

The strange case of French feminism.

*Blurring the line of feminist epistemology:
a materialist questioning of the sex/gender system.*

Grazia Dicanio



**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Philosophy in
Gender Studies**

Centre for Gender Studies

University of Oslo

Blindern, Norway

May 2019

Abstract

This study originates from the urgency to reflect on theory and epistemology in the light of a divide between academia and political movements. The study was thought out as an attempt to interrupt the chrono-logic cycle of *old theory* vs. *new theory* or *theory* vs. *post-theory* and possibly re-constructing a bridge to re-establish a contact with a stigmatized past in feminist genealogy and epistemology identified with the 1970s. My analysis revolves around French feminism as a theory by looking at how it was received, appropriated and, as some would say, invented. What makes a theoretical strand? Is there a French feminist genealogy we did not know of? What kind of epistemological stance does this genealogy advocate for? And what are the consequences of an appropriation? To try and answer these questions I take into account three of the most important French materialist theorists and delineate a theoretical path in French feminism that is almost totally unknown or misconstrued in our institutionalized feminist epistemology. A constant question I have in the back of my mind while writing is: who has and has had the primacy to establish a mainstream genealogy in feminist studies? And what has this done with our, personal and political, knowledge of the sex/gender system from different points of view?

Acknowledgements

Thanks to STK and Helene Aarseth for giving me the opportunity to do this research.

To the little boy who knows my name and the girl who brought music into my life, my home and shelter, my son and wife, Theodor and Hedda: may we spend our lives together reframing the world.

To Bjørn and Beate thanks for your support.

A mia madre e mio padre che inconsapevolmente mi hanno resa la ricercatrice che sono, anche quando non scrivo. A mia sorella, mio fratello e Dominic.

Alle mie sorelle della politica: Antonella e Piera.

A tutte quelle persone che ho incrociato e che, incrociandomi, mi hanno toccata e si sono lasciate toccare.

A, Giulia, Rosi Giulia, Marta, Luki, le Desiderandae, Natacha, i Quaderni Viola, Audre, Gloria, Pomarico, Bari, Bologna, Londra, Parigi, Oslo, Anja ecc...

A tutte le attiviste che prima di me, con me e dopo di me hanno instancabilmente cercato di produrre conoscenza per amore della stessa.

To the people in that strange, strange place we call the cave but it's more like a dungeon...thanks for inspiring me and for sometimes enduring long conversations on heavy stuff! You are fierce!

This work is dedicated to all of you out there who, like me, are constantly consumed with some kind of question about existence.

“Poetry is not only a dream and vision: it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.”
(Audre Lorde) ...goes for theorizing as well!

Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgments.....	iii
Table of contents.....	v
1 Introduction.....	1
1.1 Defining and delimiting concepts. A glossary.	9
1.1.1. Historical materialism.	10
1.1.2. Materialist feminism – from Marxism to feminist materialism.	10
1.1.3. Additive approach and holistic approach.	10
1.1.4. Marxist feminism and radical feminism.	11
2 First Thread.	12
2.1. Feminism in France: social and theoretical agents.	12
2.2. Psych et Po and its role in the Women’s liberation movement.	14
2.3. Questions Feministes.	20
2.4. Difference feminism and Materialist feminism.	23
3 Second Thread.	26
3.1. The appropriation or invention of a theory.	26
3.2. Genealogy interrupted. Rebuilding the bridge?	37
4 Third Thread.	46
4.1. Key theorists of French materialist feminism.	46
4.2. Christine Delphy. An introduction.	49
4.2.1. Dissecting patriarchy.	52
4.2.2. Gender as the principle of partition.	54
4.3. Colette Guillaumin. An introduction.	61
4.3.1. #All lives matter. Race and sex: the marks of a systemic ideology.	62
4.4. Monique Wittig. An introduction.	70
4.4.1. The straight mind and the destruction of the sexes.	72
5 Conclusion.	82
6 References.	87

Since the idea and urgency to do this study originated from a long series of both informal and formal conversations on the sex/gender system, I suggest that the reader do a simple procedure before starting. You will need a piece of paper, a pen and something to set the time. You have a couple of minutes to answer to these questions: what is sex and what is gender for you, in your own life?

Introduction

“It hurts because it matters, when we are passionately invested in academic feminist practice.” (Clare Hemmings)¹

This research revolves around how feminist theories and epistemologies are constructed and trafficked in the academia and their relation to political movements. The focus is on how theory and epistemology can directly impact our material lives in the sense of structured social relations and construct the way we can encompass the category of sex and gender. I focus on French Feminism and in particular on the French materialist feminism as a theory which is a side of the political hotbed happening in France from the end of the 1960s and onwards that we rarely get to see in all its premises and implications. One of the reasons of this ‘absence’ is the fact that the French materialist feminism never got inscribed in the big theoretical wheel of Postmodernism or, as some intellectuals would put it, did not engage in the ‘cultural turn’.

Feminism as a Liberation political movement became a western phenomenon from the end of the 1960s. The women who were part of the Mouvement de Liberation des Femme² in France were authors of many texts, challenging the status quo, that were directly inspired by the political struggle of the feminist movement and all the dreams to turn the tables on women’s oppression. Most part of the texts we have come to associate with French feminism in an academic context in Europe and North America though, were authored by intellectuals and women writers who distanced themselves from the feminist movement and from feminism as an ideology. The production of theory that still corresponds to the (postmodern) French feminist academic sphere is that of three specific theorists: Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray. These three theorists revolved around a political group called Psych et Po³

¹ Telling feminist Stories (2005:120)

² Women’s liberation movement.

³ Irigaray did not maintain her collaboration with Psych et Po.

that focused on and promoted the psychoanalytic aspects of feminism working on femininity and how to make it emerge. The texts of these authors came to us because of how French feminism was *exported* to the north American academia, through studies of literary criticism, in the late 70s and 80s and were, then, re-sent to Europe in form of a unitary block of theory labeled “French feminist theory”. It is interesting to look at this today because one is given the opportunity to revisit what has happened theoretically and politically in academia and feminist movements and pose some questions to some of the myths that are constructed around *the feminist movement* both as a theoretical and a political logos. One of these myths is that the women’s liberation was firmly based on sex during the second wave feminism initiated during the 1970s and that the deconstruction of the category of sex by the category of gender was a late 1980s to early 1990s concept whose most eminent exponent would have to be Judith Butler. This myth can be re-discussed when one looks at the production and work of French materialist feminists such as Christine Delphy, Monique Wittig and Colette Guillaumin⁴. This point of discussion, namely the analysis of the “sex/gender system” and its deconstruction constitutes one of the main beams of my analysis as it highlights the profound theoretical and epistemological difference between what has been labeled and we have apprehended as French feminism and what French materialist feminism stands for. This particular difference can be explained also by briefly looking at Judith Butler’s contribution on the deconstruction of the category of sex by using the category of gender: while Butler operates this deconstruction leaning on psychological analysis (which is also made clear by the theoretical genealogy chosen in her most famous book *Gender Trouble*), the French materialist feminists do that by means of a social structural analysis. Some of my questions revolve around the substantiality of the sex/gender epistemology, that is to say: how do theoretical genealogies help create the epistemology of the sex/gender system or how do we *know* the sex/gender system that in turn informs our lives as human and political beings? What happens when genealogies are interrupted? I take Butler’s work briefly into account and move or report some points of critique on it because it frankly is impossible to discuss *gender* nowadays, with a brief historic excursus, without involving even minimally a theorist whose work has forever changed the way we can talk about gender: concepts like gender fluidity and performativity of gender are inherent, like it or not, to the way we all encompass gender, be it a more or less academic way to do it. I do not construct my project, though, on an antagonistic

⁴ I chose these three authors to be able to illustrate the French feminist materialist theory compound although there are other very important contributions by other authors such as Nicole-Claude Mathieu and Paola Tabet.

or confrontational analysis of different theories to ‘set the record straight’ but rather to be able to tap into these theories and to look at how epistemic meanings can be created and change.

I focus my analysis on the French materialist feminists as both a *forgotten* genealogy, a possible epistemology and feminist theory and an appropriated theory to be able to trace a materialist take on the sex/gender system and also to be able to present the theorists I have chosen after deploying the mark of the appropriation. When I write *appropriation*, as I will try to explain, I think of a *missing chunk of context* that, theoretically and epistemologically speaking, could (or could have) provide another possible understanding of the sex/gender system. A quick example of missing context can be the use of theorists from France in the academic programs for gender studies students (both graduates and undergraduates): Wittig is never presented as a materialist feminist but rather as the unknowingly foreseer of queer theory, mostly because Butler presents Wittig devoid of her theoretical and political context in *Gender Trouble* while in the same stream as Kristeva and Foucault as postmodern theorists of *deconstruction*; Simone de Beauvoir is always solely presented as an existentialist (which she also was) but never introduced as an active feminist in the Women’s liberation movement in France, she is certainly never presented as affiliated to the materialist feminists (which she was as we will see) and very few know of her active participation in the French public discussion on feminism with her abrasive articles against difference feminists such as Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous. Far from being a mere missing piece of ‘historical’ context this, in my opinion, is a missing piece of epistemics. This lack, I sustain, is part of the factors that influence our institutionalized, internalized knowledge of the sex/gender system.

To take my point even further and start to give an idea of the missing links I want to examine in my research, I want to briefly include here the poignant analysis that Teresa de Lauretis does in her article “When lesbians were not women” (an article I will analyze in depth in the chapter on Monique Wittig). de Lauretis manages to show how Wittig’s work and consequently the French materialist stance suffered the blow of the dominant discourse on differences of the 1990s by looking at how Wittig’s theoretical work is rendered in Butler’s *Gender Trouble*. Looking specifically at what is said to be the major epistemic trait of the 1990s, that is the de-construction of *women* as a unitary concept, de Lauretis detects a contradiction.

“[...] women are understood to be the simulacra of the social imaginary, with no inherent physical or psychic substance: women, like gender, sexuality, the subject, and the body itself [...] are all discursive constructs [...] In this perspective a concept such as Wittig’s [...]

notion of lived experience, which was central to feminist theory of the 70s and 80s, have been dismissed as essentialist, naturalizing, ideological, or worse, as humanist – which in the context of the “posthumanist” or postmodern vogue of the 90s, was definitely a derogatory word.” (de Lauretis, 2005:56).

This adds up, in my opinion, to the lack of understanding of the materialist epistemology due to a dominant discourse that, tile by tile, construct the strange case I refer to in the title of my research.

