

Emily Cousens on the Materialist Trans Feminist Potential in Wittig's Non-Fiction

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You are listening to the Hopkins Press podcast. I am Rahne Alexander, the publicist for Hopkins Press Journals.

Today we are talking with Emily Cousens who is an assistant professor of politics and international relations at Northeastern University London and their expertise focuses on trans feminist philosophy and history. They are also the UK lead for the Digital Transgender Archive. They are the author of *Trans Feminist Epistemologies in the US Second Wave* which is the first book to explore the philosophical and intellectual contributions of trans individuals in the 1970s.

Emily's got a new article in *L'Esprit Créateur* called "Subjectivity Without Sex: The Materialist Trans Feminist Potential in Monique Wittig's Non-fiction." This is part of a whole special issue of *L'Esprit Créateur* devoted to Monique Wittig and the whole issue is available free to all because *L'Esprit Créateur* is part of our new Subscribe to Open Open Access initiative. Click through in the show notes to learn more about this great new initiative and especially to read some exciting new scholarship about Monique Wittig.

And with that, let's welcome Emily Cousens to the Hopkins Press Podcast.

Well, thank you Emily for joining me on the Hopkins Press Podcast. Would you mind introducing yourself to the listeners?

Emily Cousens

Sure. And yeah, thank you, Rahne, so much for inviting me on this podcast as well. My name is Emily Cousens, and I'm assistant professor in politics and international relations at Northeastern University, London. And I'm a queer non-binary philosopher who works across feminism, queer theory, and trans studies. So it's really exciting to be in dialogue with you as someone who also shares my fascination with Monique Wittig and is also interested in exploring her visions and ambitions through a trans feminist lens. So thank you for having me.

Rahne Alexander

Yeah, it's very exciting. Your article, when I saw it come through my new issue alerts, I was very excited. I can always read about Monique Wittig. She was so important to me coming up as a trans person, as a trans feminist especially. I went directly to it and I was so glad that you wanted to have this conversation. Maybe we should do a little background for those who may not know so much. Who was Monique Wittig and how did you come to study her?

Emily Cousens

Sure. Well, I can say briefly a little bit about how I first came to study Wittig, as I think this is something which is kind of common for her cohort, if we want to use that word, of second wave feminist. She's someone whose reputation sort of precedes her somewhat, and I think that my introduction to her probably has quite a lot in common with how a lot of fellow millennial feminists and other queer people first encountered Wittig.

So I was first introduced to her when I was an MA student early on in the gender studies MA that I was doing, which at the time was still called women's studies. We had a week on "What is a woman" where we were either set Wittig's famous 1980 essay "The Straight Mind" or it was discussed in a lecture; and this is an essay which ends with the line "Lesbians are not women." So this kind of set my mind alive. I didn't know at that point who or what I was at that stage in terms of having any kind of assured identity, and I didn't identify as a lesbian, but certainly "woman" was something that I didn't feel like I was and had never wanted to be. So the idea I understood from Wittig that heterosexuality was a particularly womanizing enterprise and therefore not all of those who are born into the promise that they will become women, i.e. people who have been assigned female at birth, will do so. It suddenly felt like a whole world of possibility opening. So essentially kind of as a non-binary person without the language available then, it said to me that there are other people than men who aren't women and that kind of felt enormous at the time. And Judith Butler has put it much more eloquently than I just have when they recall that they recall their own sense of epistemic gravity lifting when they first heard that line that "lesbians are not women" for the first time.

Rahne Alexander

So generative and definitely a piece that really opened me up especially in line with Simone de Beauvoir's one you know, "becoming a woman"

Emily Cousens

Yeah, 100%, and you know to kind of follow up on the initial question, you know, who is this Monique Wittig, who was behind one of the most provocative and to this day generative sentences on the 1970s. I can say a little bit about her if that would be useful.

Rahne Alexander

Sure!

