fatalistically. Here, Wittig is not mourning the "impossibility" of her womanhood but arguing that, because lesbian ways of living are not described by the discourse of heterosexuality, instability is generated that can inspire new authentic gendered self-understandings–self-understandings that, for Wittig, are joyful in their liberatory potential.

If Wittig errs, therefore, it is in her struggle to imagine why and how a lesbian might authentically choose her womanhood, and how such a choice—especially if made by those for whom patriarchy is eager to degender: trans women, Black women, intersex women, and so on—can contribute to the destabilization of heterosexuality. The most generous reading is that this is evidence that lesbian non-womanhood, for Wittig, *did* fulfill her subjectivity. Nonetheless, if Butler's critique that Wittig engages in a "purification" of lesbianism holds weight under the Beauvoirian reading I have constructed, this is how: not on grounds of ontology or any commitment to the prediscursive, but by a universalization that sabotages Wittig's thoroughgoing commitment to the intersubjective bond. Wittig's mistake is not Sartre's, but her own.

NOTES

[1] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 2.
[2] Ibid, 576.
[3] Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman", 11.
[4] In *What Is a Woman,* Toril Moi argues that "English language critics have read Beauvoir's 1949 essay through the lens of the 1960s sex/gender distinction", failing to appreciate its relation to the body. "In short," Moi writes, "'one is not born, but rather becomes a woman' has been sorely misunderstood by contemporary feminists" (5).
[5] Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman", 19.
[6] Ibid, 19.
[7] Ibid, 20.
[8] Wittig, "The Straight Mind", 32.
[9] Butler, "Variations on Sex and Gender", 129.
[10] Foucault, *Madness and History*, 141-144.
[11] Butler, "Variations on Sex and Gender", 129.
[12] Ibid, 130.
[13] Ibid, 131.
[14] Ibid, 132.
[15] Ibid, 133.
[16] Ibid, 136.
[17] This is not an idle comparison: in *Gender Trouble*, Butler comments that Wittig "places herself here within the traditional discourse of the philosophical pursuit of presence... in distinction from a Derridean position" (160).
[18] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 165.
[19] Ibid, 43.
[20] Butler, "Variations on Sex and Gender", 136.
[21] Ibid, 137.
[22] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 165.
[23] In 'Simone de Beauvoir and Lesbian Lived Experience', Meryl Altman writes about her "deep suspicion" of Beauvoir. Her attitude was far from unique–"lesbian feminists have found Beauvoir's lesbian chapter problematic since the 1970s"–but Altman has come to rethink it (209). Her essay presents a modest claim: "simply that it is worthwhile [as a lesbian] to read Beauvoir" (229).
[24] Busch, "Jean-Paul Sartre and Judith Butler", 55.
[25] Kirkpatrick, "Beauvoir and Sartre's 'disagreement about freedom'", 4.
[26] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, lxii.
[27] Sartre, *The Imaginary*, 185.
[28] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 180.
[29] Echoes of the rejection of this "retreat" are found in the preference for the word *retransition* instead of *detransition* by some who (seem to) revert to their 'original' gender identities and presentations. For them, there is no return, because there was no self prior to its capacity to imagine itself; aspiring to embody that self is a project in bad faith.
[30] Kirkpatrick, "Beauvoir and Sartre's 'disagreement about freedom'", 5.
[31] Beauvoir, *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, 93.
[32] Ibid, 138.
[33] Kirkpatrick, "Beauvoir and Sartre's 'disagreement about freedom'", 9.
[34] G.L.O.S.S., "G.L.O.S.S. (We're from the Future)" on Demo 2015.
[35] Busch, "Jean-Paul Sartre and Judith Butler", 56.
[36] Ibid, 55.
[37] See Hernandez & Bell's "Much Ado About Nothing: Unmotivating "Gender Identity'": "trans people are often expected to explain ourselves to cis people in terms of an essential,

medicalized gender identity—even when that language draws on a problematic history and elides, misrepresents, or flattens the way we understand ourselves."

[38] Ashley, "What Is It like to Have a Gender Identity?", 1053-1054.

[39] Ibid, 1055.

[40] Kirkpatrick, "Beauvoir and Sartre's 'disagreement about freedom'", 8.

[41] It is important to say that trans people are already subject to outsized scrutiny regarding their lived genders; for them, inauthenticity poses a *hermeneutical overabundance problem*. Therefore, the transfeminist project is interested in 'turning the tables'; Ding, for example, in "The Cisgender Tipping Point", writes "instead of scratching our heads all day over why and how trans people are trans, I ask why and how cis people believe they are not" (1).

[42] Burke, "On Bad Faith and Authenticity", 87.

[43] Ibid, 89.

[44] Ibid, 98.

[45] Ibid, 103.

[46] Kirkpatrick, "Beauvoir and Sartre's 'disagreement about freedom'", 8.

[47] Ibid, 9.

[48] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 61-63.

[49] Wittig, "The Straight Mind", 30.

[50] Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman", 19.

[51] Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 63.

[52] Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman", 13.

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