The idea for the title of my thesis is directly inspired by Christine Delphy’s article *The invention of French Feminism: an essential move* that skillfully illustrates how theory and epistemology are the arenas of appropriation and creation of power. What inspires me is the possibility to investigate the dynamic between academia, feminist movements and epistemology in the creation of the categories of sex and gender and the common sense around them.

I am drawn to the materialist epistemology because of its unshakable anti-naturalism and the revolutionary power of turning the tables on categories and concepts many of us think we are done with. I want to analyze the work of some French materialist theorists because I think it can be a great asset for feminist epistemology and rethinking of political movements nowadays. In fact, a point of analysis I cherish in this work is what I will call the *theoretical chrono-logic* and which was inspired by Clare Hemmings work on feminist stories that will help me discuss genealogy. My effort consists in stopping the clock ticking just for a moment on a seemingly evolutionary-like theory/epistemology that forces us to divide the history of ideas and theories into chunks of time that are perfectly captured and that can even seem perfectly independent from each other. There is a tendency to use categories of thought such as ‘modern/non-modern’ when it comes to theory that almost suggest we should dismiss ideas that come from the past because the evolution (also in the sense of development) of theory lies ahead and never in the past, making the epistemological issues in theory rest on the logic of time: the chrono-logic.

The fear of blurring such a clear line, as we will see with Hemmings, for myself as well, is a huge challenge to everything I have learned to believe in as an activist, as a feminist and as an academic. I focus on this specific ‘French feminism case study’ for several reasons:

- French feminism (as an appropriated theory) has consistently been (and still is) a significant part of gender studies and women’s studies programs for the past three

decades in both Europe and the U.S. and is hence a consistent part of a dominant theoretical, epistemological and political discourse on feminism and gender studies;

- It gives me the opportunity to discuss some of the theorists I find most inspirational;
- It is a great opportunity to work on the understanding of how the sex/gender system is constructed and how the mainstream concepts of sex and gender are informed by various processes that involve academia and political movements and how, in turn, they inform our material lives.

I named my thesis “The strange case of French feminism” also because I was inspired to tell a story with many threads. I pull out and deploy these threads starting from a *feminist story* of appropriation which puts together academia and political movements. This ‘story of appropriation’ (which may not be the only case of theory appropriation but has its own specificity) embraces a period that goes from the early 1970s and the birth of the second wave feminist movement to nowadays and beyond through the theoretical and epistemological implications that I will illustrate in the following chapters.

I have often found myself pondering on the relationship between sex and gender and how it informs every aspect of my life. Every time I have found myself discussing said relationship or asked others to define it for me in their own words, the answers I have received can be summarized as “sex equals biology/nature/sexual connotations and gender equals a sense of self/ a socially constructed apparatus”. In other words, gender is the social counterpart of the natural or biological fact of sex. As a feminist, a lesbian and an activist I have come to understand the relationship between sex and gender as a political one: I find that sex and gender have a meaning (both theoretical and practical one) only in a context of material relationships that have been established and respond to a specific hierarchy. As a younger person though, I had a personal definition of sex/gender that was much more leaning towards identity and the nature/culture divide. My political and academic experience have brought me to re-evaluate the mainstream social constructivist understanding of said relationship and to land on a definition that not only looks at gender and sex as historical and political constructs but inverts the social constructivist terms of the relationship. My understanding of sex and gender and how they form a system involves the notion that it is (the concept and the pertinence of) gender that creates (the concept and the pertinence of) sex and not the other way around. At this point I find it compelling to interact with Butler for the reasons I explained before, to look at how she opened that gate in the understanding of sex and gender:

“If “the body is a situation”, as she⁵ claims, there is no recourse to a body that has not always already been interpreted by cultural meanings; hence, sex could not qualify as a pre-discursive anatomical facticity. Indeed, sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along.” (Butler, 2006:11)

What Butler is saying here is that there is no such thing as a pre-discursive body/sex that exists a-priori or before language, before social and cultural construction and/or discourse. She refers to de Beauvoir’s claim that “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” and the phenomenological conception of the body (as a situation) to explain how what we think and experience as the social (constructed) explanation of something natural or biological is actually what creates that same element or our conception of it. To reformulate: gender is not the social explanation of sex (that in this equation would be the natural element) but rather what creates sex as a discourse thus inverting, already in 1990, the social constructivist inference which is, in my experience, the mainstream way to describe the relationship between sex and gender in one’s life.

This quotation, as much as it is not the most acclaimed among Butler’s, represents a pivotal point in both the conception of the sex-gender system I want to analyze and in the analysis of the reception of theories I want to engage in here. Primarily, when it comes to how we experience sex and gender in our everyday lives and the answers I usually get from my peers on this issue it is quite interesting for me that the relapse on a social constructivist conception of sex and gender is so major if I think of how influential and mainstream Judith Butler’s theories have been politically and academically and still are. Secondly, it is interesting to see how the ‘revolutionizing’ approach to sex and gender (as concepts and as systems) that came along with Butler’s *Gender trouble* (1990) had actually been theorized long before by the French materialist feminists (although with a different theoretical strategy as we will see) during the 70s and 80s and which will bring my attention towards genealogy as well.

In fact, the book in question can be a good example of the difference that can be made between French feminism, as we came to know it through the narrative of the American academia, and French materialist feminism as a political theory. While I detect a crucial similarity between Butler’s and the French materialist feminists’ theorization of sex and gender and while Butler herself has been claiming her materialist practice since the end of the

⁵ Simone de Beauvoir (my note)

1990s⁶, there is a fundamental dissimilarity or discrepancy represented by the fact that Butler's analysis revolves around psychoanalysis as it is easily understandable by the choice of theories present in her book, while the French materialist feminists' analysis, as we will see in depth, finds its roots in the political significance, rather than cultural significance, of sex and gender.

If both sex and gender are to be considered as political constructions, how can we begin to define French materialist feminism then? I report here a little part of a long interview done recently to Christine Delphy which is the French sociologist and feminist theoretician who first coined the name 'materialist feminism'.

"I devised the term 'feminist materialism' or rather 'materialist feminism' from a double-featured idea actually directed at the social sciences. First, the social sciences could not deal with the oppression of women because they did not call it the oppression of women. Exit all social sciences. It was a tabula rasa. And also, that a theory could only develop if there was a fight, if there was a struggle, because without a struggle, you cannot develop concepts. You just cannot. The two are associated. If you do not want to move, you do not need this dynamic analysis of society. If you want to get from here to there, then you have to analyze it in terms that are not usually used. But if you do not want to move, nothing will happen. So, this was the outlook from which I wrote this paper called 'For a materialist feminism'. The expression 'materialist feminism' was then applied to my friends and colleagues. Now it is more seen—and it is of course—as anti-essentialist. Anti-essentialist does not mean that we do not believe in essences, but by 'material' we believe that relationships are the main thing. We believe that relationships between classes, categories of people, are the main motor of history. It is not the material in the sense that something is tangible. It is not like a chair! Because the essentialists also believe they start from the material. They say: 'We start from what is most material: the body!'. But again, the body does not have its own meaning. You cannot say: 'The body says this' or 'The body says that' because the body really does not say anything. Because nothing says anything." (Delphy, Eloit, Hemmings, Tyssot 2016:155)

As we can see in this quotation taken from a recent interview to Christine Delphy the focus of materialist feminism revolves around anti-essentialism and denaturalization as a political and theoretical practice and the analysis of relationships as the motor of history. As Delphy points out, it is fundamental not to confuse material with tangible as it happens for example in the

⁶See "Merely cultural" by Judith Butler
https://courses.washington.edu/com597j/pdfs/Judith%20Butler_Merely%20Cultural.pdf

case of essentialist feminist positions such as some of the stances of difference feminism that explain the body as something pre-discursive and with an intrinsic meaning (to be found in sexual difference): the materialist feminist stances do not see any meaning in the body per se prior to relationships between classes (gender is also a class) that determine the kind of pertinence given to the body and to sexual difference.

The drive to write this thesis comes, as I wrote, from different threads in my life: activism, political movements and a deep engagement in the importance of gender studies and epistemology rooted in the belief that the personal is political. In my vision these threads are indissoluble when it comes to what we call theory and should be always trackable and accountable for. The reason for this is that I intend epistemology as the category through which we co-create and co-establish a common sense and through which we apprehend and live in the world. I always consider the position I speak from as situated: material conditions, gender, age, race, sexual orientation are part of and form one's epistemology and in order to understand how or to change how one experiences the world one must investigate how these categories are thought of and constructed.

Through the analysis of what I call "the strange case of French feminism" and the threads I mentioned I will look at how the very notions of *gender* and *sex* can be formed and why the sex/gender system represents such a battle zone where there is a struggle to achieve the primate and power to define these elements. In fact, while a part of the thesis is dedicated to a more sociological narrative of the case where I present the development of the context of social movements and feminist activism in France during the 1970s, another part is dedicated to epistemology and the analysis of the current of thought of three of the main French materialist feminist thinkers: Christine Delphy, Colette Guillaumin and Monique Wittig. Each of these theorists will allow me to discuss an important facet of the French materialist feminism.

Despite choosing to write a thesis about 'appropriation' of theory I find the whole concept quite controversial. While social sciences, theory and episteme in general belong into a realm that would not exist without *appropriation* or re-molding of others' theories and ideas, I cannot dismiss how this concept works and what it does to our fruition of theory and co-construction of epistemology. I want, therefore, to point out the aspects of 'appropriation' that I find most productive to understand and that underlie what I put in 'the strange case of French feminism': how can we define a theoretical implant? What kind of texts form a theory? can both primary and secondary literature be considered part of a theory?

An interesting perspective on this issue comes from Delphy who applies these questions to the case of French feminism:

“[...] a body of comments is really nothing more, nor less, than a theoretical statement or statements in the end. Or, put differently, there is no substantive difference between a theoretical work which is about something and a theoretical work which is about somebody. Whatever the detours, you end up saying something about the world, so that there is no legitimate difference of status between the text that presents itself as a ‘mere’ comment, and the text it purports to comment on. These comments – including of course the bits and fragments, the quotes – therefore make up the only text we have of ‘French Feminism’, and it is this body of work which constitutes ‘French Feminism’. For all these reasons, ‘French Feminism’ is an Anglo-American strand of intellectual production within an Anglo-American context.” (Delphy, 2000:173)

More than just looking at what we get to ‘see’ as a result of an *invented* French feminism I choose to look at what more to see there is left and to discuss consequences and possibilities in feminist epistemologies. Writing this dissertation, I have often asked myself as a background story for my research: how does a fact⁷ from the past affect the present and relate to it? The answer to this question is intertwined to my questions around epistemology and genealogy.