Emily Cousens

So she was a French lesbian feminist activist philosopher and novelist. Some of her key influences you just mentioned was Simone de Beauvoir, and also Marxism. She's often kind of associated with the Marxist tradition and materialist feminism. And while she started publishing fiction in the 1960s, most of her non-fiction was written in the late 1970s and the 1980s. So for some classifications, this would make her a second wave feminist. She also gets classified as a Marxist feminist and as a radical feminist. And I think it's also important to add that she was a white lesbian feminist. And this is a philosophical attribution, given that she didn't theorize race or racism at all in her non-fiction, but instead kind of relies on racism allegorically to demonstrate quite how severe white women's oppression was. I think there's no doubt that she was a visionary thinker and writer. Her essays are incredibly succinct

yet they sort of draw on classical political philosophy, Lacanian thinking, Marxism, literary theory in order to establish a critique of heterosexuality as a political and economic system that needs to be abolished. And she argues that in the process the categories of sex, i.e. male and female, will be abolished too. So there's a kind of similarity here with Marx for whom, you know, when capitalism withers away the distinction between owner of production and worker or capitalist and bourgeoisie will dissolve as well. For Wittig, so too with heterosexuality and the categories of sex, male and female. So I've always been quite hooked by the radical transformative visions that radical feminists like Wittig were developing: an end to patriarchy and heterosexuality, to men and women, cis men and cis women anyway in their kind of coercive senses is all in one short essay. Sign me up!

However, kind of what I'm what I'm sort of more interested now in in exploring and what the article subjectivity without sex seeks to do is to investigate a bit more deeply what goes untheorized in her work and what we can learn from that as well. And race and colonialism are one aspect of this and transsexuality is another. And I think if we ask questions about who is included in her vision and who is not; or more specifically kind of whose histories are imagined and whose are elided we quickly see that there's a sort of ethnic and cultural egoism that her visions and analysis depend on. And I think that this is important because what she is calling for, so the abolition of western sex-gender epistemes, remains for many of us really appealing. But I think we can kind of learn a lot about the promises and pitfalls in contemporary arguments for abolition if we also attend to what gets missed out in thinkers like Wittig who on the surface make a lot of compelling arguments.

Rahne Alexander

So I came to feminist theory in the late 80s and early 90s when I became an undergraduate and I was also at that same time coming to terms with my own trans identities as well. And so really doing this double project of trying to think about how to be a trans woman and how to be a trans feminist woman. And this was at a time when the idea of trans feminism didn't really exist as kind of an idiom the way that it does now. And of course you're putting it in the title of your of your piece here. Can you maybe talk a little bit about how you define trans feminism and what that all entails?

Emily Cousens

Definitely. So I think this is a really good question and it's still a question that I'm kind of thinking through. I think the definition of trans feminism remains up for grabs and in some ways this is why it's such an exciting political and philosophical area. Attempts have of course been made to define it, some kind of very important and very generative.

So we've got Emi Koyama, in her famous "Transfeminist Manifesto" from 2001, offers a very political definition of trans feminism as a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond. And I think this is an important reminder that trans feminism needs to be at its core led by and kind of prioritize trans women. And Koyama later adds that it's also open to other queers, intersex people, trans men, non-trans women, non-trans men, and others who are sort of sympathetic to the needs of trans women and consider their alliance with trans women to be essential for their own liberation.

However, what liberation means in this instance, I think, still needs to be defined, especially as it exceeds the understandings that traditional feminist movements have advanced for their understandings of what liberation might be.

Marquis Bey does some of this philosophical work essentially arguing that trans feminism is liberation from what they call the genre of the binary. And for Marquis Bey, trans feminism is necessarily a Black feminist project because the structures of racial categorization and dehumanization on the one hand and the structures of gender categorization and dehumanization on the other hand converge. So for Bey, Blackness and transness are both paraontological and thus can be and must lead us somewhere beyond the violent regimes of the western normal.

But I kind of tend to think of this question of trans feminism as you know very much still a question of what does trans do to feminism? Feminism itself is a vexed political project with an exceedingly troubled history. We know that there are lots of really despicable forms of feminism. So trans-exclusionary radical feminism is the most obvious current one. But there are long histories too of imperial feminism, white feminism, anti-sex work feminism, carceral feminism which point to the fact that feminism itself is a very ambivalent category to build one's political project around. It's also one that is very readily recognized. So, for example, in the name of feminism, the rights and autonomy of migrants and trans people, sex workers, racialized men, racialized women, to name just a few, have all been disregarded. And there's also lots of trans people who have identified as feminists who failed to make their projects intersectional or radical at all and instead appealed to liberal feminism in order to secure certain protections for certain, i.e., white, middle-class, employed, heterosexual-identified trans women whilst happily throwing under the bus trans people who are poor, racialized, sex workers and unhoused. And this is stuff that's kind of come out of my archive research and I talk about elsewhere.