Defining and delimiting concepts. A glossary.

This brief chapter in the thesis can be used as a glossary because it contains both delimitations of some of the concepts used in my analysis and further explanations of some other concepts. The reason I include this self-made ‘glossary’ is to work on my epistemic act of knowing throughout the thesis; what I mean is that I wrote the delimitation or description of these concepts drawing on the phenomenology of my knowledge instead of trying to give an ‘institutional’ definition. I also use this space to be able to dilute the concepts a bit and avoid a condensed explanation along the threads. The threads of this thesis are intertwined and so are the concepts I delimit here: so in order to give myself space to utilize ‘complex’ concepts

⁷ I use *fact* here as a general term to mean theory, phenomenon, knowledge etc. I do not imply that every argument I make and every perspective I present are objective facts, although, whether they are objective or not, they are still part of a discourse.

such as materialism, Marxism and so on, and still anchor them in different ways to give the reader the same kind of space I allow myself.

To signal a concept present in this glossary I will use the asterisk *.

Historical materialism or materialist conception of history:

This concept is quite important to delimit or to remember because the French materialist feminist is born in the Marxist and socialist theoretical movement which is also the main theoretical academic approach during the 70s and 80s in France as it purports the critique of the production mode of capitalism. One of the main issues of Marxism is the exploitation of labor as a mode of production: the reification of the work force and the disassociation of the work force from the product (as a result of work). Another structural concept of Marxism is historical materialism which forms a whole new layout of the development of history which is in contrast with the historical idealism. Whereas the historical idealism tells us that ideas are what history ‘is made of’ or what has caused changes in history, the historical materialism says otherwise. The materialist conception of history presents us with a base and a superstructure: the first represents the economic blueprint of a society and the second one represents the ideology present in said society. The base determines the superstructure: the material basis of history (means of production and relations of production – where there is an unequal distribution of wealth) determines the ideological basis of history (everything not directly related to production: law, art, family, science, philosophy etc.) which, in turn, reconfirms and maintains the base.

Materialist feminism – from Marxism to feminist materialism.

Speaking of historical materialism, it is important to detect the point of divergence that the materialist feminism operates epistemologically which is explained in the chapter ‘Difference feminism and Materialist feminism’. Here I will simply point out that the materialist epistemology is based on a structural, systemic analysis of social categories such as man, woman, race etc from the point of view of the hierarchized relations between social agents, categories are created and fixed in that hierarchy. The materialist feminism is profoundly anti-identitarian, anti-essentialist, non-naturalist.

Additive approach and Holistic approach.

I want to include the delimitation and comparison of these two concepts as they are present in the analysis of Christine Delphy in her article “The invention of French feminism. An essential move.” which I examine in the Second thread. The fundamental discrepancy

between the additive and the holistic approach is the relationship between the whole and the parts. The linguistic theory of Saussure, for example, says that sounds do not pre-exist language as a whole but it is the language as a whole that determines how the continuum is going to be cut up into single sounds. Psychoanalysis, says Delphy, has the exact opposite approach: the parts have a life of their own, an essence, and exist independently from the other parts in the whole or are prior to discourse: woman/femininity has an essence that is independent from society and socialization and is independent from man/masculinity and that is why this approach is defined additive. That is why the goal of *Psych et Po* is to bring to surface and “up femininity in order to up the state of woman”; the social battles for justice are considered intrinsically masculine and therefore non suitable for their goals. The aim and the instrument for them is difference. Delphy’s critique is that even if they operate inside structuralism and define their approach as non-essentialist, they have an additive approach since they enhance femininity as a global psycho-social trait of all women that is there before all thought and needs to be brought to life through various practices (for example the *écriture féminine*).

Marxist feminism and radical feminism:

The difference between these two political stances can help understand how the different pieces of the MLF worked and the influence they had on feminist theory. Marxism and historical materialism represented in the late 1960 and in the 1970s the main theoretical approach in the French academia and socialism represented the main political stance for the revolutionary anti-establishment groups. The two main contributions by Radical feminists to Marxism (theoretically and politically) came from Christine Delphy and Monique Wittig: Delphy analyzed women’s domestic situation as exploitation of means of production by men and theorized gender as a class and the categories man/woman as social agents in a hierarchical relation; Wittig theorized the shortcomings of Marxism by theorizing the necessity of putting the subject back into history, a subject who is involved in the class struggle but whose desires are taken into account as well.

First thread.

Feminism in France: social and theoretical agents.

“[...] what is going on in the present when feminist stories about the recent past are being told? What textual, rhetorical, exclusionary, inclusive or diversionary tactics are employed to secure this story and not that one, this present and past and not those ones?” (Hemmings 2005:119)

“In August 1970, several women went to the Arc de Triomphe and placed a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier dedicated to one more unknown than the soldier – his wife. They were promptly arrested and later released. It was at this event that the name *Mouvement de Liberation des Femmes* was first used to describe feminists in France, used by the media in its reporting of the event and taken directly from the American Women’s Liberation Movement.” (Duchen, 1986:9)

Similarly to other countries in Europe and to the United States, France began a more mainstream feminist experience in the 1970s when women’s groups associated to create a political battle focused on women’s issues specifically. The women’s liberation movement was not suddenly born in the late 1960s though. In France there was a long tradition of women fighting for fundamental rights who were associated to the working-class struggle and the socialist revolution. Even two centuries before that, during the French Revolution, there were significant attempts to make women part of the public sphere and the most important representant that stood out was Olympe de Gouges. In her “Declaration of the rights of man” (1791) she did a simple operation: she substituted the word man with the word woman to create a reflection around women’s specific condition in society. Her work is still at least mentioned in gender and philosophy studies basic courses.

“Largely forgotten by history, it was only after the emergence of the ‘new’ feminism, significantly different in many ways from the ‘old’, that women began to look back, uncover and reclaim as their heritage the words and actions of their foremothers.” (Duchen, 1986:1)

Was there such a ‘difference’ though? Comparing Olympe de Gouges’ attempt and the Arc de Triomphe action in 1970 we find the exact same track: the will to claim a specific struggle for women due to their specific condition in society. Despite a long tradition of feminist

movement, I will have to concentrate on a specific chunk of history that involves the birth of the MLF (Mouvement de Liberation des Femmes) which happened with the abovementioned Arc de Triomphe action. The term MLF was actually given by a journalist in the attempt to describe the group of feminists protesting publicly and it was inspired by the American Women's Liberation Movement. The movement could not have named itself because it was animated by several (Duchen says there were at least 55) disjointed groups all wanting to do political actions and all joining in the open feminist debates that from the end of the 1960s were held at the Beaux-Arts school in Paris.

“At this meetings, chaos and good humor rather than clarity and order prevailed. [...] As well as small group meetings and large general assemblies, there were a number of events designed to bring the MLF into the public eye.” (Duchen, 1986:9)

One of these provocative events, after the Arc de Triomphe action that got all of the participants arrested, was to interfere in a conference named ‘Woman’ and organized by the magazine *Elle*. During the event, the participants had received a questionnaire with the intent to delineate the profile of the modern French Woman. Activists of the MLF had thought out a more feminist version of the questionnaire and distributed it to the participants:

“For instance, the question: ‘Do you think that women are more, equally or less able than men to drive a car’ was replaced by ‘In your opinion, do double X chromosome contain the genes of double declutching?’ [...] ‘When a man talks to a woman, should he address (a) her tits and her legs? (b) her arse and her tits? or (c) just her arse?’” (Duchen, 1986:10)

Beyond the irony and provocation of the questionnaire it is possible to read the anti-naturalist, anti-essentialist political stamp of the action. The other general and shared intent of the MLF was to maintain alive as many of the voices of the movement as possible which was done also through different publications. The most important ones were *Le Torchon Brule* which was initially published as a special issue of a much bigger newspaper called *L'idiot international* and then started issuing as an autonomous feminist newspaper that lasted for three years.

“The *Torchon*'s aim was to reflect the MLF's increasing diversity and share opinions and experiences, to break women's silence, leave an imprint on paper and therefore in history. There was no desire to produce polished journalism, but instead to avoid the division between those who can write and those who read and to encourage women to write whether they thought they could or not. Women wrote about themselves, their life histories, their anger and

their feelings about the MLF. [...] there was no censorship, no editorial policy, no columns on the page, no rubrics” (Duchen, 1986:10)

A lot of groups served as many purposes in the MLF, consciousness-raising, study groups, support groups for women workers and groups in colleges as well. A breakthrough moment that got as much media attention as the Arc de Triomphe action was the publication of a Manifesto that came out on the magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*. The text that came out April 5th 1971 was signed by 343 women with the title “Manifeste des 343 salopes”⁸, the first signature of the list was the one of Simone de Beauvoir. The text read:

“One million women abort every year in France. They do so under dangerous conditions because of the clandestinity they are forced to notwithstanding the fact that this operation done under medical supervision is a very simple one. No one ever mentions these millions of women. I declare that I am one of them. I declare that I have aborted. We demand both free access to contraception and to free access to abortion”⁹

At the time abortion was still illegal in France, meaning that the women who had bravely signed the Manifesto could be arrested for that. But the infinite resources of the MLF soon created a group called *Choisir* whose aim was to defend the signatories in case of prosecution with the lawyer Gisele Halimi as a predominant figure.

The multifaceted nature of the MLF really seemed to work and spread all over France through non-hierarchical work and production of knowledge together with a certain flexibility to absorb the inner splits and political views that animated the movement. Needless to say, this was not going to remain the status quo of the MLF.

Psych et Po and its role in the Women’s liberation movement.

In the 1970s and 1980s in France there were two main groups in the Women’s Liberation Movement: Psych et Po (Psychology and Politics) and Questions Feministes¹⁰. The production of the self-defined women writers – Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous – that collaborated with Psych et Po differs deeply from that of the group of feminist thinkers that gathered around the journal Questions Feministes – de Beauvoir, Delphy, Wittig, Mathieu, Guillaumin, Tabet. In fact, as Adkins and Leonard point out in their book *Sex in question*, the

⁸ The manifesto of the 343 whores. (my translation)

⁹ <https://www.nouvelobs.com/societe/20071127.OBS7018/le-manifeste-des-343-salopes-paru-dans-le-nouvel-obs-en-1971.html> (my translation)

¹⁰ Questions Feministes was also the name of a journal published from 1977 and translated into English by the Feminist Guild from 1980 with the title Feminist Issues.

Psych et Po group was concerned with psychoanalysis* and deconstructive literary analysis while the Questions Feministes group had a common feminist materialist* view.

“Delphy and her colleagues conceived their distinctive materialism in the context of the French Women’s liberation movement (MLF), defining themselves as ‘radical’ feminists against two other tendencies within French feminist politics: “class struggle” feminists and Psychanalyse et Politique (Moses 1998:246). Against the former, they insisted on theorizing the “patriarchal social system” as distinct from the capitalist social system. Against the latter, which they denounced as promoting the “ideology of neo-femininity”, they argued for a feminism devoted to “deconstruct[ing]” the “notion of ‘sex differences’” as “an integral part of naturalist ideology” (Questions Feministes Collective [1977] 1980:214 – 16)

In addition to this, the three famous intellectuals associated to Psych et Po (Kristeva, Irigaray, Cixous) had different views on feminism as a political movement and ideology and two of them were directly against feminism per se and did not consider themselves as feminists (Kristeva and Cixous). The political group Psych et Po was led by the psychoanalyst Antoinette Fouque who soon made the astute move of juridically appropriating the brand Mouvement de liberation feministe (MLF) and make it a synonym of Psych et Po and the empire of feminist publications that came immediately after by appropriating and registering the brand. It is difficult, if not impossible, to understand the history of Psych et Po (and of the MLF) without briefly looking at its most important and outspoken figure: Antoinette Fouque. Thirty years from the birth of the Mouvement de Liberation des Femmes in 2008 an article was issued by Le Figaro¹¹ in France, where the historian Michelle Perrot, specializing in women’s history, discussed the strong figure of the psychoanalyst and women’s movement activist Fouque: the article’s title says “Antoinette Fouque a un petit côté sectaire”¹². She recognizes to Fouque a huge personality and the merit of creating a publishing house of and for women which was a sort of miracle. She also highlights the fact that Fouque’s move to register the brand of the French women’s movement (MLF) can only be considered an appropriation because it was done for personal interest and because it betrayed the nature of the movement itself which was very far from an institutionalized system. Being the nature of the MLF very fluctuant and based on activism there could have not be one single person, including Fouque who was part of the movement from the very start, to claim the birth of the movement, says Perrot. The fact that she managed to appropriate the movement’s brand was

¹¹ <http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2008/10/09/01016-20081009ARTFIG00739-mlf-antoinette-fouque-a-un-petit-cote-sectaire-.php>

¹² “Antoinette Fouque has a slightly sectarian side” (my translation)

due to the movement's lack of capacity to structure itself and this, according to the historian, has granted Fouque a lot of recognition inside and outside of France. It has also hidden the variety of the women's movement and contributed to create an idea of a French Feminism that was almost exclusively tailored around Fouque's theoretical stance. Another crucial moment of Fouque's political figure happened in the aftermath of de Beauvoir's death when she published an article in the journal *Libération* where she wrote how happy she was that de Beauvoir was finally dead. The story and its background are very well narrated in Christine Rodgers' article "Elle et Elle: Antoinette Fouque et Simone de Beauvoir.": the author writes that Fouque envisioned de Beauvoir's death as the greatest liberation possible for feminism in France. The French psychoanalyst looked at de Beauvoir's work as "[...] an equality feminism that proceeds from an intolerant, assimilating, hateful universalism that reduces everything else and impedes every other reflection on women [...]" (Rodgers, 2000:741). The article explains quite well how deep the difference was in the theoretical and epistemological approach was between difference feminism and materialist feminism and how this difference influenced the political direction that *Psych et Po* and *Questions Feministes* envisioned for the *Mouvement de liberation des femmes*.

The interest around *Psych et Po*'s theoretical platform had great success not only in the USA but in Italy too. In one of the publications of *Le Quotidien des Femmes* (a magazine tied to *Psych et Po*'s publishing house) Antoinette Fouque explains "From the moment that she (a woman) begins to speak, to exist, she has to face problems which are all masculine and this is what puts her in mortal danger – if she doesn't use them, she doesn't exist, if she does use them, she kills herself with them. This is the fringe area where we are, and this is where we will lead the struggle. I think that historically women have never existed. The movement's goal is to bring them to existence as a differentiated space, a space for difference. Alterity is woman." (Duchen, 1987:47) From this brief piece it is possible to understand a couple of fundamentals that clarify both the philosophical stance of *Psyche et Po* and the difference between this one and *Questions Feministes*:

- Although the use of the concept of alterity is meant as *otherness* and wants to portray *woman* as radically different (from man), the insistence on woman and the feminine as an entity that is possible to cultivate and that has to be brought to life (through *l'écriture féminine* and *l'écriture du corps*) through the marking of difference and embracing feminine values that are discredited in the Symbolic Order reveals a profoundly essentialist orientation;

- The French materialist feminists have a radically anti-essentialist and non-naturalist political point of view that considers *woman* and *man* as two classes whose material conditions, that's to say their specific relations in the institution of heterosexuality, create the specific conditions of women (and not *woman*); there are no naturally specific feminine values but only materially (relationally) and socio-politically specific conditions that have to be fought in the public arena and through social, juridical, economic and political feminist fights.

A decisive difference between these two groups is the take on feminism as a political movement: "Psych et Po's primary battle, then, was against the masculinity in women's heads: not against the material conditions of women's lives, nor against discrimination that can be changed through legislation, but, as feminist Nadja Ringart says "[...] against the 'phallus in our heads'. We have to understand what has turned us against our woman-ness; we must [...] nurture the woman in us. [...] psychoanalysis can help release our potential femininity. [...] we must move from 'seeking recognition by the Father' (the Father being authority in the shape of institutions or any established practice)" (Duchen, 1987:48) this highlights the reluctance to embrace feminism as a platform for public, political battles to enhance and improve women's conditions institutionally. Psych et Po's theory leans towards Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theoretical tools describing 'woman' or 'femininity' as "in radical contradiction with what he calls the Symbolic Order. [...] The Symbolic Order is founded on the Law of the Father, his authority, his name. it is therefore always patriarchal. Little girls, like little boys, enter into an external world and also into unconscious structures that are always patriarchal, controlled by masculinity: a girl's potential to be different – that is, to be herself – is never allowed to develop." (Duchen, 1987:48)

Although there were other journals and other groups, the central protagonist of this piece of history, as Moses writes, is the MLF which was a political movement that gathered several groups without a fixed structure but with the clear intent of constructing a feminist stance totally based on political activism and totally devoid of institutional affiliations (Moses, 1998:243).

In Moses' article "Made in America: "French feminism" in America." we can read about Julia Kristeva who was completely detached from the Mouvement de Liberation des Femmes and often wrote against both feminism as an *ideology* and the MLF itself, Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous whose views were grounded on psychoanalysis and the specificity of *woman* (Moses, 1998:245). The picture we get from Moses' reports of the

history of the MLF is even more explicative when it comes to the idea of feminism both as ideology and as a movement promoted by groups such as Psych et Po, Questions Feministes and others: “Attempts to confront the state through the courts or to press for different laws (for example, decriminalizing abortion) were denounced as “reformist” or, worse, “masculine”. Moreover, Psych et Po, alone among the MLF groups, condemned “feminism” itself, claiming that “feminists” sought simply to share in masculine power.” (Moses, 1998:249) The main feminist ideological stance of the MLF was based on Beauvoir’s claim “one is not born a woman but rather becomes one” that also represents the principle upon which the materialist feminism leans on. This stance represented both the constructivist perspective on sex and gender and the political struggle to break with the essentialist idea of a female specificity or difference which was sustained by the views of Psych et Po.

In an issue of *Questions Feministes* of 1980, Christine Delphy gives an account of the first ten years of the MLF. Her concerns revolve around how to make it clear to the younger generations of women that the freedom they can experience now has been brought up with the struggles made by feminists rather than a ‘natural’ change in society that happens as a consequence of more ‘modern’ systems. The goal of the movement should not only be to demonstrate how patriarchal history has presented feminism as useless and divisive (threatening the stability of the working-class, of family values, of national unity and of women themselves) but to understand written history as the *only* history. In fact, Delphy focuses on the question of ‘*who gets to write history*’ and for whom:

“We are too ready to consider that history is the business of academics and we, on the other hand, are activists [...] We seem to think that it’s normal that people outside the movement write our history; and also normal that, being ‘outside’, they write it ‘badly’.” (Duchen, 1987:38)

Feminists who have made history with their work as activists, cannot allow themselves to think of history as a principle of reality. It is necessary to embark on a reflection around how this history has been written because for the generations to come there is but the written history. Referring to one of the greatest achievements of the MLF, the changing of the law on abortion, Delphy writes:

“For the readers of *Le Figaro* it is Madame Veil¹³ who has changed the law; for readers of *L’Humanite*, it is ‘the pressures brought by democratic parties’. Even among us, not everybody knows that the women’s liberation movement and it alone was responsible for the abortion campaign. In 1976, in a local women’s group I saw a chronology of the struggle for legal abortion in which it was said that the struggle began in 1972 and began with the manifesto of the doctors. Where was the women-only women’s movement in all this? It was not there, only five years afterwards; it had been wiped out of its own history by a feminist group.” (ibid:38)

It is of vital importance to feminism that history be perceived not as a mere ‘objective narrative’ but as a site of political struggle. History (as a narrative) is, in fact, something that molds reality itself because it is a part of it and it is used to discredit feminism to discourage other women from joining in the battle. However, reflects Delphy, it is not only the so-called patriarchal system that operates towards the end of feminism but also “women who have only a feminist *image*”: here she refers to Psych et Po. This is the moment in the history of the French Mouvement de Liberation des Femmes when Psych et Po had appropriated the acronym MLF and registered it as a private logo. This would be used to represent the publishing house *des Femmes* and the work of the political group Psych et Po which was, as we have seen by now, only one, however substantial, of the many realities existing and forming the MLF. Delphy, however outraged for the actions of Psych et Po, tries to reflect here on what had led to this event and comes to the conclusion that maybe the MLF was trying to give a ‘unitary’ image of itself on the outside while maintaining a horizontal and flexible structure on the inside and how this appropriation by one voice of the movement was going to play out in an ‘outsider view’. The questions posed in the article give a glimpse of the analysis of French Feminism as a set of theories ‘invented’ by the American academia during a process of story-telling that happened during the second half of the 1970s that involved the conflation of different perspectives.