So in some senses, I think there's a bit of a question around, you know, why would we want to connect trans liberation with feminism? And there is a history of many leading trans liberationists like Sylvia Rivera and Angela Douglas in the US who very much kind of worked outside of and resisted feminism. But you know more positively for me I do want to hold on to trans feminism as a kind of political project and for me trans modifies feminism in urgent and significant ways. So for me trans feminism is a political and philosophical project which takes as elementary the fact that people can and do change and which seeks to fight for the conditions that will support this basic human capacity. So this includes housing, healthcare, income, environmental stability and trans feminism then needs to be open-ended about what kind of future worlds will emerge when people are allowed to change and to continue to do so without fear, repression, violence, etc. And trans feminism I think also needs to recognize and you know start from the basic point that the devaluation of femininity is central to the violent regimes of the normal and that gender as well is a kind of foundational violence for all subjects.

And then in my kind of research and in my work, I take trans feminism to also have this kind of epistemological or kind of philosophical aspect which understands that how we come to know things. So, you know, what we think about as knowledge is inseparable from embodiment. Therefore, self-authorization is central to trans feminism as is a recognition of what we might call "lay knowledges." Those quote-

unquote “non-expert knowledges” which are nonetheless grounded in the knowledge that derives from experience. So in this sense, trans feminism has a lot in common with Black feminism, which is also a theory of knowledge and a critique of universalisms. For example, the idea that there's anything that's true of one category and also that such truth could, you know, be deduced from the conceptual apparatus of Western academia.

Rahne Alexander

Thank you for that wonderful, wonderful definition. So your article explores the limitations of Wittig's writings and offers some suggestions on how she could have perhaps taken steps further. You've already alluded to some of these things. On one hand, you identify implicit racism in Wittig's work and on another you identify as “transition phobia,” which I assume is different than transphobia. Can you maybe talk a little bit about how these limits were revealed and what it means for a trans feminist inquiry into this foundation?

Emily Cousens

Yeah, that's a super helpful question. So, I can start by outlining what I see as the trans feminist potential in Wittig's writing and then discuss where I think it falls short in terms of her racism and unchecked transition phobia. And I'm kind of taking “transition phobia” to be a bit more of a sort of unconscious implicit premise that transition can't happen or it shouldn't happen. So elsewhere this has been called “egg theory” by Grace Lavery and it's different to transphobia because it doesn't necessarily manifest as hatred towards or violence towards trans people. It's rather more of a kind of foundational understanding of what is possible for oneself and others. So the idea that kind of transition is impossible rather than the idea that kind of trans people are not like you, and also worthy subjects of disdain or violence. But in terms of the trans feminist potential in Wittig's writing, I do think that her non-fiction offers a lot of conceptual and political tools for thinking beyond cis-het-normativity and many queer, trans and non-binary writers have taken her work in this spirit.

So Wittig calls the structure which produces men and women as men and women “the straight mind.” However, as the philosopher Katherine Costello has highlighted, the straight mind is also the cis-hetero mind. And this is because, you know, a revolution away from heterosexuality and heteronormativity is also away a revolution away from kind of cis men and cis women, because these categories only make sense within the logic of the straight mind. And you know, we can take lines like the following from Wittig which are very ripe I think for trans feminist theory theorizing.

So she writes that a new personal and subjective definition for all humankind can only be found beyond the categories of sex and those are woman and man and that the advent of individual subjects demands first destroying the categories of sex, and ending them, the use of them and rejecting all sciences which still use these categories as their fundamentals. So you know this is a kind of clear argument for what might be called sex abolition, but could also be called gender abolition. And she's also clear that gender is an enforced division of a more fundamental humanity, what she terms the division of being through language. And also for Wittig's lesbian feminism, she really invests in this lesbian as a kind of category of gender without identity and the sort of insurgent category that's going to kind of take us to the

beyond heteronormativity, beyond cisnormativity. She defines a lesbian as a not-woman and not-man, and therefore this is the kind of conceptual container that holds the keys to the gender-free future that I think she's arguing for.

And you know, whilst this might be a trans feminist future for some, particularly for white non-binary subjects for whom escaping gender signifies liberation, given the historical and ongoing degendering of racialized bodies, this is a very different question for non-white bodies. And it raises lots of questions that I think are pertinent to understanding the potential limitations both of Wittig's revolutionary theory and gender abolitionist projects more broadly.

So there's one telling line in Wittig's essay which is in one is not born a woman where she writes that at least for a woman wanting to become a man proves that she has escaped her initial programming but even if she would like to, with all her strength she cannot become a man.