¹³ Simone Veil was Giscard d’Estaing’s Minister of Health in France from 1974 to 1978 and was responsible of drafting the law on abortion and seeing it through Parliament.



Questions feministes.

*Questions feministes*¹⁵ was a journal published by the radical feminists* or materialist feminists* of the MLF during a three-year period, from 1977 to 1980; it was founded out of the urgency to have a place for feminists, radical feminists, to write and discuss theory while trying to make theory something available for women outside academia. Part of the editorial board were: Simone de Beauvoir¹⁶, Christine Delphy, Emanuele de Lesseps, Nicole Claude-Mathieu, Monique Plaza, Colette Guillaumin and Monique Wittig.

In their editorial number they publish the manifesto of radical feminist theory: “Variations on some common themes”. Here we find a very definite theoretical and political voice that had developed within the different tendencies of the MLF.

In their manifesto they touch upon the shift, in France, where revolutionary feminism or radical feminism comes to represent a specific kind of analysis entailing epistemological, political and sociological perspectives. The reason has also to do with genealogy as well: the detachment from Marxism as a univocal form for epistemology and social analysis as insufficient for a feminist analysis.

“From the beginning of the movement two streams of analysis of the oppression of women have emerged. One was called “revolutionary feminism” (now “radical feminism”) – and to which we belong – and the other is known as the “class struggle tendency”.” (Feminist Issues / Summer 1980 translated by the Feminist Guild)

A fundamental act for the radical feminists who wrote the manifesto was to produce theory, to liberate it from the realm of academia and bring it on a political level. They defined theory as

¹⁴ <https://no.pinterest.com/pin/361202832599009048/?lp=true> The sign on the left says: Men are cowards, selfish and immature. The sign on the right says: Woman is the equal of man. (my translation) This image was used to explain why difference feminism was the only theoretical and political stance worth pursuing and why equality had to be rejected.

¹⁵ Called «Feminist Issues» in the English translation that started in 1980.

¹⁶ “Simone de Beauvoir acted as titular, but played little part in the running of the journal.” (Jackson, 1996:20)

all accounts attempting to explain how the oppression of women works in general or in particular and concluding that “Theory is any account which tries to draw political conclusions and which proposes a strategy or tactics for the feminist movement.” They advocate for a feminist science that accounts for hierarchical patriarchal structures and their impact on individuals that would change the analysis of society. The radical stance signifies the unmasking of the oppression through the destruction of all arguments based “on the supposedly obvious “facts of nature” which they detect in the neo-femininity trend (referring to Psych et Po). This trend focuses on *women* and *movement* by forgetting the word *liberation* in between and pushes towards the search of the female essence and the existence of women. Radical feminists refute vehemently this position as, for them, difference is a synonym of oppression “It is the patriarchal system that sees us “different” in order to justify our exploitation, to mask it. It is that system which prescribes the idea of “nature” and of a feminine “essence”.”

There are several brilliant points made in this manifesto and I want to report one in particular that sums up for me the political and epistemological goals of such stance: the definition of difference and equality as political tools. Radical feminists of Questions Feministes advocate for equality but not in a differentialist/essentialist perspective where equality is established in difference (equal value to different established essential roles) but rather an equality that can entail the destruction of the codes that create difference: to destruct both difference and equality as dominant discourses by destroying the axioms of the codes and have equal access to individuality (non-sexed definition).

“Those whose feminist approach consists of insisting above all (or perhaps exclusively?) on Difference oppose the notion of equality: “What? Claim equality with the oppressor?”. Equality-with-the-oppressor, however, is a contradiction in terms, is there is equality between two beings, there is neither oppressor nor oppressed.” (p. 13)

In fact, since equality would signal the end of oppression for women what would be the criteria of advocating for difference once the oppression is over? Difference used as a tool in the feminist struggle is only a means to affirm the *specificity of a struggle* against a *specific oppression*. Feminism as a struggle against oppression needs to be thought of by women not as women per se but as oppressed subjects in an asymmetric relation: absence of difference, or equality, means absence of phallocracy and hierarchy.

“We acknowledge a biological difference between men and women, but it does not in itself imply a relationship of oppression between the sexes. The struggle between the sexes is of the

result of biology. We acknowledge a difference between men and women in the social hierarchy – psychological differences expressing at the same time the oppression of one sex by the other and the exclusion of both sexes from the potentialities attributed to the other. It is these differences that we want to abolish.” (p. 14)

While the feminist materialist stance never changed, as we will also see in the chapters about the theorists, it came to a point where Questions Feministes had to stop issuing articles because of what was later called the “lesbian split”.

“In February 1980, Questions Feministes (QF) published two articles which sparked off a serious dispute, first inside the QF collective and subsequently in the MLF as a whole.” (Duchen, 1987:78)

The articles Duchen refers to are “The straight mind” written by Monique Wittig and “Heterosexuality and feminism” written by Emmanuèle de Lesseps. In “The straight mind”, that will be followed by “One is not born a woman”, Monique Wittig lays the ground of her lesbian epistemology by theorizing heterosexuality as a systemic institution, attacks the tendency to think in terms of universal truths and concludes that lesbians are not women since what constitutes women “is a particular social relation with a man, a relation that implies personal and physical obligations as well as economic obligations... a relation that lesbians escape by refusing to become, or to stay, heterosexual.”(ibid. 78)

In her article, Lesseps attacks political lesbianism by rejecting the idea that feminism could exclude heterosexual women and advocating for a feminism that embrace contradictions instead of abolishing them. To this day it is not exactly clear why Questions Feministes had to close because the two fronts had different interpretations of the situation: the radical lesbians claimed their animosity was purely political while the radical feminists thought there was also a personal component in the arguing. With the dissolution of QF, all the members of the collective signed an agreement that no one would use the same name for another journal or publication. Shortly after that, the radical feminists of the group (as opposed to the radical lesbians) started a new journal by calling it Nouvelles Questions Feministes (almost the same name as QF) which felt a bit like the appropriation of the MLF logo by Psych et Po. In the editorial number of NQF, the radical feminists explained that the purpose of the journal and the collective was still to produce and make theory available for all women and their total refusal to accept a practice that they defined totalitarian. A practice they had already seen happen within Psych et Po. For them the criticism of heterosexuality must be dissociated from the condemnation of the individuals, heterosexual women. In explaining their positions by

writing a letter to the MLF, they pointed at how lesbians were stigmatized within the feminist movement and often reduced to their sexual preference which transformed their political battle to end women's oppression into a battle to fulfil their sexual interests. The radical lesbians front responded passionately and opening up a complex discussion that still lurks among feminists in France Italy, although in a much lighter form than ten years ago, that I know of.

Difference feminism and Materialist feminism.

Two of the major MLF's theoretical stances that created the debate on 'French Feminism' as an appropriated theory.

Before such a clear divide was established between these two epistemologies there was one common factor and interest: the situation of women. At the beginning of the 1970s there is the insurgence of feminism in France and the public denunciation of women's oppression. There is a split in the idea of universalism of humanism and the acknowledgement that the category of women and men have very different statuses in society and an unbalanced access to rights and resources. The category of sex is the fundament of the relation of domination and women need to emancipate themselves from *their* sex or at least to emancipate from the hegemonic idea of sex. This common front is present in the MLF as it started but soon after the first battles the movement proved to be very varied at its inside. There was no unanimous theorization of feminism as an ideology. Two fundamental genealogies emerged and clashed: difference feminism tied to Psych et Po and materialist feminism tied to Questions Feministes.

The materialist feminism develops from, but quickly grows out of, a socialist/Marxist thought which was at that time the most utilized method in the French academia. Starting from a feminist re-evaluation of Marxism operated by Delphy, women's situation is no longer outclassed by the proletarian situation. The French materialist feminism opposed Marxism as both a theory and a political movement because according to the Marxist political line the 'women's exploitation issue' would be solved once the proletarian revolution would be won. Feminism was considered a factor of weakening for the proletarian revolution and that is why feminists such as Christine Delphy, Monique Wittig and Colette Guillaumin¹⁷ started to include the analysis of another important mode of exploitation: the domestic realm of production. In fact, if materialism is the means to analyze the mode of exploitations of

¹⁷ Together with Paola Tabet, Nicole-Claude Mathieu, Josette Trat (just to name the most important ones).

individuals in the frame of capitalism, they dimmed it fundamental to include all individuals and all modes of exploitation. In the domestic mode of production, it is the category of men that exploits the category of women. I speak of categories here because for the materialist feminists, *man* and *woman* are not natural essences but categories born in a hierarchized social relation and that are tied to one another. These social categories and their hierarchization are the result of the social relations created by some social organization which has no natural foundation, at the same time the division of labor has no natural foundation but is rather the result of a naturalized culture. The self-evident facts of nature assigned to the social categories of men and women allow the perpetuation of a patriarchal social organization. From this implant derives the division of production and reproduction where the first one is specific to the realm of the category of men (economic realm of production) and the second one is specific to the realm of women (non-economic realm). So, the capitalist mode of production is perpetuated in the domestic realm of production where the dominant (category of men) profits a lot from the unpaid, unrecognized (because explained as natural) work of the dominated.

French Feminism is in many ways a misnomer since the authors thus characterized are rarely of French origin or nationality (although French is the predominant language of their writing) and not necessarily overtly self-identified as feminist.

When Irigaray says that human nature is two, she does not mean that there are two fixed sexual substances, but that to be natural is to be embodied, finite, divided, that the fundamental character of nature is growth through differentiation. Human nature, in her view, is not disembodied or neutral; it is always distinctively sexed or sexuate, a neologism for sexed, but not necessarily erotic, bodily difference. Viewing the natural body as self-differentiating rather than self-identical, Irigaray also articulates distinctive capacities for generation corresponding to differing morphological possibilities (the possibilities of bodily form) that entail “different subjective configurations” (Irigaray 2001 [1994], 137).

Similarly, to Beauvoir, who ascertains that language and culture constitute the subject as masculine, and the feminine as other to him, Irigaray maintains that inhabiting a feminine subjectivity is paradoxical in a fraternal social order. But, for Irigaray, both Beauvoir and Freud fail to address sexual difference insofar as they retain a singular notion of masculine subjectivity, Freud because he presumes the libido is always masculine, and Beauvoir because she reckons the aim of women's emancipation as equality with men (for instance by concluding the *Second Sex* with a call to brotherhood and seeming, arguably, to be calling for

women to assimilate to masculine norms of selfhood). Irigaray rejects the project of equality, since 'equality' can only ever mean equality to men, and proposes instead doubling the notion of subjectivity in line with the subject's own self-division. This might seem unnecessary, especially to equality-oriented feminists, since of course, women can, at least in much of the liberal, democratic world, be citizen-subjects, just like men.