So when I read this line I sort of was like. "What does this mean? Does it mean that trans men don't or can't or shouldn't exist?" And I don't think that's necessarily the case. Wittig might be using quite a narrow definition of man here as a very relational category that's characterized by what that category signifies in language rather than a kind of felt relationship to masculinity in the male body and also a very kind of economic definition of man defined by its relationship to the heterosexual economy. You know, if relationships to categories such as masculinity, male, femininity, female are, you know, the very basis of transgendered knowledges. And so therefore, this kind of suddenly reads as a very disembodied project. And then Wittig goes on to explain that becoming a man would demand not only a man's external appearance, but also his consciousness as well. And then she writes that this is the consciousness of one who disposes by right of at least two natural slaves during his lifespan. So I think this is a kind of really important section for sort of understanding what gets missed out in Wittig's argument, and I think, you know, what we sort of see here is that she essentializes masculine consciousness as just defined by the domination and degradation of women as wives and mothers. And such a comment then does a number of different things. It highlights the implicit whiteness of her arguments, because she is representing women as uniquely stripped of subjectivity and men as the kind of internally dominating class. But this, you know, completely sidelines the history of white women's domination over non-white men from her analysis of kind of oppression and the problem of the straight mind.

And then Wittig also gets herself into another bind, I think, which is that the category of man is both presented as a kind of ontological fiction. So you know categories of sex don't really exist, but also an ontological absolute, right? If transition is impossible then, you know, no woman, lesbian or otherwise, cis or not, regardless of force or depth of desire can become a man. So I think this is where we sort of see the prohibition on transition that kind of buttresses her arguments. I think this is a kind of an example of what Grace Lavery talks about as "egg theory," because it's premised on the impossibility of transition, or at least, you know, transition can't happen until after the revolution has taken place, which for the viability of her philosophy to our current moment I think is the same. So yeah, essentially I sort of think that her arguments regarding the category of sex have some key oversights. First, that, you know, to become a lesbian is not to become a man or woman and

then the important trans feminist horizon of enabling these categories of sex is signified differently is elided. And then also this foreclosure of the possibility of felt categories of sex being anything other than imaginary actually sort of reinforces the structure of cissexism itself, which grants the sexed body, or for Wittig sex classes, a reality that can't be materialized differently in the here and now.

And yeah, I think that Wittig's analysis then is also ahistorical, which is that Wittig on the one hand, it's oppression that creates the categories of sex. But Wittig stops before asking the necessary historical, psychoanalytic, and philosophical questions about where oppression comes from. Recently, scholars like Jamey Jespersion have done some of this historical work through looking at the colonial histories of trans misogyny. But I think that you know if we're going to think about you know, where does the categories of sex come from in the first place, then you know this is a different question about the history and even the metaphysics of patriarchy which Wittig's work kind of opens up the possibility of, but doesn't actually get to.

Rahne Alexander

I think what I enjoy about critique and discovering the limits of those influential people who came before me is that I tend to see an opportunity to take it from here I can take this forward. You know, I don't think that we could have Emi Koyama without Wittig. I don't think we could have had Grace Lavery without Wittig. And if it wasn't Wittig, it would have been somebody else, right? So where do you think we go from here? And do you think Wittig's work will continue to have more to say to us as we move along?

Emily Cousens

Yeah, I love that way of putting it, and I think that our kind of intellectual debt to what we might want to call for better or worse, you know, "feminist foremothers" is often alluded, I think, you know, the way that kind of citation practices work, I think that, you know, there's a deep misogyny built into citation practices where second wave feminists very much, very quickly become part of critical citational practices and actually the sort of what we can take from their work gets elided. And yeah, certainly I'm kind of very much attracted to people and thinkers who had, you know, revolutionary visions and got a lot right and also got a lot wrong.

Right now we're living in very scary times and we are really seeing the failures of kind of liberalism and centrist and reformist politics at the moment where you know parties will throw anyone under the bus for a vote. That's a situation in the UK at least. And I think writers like Wittig encourage us to ask really big questions, you know, what does structural change look like? What does a revolution in the way that we live our lives, our bodies, and our relationships look like? And how are gender and sexuality central to this?

At the moment, it's acutely apparent in how intertwined race and gender are. As countries like the UK, where I'm based, are increasingly moving to increase the borders of the nation or kind of secure the borders of the nation through frankly shockingly normalized xenophobia. And in doing so they are also seeking to shore up the categories of sex which Wittig so cogently argued against. So I think we can take Wittig's arguments that the categories of sex, male and female, are political categories to understand what political functions they are serving at the moment.

When schools in the UK are being banned from teaching gender identity and required to present gender identity trans people and non-binary people as ideological, I think we can once again kind of inquire with Wittig into the nature of this ideology and I think you know for Wittig she might say that on some level the fascists are correct and that, you know, the categories of sex male and female most profoundly so are ideological. They sure capitalism, the nuclear family, reproductive labor, and the nation and so I think Wittig, you know, would say that there is something counterhegemonic to trans and non-binary identities and, you know, what is the ideology that trans and non-binary people conjure well a change the breaking down of borders, bodies as autonomous and changeable and I think these ideas pose a clear threat to categorical discreteness and the fixity of identity that you know western hegemony has relied on. So I think with philosophers like Wittig, we need to ask big and paradigm-shifting questions. You know, what is the world we want? How will we get there? And I do think that we need to understand how structures can be resisted and abolished. And patriarchy and heterosexuality are among these. I think it's a telling perhaps fact of lesbian feminist, Black feminist, trans feminist thought that these insights and visions are often taken to be particular and only really relevant to say trans women or Black women. Whereas actually the alternative ontologies that and you know the alternative visions and worlds that these knowledges advance offer wide ranging insights into violence, resistance and survival which we can't go without. I like the boldness of Wittig and, you know, I like the fact that even just as a writer there are so many sentences that you can kind of take and do so much thinking and work with.

Rahne Alexander

Well thank you so much for this conversation today. Is there anything else you'd like to add? And would you like to talk a little bit about what else you're working on these days?

Emily Cousens

Yes, I can talk about a few different projects that I'm working on at the moment. So over the past 10 years, my work has had two dimensions. The first is rereading radical feminists like Wittig for its persistent insights as well as kind of better theorizing the basis for its sometimes overt, sometimes more implicit whiteness and transphobia. And then the second is looking at how trans community print culture, so newsletters, journals, magazines from the 1960s to 1980s express deeply embodied and embedded insights on what it means to live a sex and gendered life which deserve to be fed into academic understandings of gender and sexuality.

Sometimes these conversations were explicitly in dialogue with or intended to inform academic understandings, but they were also often kind of shared with the purpose of community knowledge generation. I think that these are important both historically and philosophically. So out of this I have a few articles in motion. I've published some of this with my colleague I know Aino Pihlak. She's an amazing trans historian at the University of Toronto. And in motion is an article on the theorizations of the category of sex in these journals, especially the adoption and resignification of clinical ideas like bisexuality to refer to what it feels like to be trans.

And another is on trans community print culture as a portal beyond cisnormativity. And this one kind of offers a bit of a history of the development of trans community

periodicals and the sort of genre conventions that took hold, including forced feminization letters in Victorian fashion and housekeeping journals and magazines alongside the genre of the confessional case study which was emerging as a viable, although of course decidedly mediated, site of trans self-authorization in sexology.

And I've got an article on the effective legacy of lesbian separatism which is in publication at the moment and that essentially kind of looks at the history of lesbian separatism trans investment in the movement and kind of what happens when we imagine that there is something in cis masculinity that can be identified and externalized. So it takes up a few of the same questions that that I have raised in Wittig's work as well.

Bookwise, I'm bringing the archive research and theorizing together in a book called *TV Theory*. This is quite a big project though. So in order to probably engage with the effective dimensions of conversations in print, I'm currently doing a course with queer feminist psychoanalysts Anne Pellegrini and Avgi Saketopoulou to better kind of understand the unconscious and less categorically mediated articulations of gender. And I want to understand how gender is a trauma formation for all of us and also a site of oppression, negotiation and disavowal, and to be able to more aptly theorize the social significance of this.

And then more practically, I'm working with KJ Rawson on starting a UK base for the Digital Transgender Archive as much UK trans history remains uncataloged or inaccessible to the community as well as inaccessible to researchers internationally. And I myself have been guilty of overrelying on American archives for my own trans historical knowledge construction because there is this kind of big tradition of archiving, collecting and donating in America. Especially through universities which isn't kind of paralleled in in the UK. So it means we've got you know many more stories of American transcestors than we do of people in the UK. So that's one of the next things that I'm doing is essentially doing the work of providing a base for the DTA in the UK which will start to digitize and make accessible UK trans historical documents and collections.

Rahne Alexander

Wonderful. Yay. This is so much to look forward to. Well, thank you so much for your time today.

Emily Cousens

Thank you. Thank you, Rahne. It's been lovely talking to you.

Rahne Alexander

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