In this case Irigaray, in line with difference feminism, understands equality as a synonym of neutrality and neutrality, in turn, as a synonym of masculinity. The aim is to achieve a feminine subject and not just a subject notwithstanding the fact that both Irigaray and difference feminism in general does not have a definition of the feminine or femininity falling in thus in the same ideologic trap, in my opinion, that intertwines woman with mimetics and mystiques. So, in the social contract we find subjectivity and femininity to be opposed and at the same time there lies a refusal to enter the social contract as subjects/citizens because of the impossibility of being feminine subjects (as opposed to *only* subjects). This exact point allows me to look at epistemology at work: because the feminists (although many of them did not consider themselves as such) gathering around Psych et Po constructed their genealogy and epistemology on the idea of difference they consequently did not participate in many political actions of the MLF and a part of them even refused to sign the act to liberate abortion co-written and signed by Simone de Beauvoir. Here I see how the epistemic act of theorizing is completely undivided by the epistemic practice.¹⁸

Julia Kristeva, like Irigaray, was another great theorist of the idea of difference and although the two did not share the same views or even collaborate nor respond to each other in their productions they are always to be found together under the French Feminism (inevitable) curriculum of feminist and gender studies. Kristeva had a clear classification of feminisms (although she avoided to define herself as feminist)¹⁹, there are three types: 1) the one where she puts Simone de Beauvoir, is universalist and wants to inscribe women into the social contract through equality and rationality; 2) the reactive that refuses the assimilation to masculine values (such as equality and rationality) and reaffirms feminine difference (Irigaray could be aligned to that); 3) a feminism that follows the path of ambiguity and non-identity and embraces both the participation in history and highlighting the inevitability of sexual difference.

¹⁸ Some of the ideas on French feminism, psychoanalysis and Luce Irigaray are taken from or inspired by the excellent web page of Stanford University <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-psychoanalysis/#FrenchFem>

¹⁹ In her essay "Women's Time".

Despite the constant accusation to equality feminism from difference feminists of disembodiment of women in order to inscribe them in history and in the social contract, the materialist feminists were, inside the MLF, those who insisted on non-mixité as a non-negotiable condition during feminist meetings. Non-Mixité indicates a separatist gathering of women who desire and need to associate and discuss issues that apply to women without the presence of men. This is still a huge political point of discussion in France but it nowadays it involves especially women of Color wanting to associate without the presence of white people even white women. The political stance of non-mixed groups indicates how materialist feminism takes into account the *specific* experience and condition of women and that it considers women as embodied social agents. The difference is that they claim that women should associate separately in order to understand their own condition and turn the tables on hierarchy rather than cultivate their femininity which they do not consider as a universal parameter, essence or need.

In conclusion of this brief comparison, if a comparison is the right way to go, I think that the biggest divergence between these two epistemological stances is that difference feminism enhances a quest to make the feminine be born through the body politics of the *écriture féminine* and *écriture du corps*²⁰ while materialist feminism believes that the body per se cannot have a political meaning prior to social relations and considers women as a social class in a hierarchical relation to men (rather than an innate nature) aiming at destroying said hierarchical relation.

Second thread.

The appropriation or invention of a theory.

In order to draw a picture of the background of my thesis I want to discuss three texts since my main methodology is based on text analysis and discourse analysis. The texts I will analyze are two articles “The invention of French Feminism: an essential move” by Christine Delphy (2000), “Made in America: “French Feminism” in Academia” by Claire Goldberg Moses (1998) and the chapter entitled “Reconstructing French Feminism: Commodification, Materialism and Sex” by Lisa Adkins and Diana Leonard in the essay collection “Sex in

²⁰ Feminine writing and writing of the body.

Question” (1996) edited by Adkins and Leonard. These essays help me deploy a concise theoretical background and to position my research in an epistemic discourse on sex, gender, genealogy and epistemology.

The reason I choose to analyse Delphy’s article “The invention of French feminism: an essential move” is that it not only gives a wide perspective on the research I want to engage in, but it also opens to questions on epistemology. In fact, Delphy’s article explores some of the topics I think of as fundamental when it comes to feminist epistemology:

- What is an *Outsider’s view* when it comes to theory and who detains the power of definition;
- The conflation of women/feminine and men/masculine theorised as *true* or *natural*
- The analysis of the difference between the additive* approach and the holistic* approach

These three umbrella themes allow for a thorough analysis of the prodromes and implications of what I call “the strange case of French feminism”. To give an even wider spectre of the historical and political background that brought to the ‘invention’ Delphy writes about, I will take into account the first chapter of “Sex in question” edited by Lisa Adkins and Diana Leonard (a collection of essays of the main French materialist feminist thinkers) where the two authors delineate an international picture of this particular phenomenon.

“The very attempt to attribute a specific content to a feminist movement shows that we are dealing with an outsider’s view. So, even before we start looking at this content, we know that it cannot be a self-definition. This raises the question of the relationship between the way feminists from France see themselves and the way outsiders see them. This relationship bears a resemblance to that between observers and observed, between subjects and objects, a problem often raised in feminist methodology. It raises the question of who has the power to define whom to start with, who calls the shots.” (Delphy, 2000:166)

While Delphy is more interested in giving a detailed picture of how feminist epistemology absorbed and was absorbed by French Feminism, Adkins and Leonard invite us to go through an act of discerning theories in the effort to understand what French materialist feminism stands for and also embrace a part of history of feminist movements that goes geopolitically back and forth between France and the U.S. when the academia and the political movements had a tighter relationship. The international picture is necessary in order to present how the brand we have come to know and use as French Feminism has been created following a

specific epistemological strand that was made possible with the outsider's view, something that has been the tool forging the brand.

In the first chapter of *Sex in Question* entitled "Reconstructing French Feminism: commodification, materialism and sex" we are presented with the three momentums that can help reconstruct theoretically and historically how the label French Feminism has come to existence and what it has been made to signify epistemologically. What does this label stand for? What purpose has its construction served? I will use these three momentums to discuss this reconstruction. Another question comes to mind: how was it possible that a brand by the name of French Feminism had at its core theorists who would not even use the term feminist to describe themselves?

We can find two main answers to this question. The first comes from Moses who detects a change in the strategy of *Psych et Po* when the group's economy saw a huge increase (the source of this increase remain to this day unknown) that allowed it to not only open a publishing house but also several bookstores in France. This resulted in the mass circulation of *Des femmes en mouvement*²¹, making *Psych et Po* de facto the best-known group of the MLF although their views on feminism and activism were problematic for many others in the movement. Moses' quotation of a passage from *Psych et Po* written by Antoinette Fouque gives further detail: "Socialism and feminism ... are the two most powerful pillars of Patriarchy in decline, the final stage ... of Phallogocentrism ... Feminism is radical only as root of Patriarchy ... Feminists are a bourgeois avant-garde that maintains, in an inverted form, dominant values." (Moses, 1998:250) The next step comes when *Psych et Po* (this group and the publications in *Des femmes en mouvement* are inseparable) trademarked the name MLF and the symbol of the fist in the woman's sign so that other groups could not use them anymore thus co-opting the whole public meaning that many groups of feminists had built with their work until then and appropriating a history of political activism by making it seem like *Psych et Po*'s story only. The whole MLF with its 55 groups raised their voices against this appropriation but in the end *Psych et Po* won the case and gained "the backing of the state legal apparatus." (Moses, 1998:251)

Claire Moses explains the creation of the Anglo-American French Feminism through different stages, according to her analysis the appropriation was a process rather than a one-time event. The first stage of this process for Moses can be traced back to the first edition of *Signs: journal of women in culture and society*²² in 1975 that included an excerpt from Kristeva's *On*

²¹ The journal published by *Psych et Po* from 1977 to 1982 and directed by Antoinette Fouque.

²² Peer-reviewed feminist academic journal, currently published by the University of Chicago.

the women of China. In the journal Kristeva is presented as one of the most provocative and respected intellectuals of France “nothing was said to connect her to feminism [...] Nor did the editorial speak of the significance of Des Chinoises to French feminism.” (Moses, 1998:252)

Shortly after, in the summer 1976, the readers of *Signs* are introduced to Cixous who also did not have any affiliation to a social or political movement. The work presented is *Laugh of the Medusa* that is her manifesto for what became known as *écriture féminine*, a call for women to write a new female text, to write with the female body, as the editorial described. In this first stage though, Kristeva and Cixous were still defined French writers and not French feminists although their work was inherently tied to a ‘French brand’. The change of narrative happens two years later, in 1978, when two essays on French feminism are published: one by Carolyn Burke and the other by Elaine Marks. “Although both articles were still about French “writers”, both also discussed the MLF. Especially in view of the absence of any other analyses of French feminism in English-language periodicals, readers would reasonably conclude from this juxtaposition of writers and the MLF that French feminist activists were all novelists, philosophers or critics.” (ibid. 253)

Both the essays that came out on *Signs* have in common this conflation of women writers and feminist thinkers that, however done voluntarily or not, had a consequence on the way to apprehend the situation of women and feminism in France for an English-speaking audience. Moses stresses on the fact that both Burke and Marks were French-language literature specialists who travelled often to France and had a great interest in the MLF, Burke even mentions some criticism moved towards *Psyche et Po* but fails to identify the feminists who did it. By the end of the 1970s there had already been a strong conflation of the three most acclaimed women writers (Kristeva, Cixous, Irigaray) and the French feminist movement. The three women writers were renamed as French feminists despite the protests of Cixous and Kristeva who did not wish to be identified with feminism or the MLF. Moreover, the whole purpose of French feminism and the MLF was translated as “to bring into play the transformational power of language” leaving no sign of any other theoretical and political stance in sight. In a note to her article, Moses gives back a piece of vivid history when she tells about how, during the New York conference for the 30th anniversary of the first publication of *The second sex*, Helene Cixous together with other French women had attacked Beauvoir and ‘feminism’ while Wittig and Delphy had come to her defense “What we were witnessing, without comprehending, was the split between *Psych et Po* and the other groupings of the MLF.” (ibid. 269) Even more, I would add, what was witnessed

was the clear epistemic split which could have been theoretically enriching if the narrative would not have suffered the epistemic confluences and cuts that the French Feminism-brand created.

The second answer to my question comes from Adkins and Leonard's analysis that takes into account another aspect of the issue. When it comes to the label French Feminism, as constructed in the Anglo-American context, it is fundamental to highlight how the literary body of the theorists of *Psych et Po* has been the one of choice to pour into the label's narrative.

If one takes a moment to associate some theorists to the label French Feminism one would most probably come up with at least two of these three authors Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous particularly known as *the* French feminist theorists par excellence both in Europe and in the U.S. During the 1980s there was a massive interest in the North-American academia for the work of the abovementioned three writers, their production came to be considered as the most influential feminist tendency in France and was "made into" (Delphy would say invented) a brand of feminist thought known as French Feminism co-opting de facto what was the tendency of the women liberation movement and giving it a monolithic shape. Ironically the group *Psych et Po*, as I have pointed out in this chapter, was distant from the rest of the MLF and considered controversial by many in the movement both for their anti-feminism and their actions considered unjust. While the MLF (with all its different tendencies inside of it) flourished on Simone de Beauvoir's proposition "One is not born a woman" with all its implications, the theorists of *Psych et Po* had distanced themselves from that platform and had instead embraced the psychoanalytic specificity of women leaning towards Lacan's views as we have seen extensively in the First thread.

An important aspect to consider in the Anglo-American French Feminism is the academic background of the French studies specialists studying the feminist situation in France which was focused on linguistics and literature rather than sociology and anthropology. This means that their interest was focused on the construction of subjectivities and psyches through language and texts rather than in theories aiming at understanding the meaning of social relations, the economy in the relation of the sexes and the formation of an individual consciousness.

The idea of female difference and the "Revolution of the symbolic" are two main issues brought about by the theorists of *Psych et Po*: the concoction of the gained power over the name and symbol of the MLF, their well-funded publications and the exploding interest in female difference made the production of Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous perfectly translatable

into a French brand of feminism from an outsider's point of view that ended up silencing or scattering the other tendencies in the movement.

“Luce Irigaray's *Speculum. De l'autre femme* (*Speculum. Of the Other Woman*), published in 1974, attempts to locate and define the 'masculine feminine', which, she argues, needs exploration before we can think through the 'feminine feminine'. Julia Kristeva's...*La Révolution du langage poétique* (*Revolution in Poetic Language*) also published in 1974 was regarded as a capital text locating the feminine in the pre-oedipal, and characterizing it as a necessarily marginal, revolutionary force which disrupts language with what she calls the force of the semiotic.... The following year in 'Le Rire de la Medusa' ('The Laugh of the Medusa') and in another essay, 'Sorties' ('Exits'), Hélène Cixous began to theorize what the practice of an *écriture féminine* (a feminine writing) might be, a writing which would emerge from the feminine libidinal economy and its multiple nature. She called on women to write through their bodies” (Adkins, Leonard 1996:5).

The next phase can be introduced by Moses' questions: “How did it happen that such a partial 'French feminism' has been constructed in U.S. academic discourse? How did it happen that just when proudly self-identifying feminists in France were engaging in a struggle for existence, we in the United States were creating our own version of French feminism which, intentionally or not, put the considerable international power and prestige of U.S. academic feminists behind *Psych et Po* and the theorists whose views are associated with them?” (Moses, 1998:251)

During the 90s this trend continued in the works of Butler, Grosz and Fraser who dedicated a big space to the analysis of the French women writers Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous who, by then, had become French feminist writers and

“by the late 80s and the early 90s it was impossible to review the state of anglophone feminist thinking without considering the impact of their work. Indeed, the early 90s has produced reflecting on the significance of shifts in anglophone feminism due to their ideas.” (Leonard and Adkins, 1996, p. 5)

Although the work of Nancy Fraser (*Revaluing French Feminism*) opens a crack in what seems to be the core of the anglophone French Feminism, she was not quite able to pinpoint where the incongruence was, even reporting (in a footnote) that this anglophone operation (French Feminism) was protested at from de Beauvoir, Wittig and Delphy. An important step detected in Marks and Courtivron's work is how the French women's movement as a whole is represented as being detached from feminism (considered an old bourgeois category of humanistic thought) and the “psychoanalysis and politics” as the most influential and

interesting strand inside the movement. Such claims have been dimmed as “distorted” by leading feminists in France:

“Such books as.... New French Feminisms give a totally distorted image of French feminism by presenting it, on the one hand, as if it existed only in theory and not in action and, on the other, as if the sum of that theory emanated from the school of neo-femininity—which celebrates women’s cycles, rhythms, and bodily fluids, along with ‘writing of the body’ (*écriture du corps*) and women’s ‘circular thinking’ (Beauvoir, 1984, pp. 234–5). It is ironic that *Psych et Po*, which, while calling itself the movement, denounces feminism, has been embraced by feminists in foreign countries. For instance, it is to a large extent the work of this group and its sympathizers which has been dubbed ‘French feminism’ in the United States, despite numerous protests from the movement, a practice that shows no little arrogance on the part of American feminists.” (Ezekiel, 1992:84).

To confirm the reception of French Feminism in the American academia it will suffice to go through the theoretical body of Judith Butler’s most influential book “*Gender Trouble*”²³ where we find the exact platform delineated in the analysis I have engaged in: Kristeva, Lacan, Freud, Foucault, Beauvoir and Wittig are the main authors encompassed in her analysis. It is very important for me at this point to highlight the fact that my thesis and my analysis are in any way meant or constructed as a critique of the theoretical body of the authors I refer to as the core group of the brand French Feminism, I place my attention on the construction of a brand of theory and on how feminist epistemology comes into existence and is spread through academic theoretical work.

The anglophone operation of putting theorists together under a label or dispersing them as if they were not related to each other is another aspect of French feminism that not only has promoted a conflation of the strands of the women’s liberation movement of France but has provoked an even worse consequence: the conflation and confusion of theories.

This, in turn, has allowed to squeeze into the anglophone French feminism theorists like Wittig and Beauvoir while detaching them from the materialist feminism they had theorized and written so much about. This kind of dispersing and rearranging theories is what this chapter tries to present as theoretically and historically problematic:

²³ I find it important to point out here that I am not saying or implying that Judith Butler’s theoretical implant is differentialist or essentialist, I am rather saying that the writings and authors she chooses for the sake of her analysis, in *Gender trouble*, purport the picture I am trying to deliver of the French Feminism as a theory constructed in the American academia.

“What is also interesting about *New French Feminisms*²⁴ is how its editors represent some of the feminists associated with QF. Specifically, as is quite common in anglophone feminist writing, they place Beauvoir and Wittig within and central to the exciting and innovative ‘new French feminism’ without noting their disagreements with Psych et Po and Cixous.” (Adkins and Leonard, 1996:7)

At the very start of her article, Christine Delphy asks herself the rhetoric question: what is “French Feminism”? The quotation marks encasing the two words set us immediately in the position of investigating a meta-concept or a concept in a concept. The main preoccupations of this article revolve around the epistemological implications that such a theoretical co-opting of theory described by Leonard and Adkins can bring about. The first step in this direction is represented by the fact that a feminist theoretical strand has been given geographical boundaries:

“An ideological content – never mind which at this stage – has been given a geographical specification.” (Delphy, 2000:167)

Why is this worth pointing out? For Delphy this represents a central question when it comes to the construction of a brand such as French Feminism, in fact she asks how relevant national boundaries should be to feminism or other social or ideological movements. This aspect of the issue brings to mind the question of the outsider’s view, which is a fundamental question for feminist theory, and can be interpreted as the effort of making a brand, an ideology exotic and monolithic. The content poured into French Feminism has, in fact, not much “to do with what was happening in France on the feminist scene, either from a theoretical or from an activist point of view” but it has certainly privileged an “overtly antifeminist political trend called Psych et Po” (Delphy, 2000:167)

Delphy explains the choice to conflate “women writers” with “women’s movement” (which is one of the steps in the creation of French Feminism as I have discussed before in this chapter) with the ongoing separation between the academic world of Women’s Studies and the activist political movements; this can, in turn, also purport the fact that the Anglo-American French Feminism encompassed the production of the anti-feminist, anti-activist pole of the French scene. In fact, according to Delphy, French Feminism as a political strand and on an analytical level cannot be compatible with feminist analysis because “the problems most apparent in that approach, such as the reclaiming of the “feminine” or a definition of sexuality that leaves no room for lesbianism, are not the source of its inadequacy. I propose instead that

²⁴ Marks and Courtivron’s essay collection which Adkins and Leonard consider one of the text that have created the anglophone French feminism.

these claims, which are problematic for a feminist politics, are a consequence of adopting an outdated epistemological frame.” (Delphy, 2000:170)

To discuss the themes presented in the first part of her article, Delphy suggests that it is fundamental to understand how French Feminism relates to feminism (or does not) and to trace a correlation between its content and the necessity to brand it as foreign. When it comes to why those specific writings and that specific theoretical strand was chosen by the proponents of French Feminism to represent the French feminist ideas abroad, Delphy talks about ideology because she refuses to think that every single scholar proposing an analysis of feminism in France would have “*misunderstood* the French political or intellectual scene.” (Delphy, 2000:171) This position adds to both Adkins and Leonard’s position (pointing at the interests and academic background of the scholars) as well as Moses’ position (pointing at the flourishing finances of P&P) analyzed previously.

Ultimately, for Delphy French Feminism represents a set of voluntarily distortions of feminism in France, but a set of distortions that are not random, they have in fact an ideological pattern. She defines it as “a body of comments by Anglo-American writers on a selection of French and non-French writers: Lacan, Freud, Kristeva, Cixous, Derrida and Irigaray are the core groups. But there are others.” (Delphy, 2000:172)

In addition to this, Delphy defines French Feminism as “an Anglo-American strand of intellectual production within an Anglo-American context.” (ibid. 173) because this colonial operation of *orientalization* of theory is the way the American academia has promoted an old epistemic apparatus, while avoiding to take responsibility for it and making it exotic by stamping it as French. What does this epistemic apparatus entail then? The elements that form this epistemology are: the belief that the “feminine” and the “masculine” exist or should exist and that they are the model of what actual women and men do and “are”, the belief that this division is a trait of the universal psyche and the psyche is anterior to both society and culture, that it precedes them and can be considered independently; the focus on sexual difference is based on the belief that this is the only significant difference between people (articulated in morphological, reproductive and psychological differences) and that it should be the basis of psychic, emotional, cultural and social organization (although the concept of “social” is cautiously avoided). (ibid. 174)

This epistemic apparatus, which Delphy finds extremely problematic on an analytical and a political level, should not be compatible with a feminist analysis as it plants concepts and categories in the realm of human nature which is something that, she says, “is bound to wield very disappointing results for any movement bent on changing the world or even simply

understanding it.” (ibid. 175) But why is the “sexual difference” approach flawed on a theoretical basis? Why is this epistemological stance “incompatible with the modern humanities and social sciences, including the so-called postmodern” (ibid. 176)?

To dismantle this approach that is deceptive, and yet enticing for so many, Delphy goes back to a basic and radical analysis of the difference between structural and additive epistemology. The structural approach, she explains, considers the whole before it considers the parts and sees the parts as a consequence of the whole; the additive approach, on the contrary, considers the parts as “independent from one another and pre-existing their coming into relation.” (ibid. 177)

To further explain the difference between these two approaches and the epistemological consequences of their application, Delphy traces a comparison with the Saussurian model of linguistics which is the basis for the structural epistemology and therefore the post-structural as well because, as Delphy notes, the *post* is just an indication of further development of the structural. This model of linguistics looks at the language as the whole and to language sounds as the parts: “This model informs contemporary anthropology [...] contemporary psychology and sociology. This understanding of the world is already present in the work of Marx: the total society pre-exists each class, and it is the way it functions as a whole which creates the division principle; the division principle itself creates each class. Classes cannot be viewed independently of one another [...]” (ibid. 176)

Based on this view she calls the structural approach holistic and highlights how this very approach is the “matrix of all twentieth-century schools of thought, whether they call themselves materialist, social constructionist or structuralist.” (ibid. 177) Consequently, the epistemological implant in studying gender comes from this matrix and considers *gender* as the principle behind the creation and existence of *genders* which implies, as Delphy explains, that the gender categories (“men” “women” “the feminine” “the masculine”) cannot be thought of separately or as independent parts. In fact, these categories are inextricably intertwined and the ability or possibility of one category to change is connected to the ability or possibility of the other category to change; moreover, this implies that both the status and content of each category needs to be changed in order to change the category itself.

On the other hand, the epistemological implant of French Feminism recirculates an outdated approach that Delphy calls *additive* because “They go on considering the parts as independent of one another and pre-existing their coming into relation.” (ibid. 177) Why is this epistemological implant so outdated and dangerous and how does it differ from the structural approach? For the first, if we consider the parts (or categories of gender) to be independent

and pre-existing their coming into relation (additive approach) we must also consider that each part is intelligible on its own and its content and status do therefore not depend on the relation with the other parts (or categories). This mindset purports the idea that each single category has an essence of its own that, not only is universally and a-historically intelligible but transcends any kind of relation (social, economic, political, historical and so on) to other categories. In addition, it implies that the parts or categories that make up reality are always the same in number and content and that they are eternal.

It ultimately implies that “society or its instances – language for one instance – intervene only to rank these pre-existing realities; that these constituent parts can be shifted around without changing the whole; and, conversely, that the only thing that can be done with them is to shift them around; that inasmuch as one wants to shift them around, one has to find their “real” meaning, their “real” essence. The *additive* approach is thus necessarily essentialist.” (ibid. 178)

By explaining the epistemological platforms of the structural and the additive approach, Delphy is able to clarify the kind of relation French Feminism establishes between the category “woman” and “the feminine” and what sort of role “sexual difference” plays. For the first, the intellectuals around *Psych et Po* as we have seen, claim that to elevate the status of women it is necessary to elevate the status of “the feminine” and this change can happen without interfering with the whole. This in turn means that there is no need to change the status quo (the whole) or the other part/category. One example that comes to mind is the discourse on “feminization” of culture or feminization of men (in terms of role in the household and caregiving for example) which, as much as it enhances women’s emancipation from determined roles, rests on the assumption that specific instances (caregiving, house chores etc.) pertain specifically to the category of women or have a feminine essence and that all we can do is to shift them around and/or to rank them in a fairer way or in a way that ups one category but does ultimately not change the one or the other let alone change the whole that contains the parts. In this specific instance it makes a lot of sense that Anglo-American French feminists leave the “sexual difference” as “a mystical object whose mysteries must remain obscure.” (ibid. 178) because then they are to not take into account all the feminist work that has been done to crack open the nut of sexual difference.

“extricating sex from sex role and sex identity [...] it has proceeded [...] to break down “sexual difference” into more and more component parts, only arbitrarily and socially related to one another, to the point where even sexual desires have been dissociated from the

anatomical difference between females and males, and heterosexuality has lost its aura of naturalness and necessity.” (ibid. 178)

This epistemological operation is the expression for Delphy of the fear, on a theoretical but also political level, of not being able to have an identity and of losing the status of *human being*. In fact, what the mystical “sexual difference” does is to keep in check the individual subjects and impede the very possibility of creating a new *whole* where the social pertinence of this difference is not based on universal and a-historical assumptions on the category of sex/gender. But as the various instances (the sexed language, the belief in a “natural” identity that explains sexual preference etc.) are being shaken and pulled apart theoretically by feminist scientific work, Delphy wonders how to make it possible to “reconcile that with the evidence of our eyes which shows a very sturdy, all-pervasive, immovable gender on which all reality seems to be founded?” (ibid. 179)

These are the questions and instances that inspire my research and the reason I dedicate my energies to analyzing the potential of French materialist feminism and the implications of the bypassing of this compound of theorists and theories into a mainstreamed (so called) French feminism that enhances a totally different epistemological and political platform.

Genealogy interrupted. Rebuilding the bridge?

In her compelling article “Telling feminist stories”, Clare Hemmings opens with a question: “How does Western feminist theory tell the story of its own recent past?” (Hemmings, 2005:115) This interrogation of the building of a genealogy and epistemology in the history of feminism lies at the roots of my research. In this article we are made aware of how the history of feminism is charted according to decades that have their own specificity and that the history of feminism is one of *chrono-logic* or time-applied logic with perfectly encompassed passages that change at every turning of decade. Hemmings reports the feminist specificity of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s:

“Western feminist theory tells its own story as a developmental narrative, where we move from a preoccupation with unity and sameness, through identity and diversity, and on to difference and fragmentation. These shifts are broadly conceived of as corresponding to the decades of 1970s, 1980s and 1990s respectively, and to a move from liberal, socialist and radical feminist thought to post-modern gender theory.” (Hemmings 2005:116)

Hemmings points out how the decades she takes into account are charged with specific meaning but also crystallized and forced to reiterate the same linear story constructed around it. The result for Hemmings, is a stereotype of every decade that can even be summarized with quick words: naïve, essentialist seventies; black feminist and ‘sex wars’ eighties; ‘difference’ nineties. She goes as further as to describe these *boundaries* as false due to the flattened narrative as the only possible one. The corollary of this chrono-logic, for the author, is the role that Poststructuralism has been given that is “the key actor in challenging ‘woman’ as the ground for feminist politics and knowledge production.” (ibid., 117)

What I find inspiring in this passage is that Hemmings manages to show how genealogy is not just a selection of theories to purport a certain epistemology or discourse on knowledge but also the construction of a narrative that enables us to “govern the production and acceptance of the knowledge we designate as history” (Scott, 1989:680). In my opinion the discourse on knowledge, the storytelling of feminist genealogy and the use of theories are three very established threads when it comes to the production of ‘new’ knowledge in an academic context because these three threads are used as a filter of veracity applied to knowledge. If I think of my project, for example, I see several levels moving: de-construct the conflation of French feminism/feminism in France, creating epistemic space for a knowledge that seems to have fallen through the cracks of genealogy, enhance reflections around the sex/gender system to see what kind of knowledge another genealogy and another epistemology could open for.

“To replace one truth with another suggests that the historical problem is simply one of omission, that once the error has been corrected the story will be ‘straight’ in the way that Spivak is critical of, an objective representation untainted by bias.” (Hemmings, 2005:119)

This passage has a major importance for both my argument and for the whole structure of this brief study. In fact, what pushes me to write about what I ironically call a ‘strange case’ is not an impulse to correct or of setting the record *straight* but rather to interrupt the cycle of chrono-logical compass of theory and epistemology by looking closer at an epistemic phenomenon that began during one of the most stigmatized periods in feminist history, namely the seventies feminism or the feminist seventies.

“The dominant and most familiar attribution to the feminist seventies is of course essentialism, an accusation so frequently repeated, that it can actually stand as justification for not reading texts from the feminist seventies at all anymore.” (Hemmings 2005:120)

The other point of inspiration in this quote for my study is that it has helped me to bend the sneaky feeling of wanting (and risking) to “make yet another unitary story” out of a feminist theory I find is the most inspiring for me. This kind of unspoken necessity for me comes from that place so well described by bell hooks’ words “Let me begin by saying that I came to theory because I was hurting—the pain within me was so intense that I could not go on living. I came to theory desperate, wanting to comprehend—to grasp what was happening around and within me. Most importantly, I wanted to make the hurt go away. I saw in theory then a location for healing. » (hooks, 1991:1).

The hurting described by hooks for me is a synonym of the conflict described by Wittig when she wrote that «there is no theory without conflict». Still, I am going to fight back the will to set the record *straight* and I will not present a chunk of unitary history or theory to substitute another chunk I present as *invention* or *appropriation* as well as I am not going to claim that the French materialist feminists were or are a unitary unproblematic group of theorists. To the contrary I want to take into account a set of theorists and theories that well represent the non-unitary essence of the MLF

and that still have a lot to say to our nowadays feminist movements, studies and debates.

When it comes to the appropriation and invention part, I want to highlight how the process has resulted not only in the ‘invention’ of a theoretical front (French feminism) but even of a national theoretical and political front as if encompassing the *whole* feminism in France. A comparison I often make to explain this ‘case’ when asked why this should be considered as a special case, since appropriation and traffic in theory is quite common, is: imagine if we would operate a synecdoche between the Kvinnegruppa-Ottar and feminism in Norway by naming the Kvinnegruppa-Ottar as Norwegian feminism, it would be an unsustainable epistemic choice and it would be considered a colonization, an appropriation both inside and outside of Norway.

Hemmings’ epistemic operation of debunking can help to envision how a ‘straight’, unproblematic, chrono-logical narrative of feminist theory is an appropriation in itself: the appropriation of approximation and continuous work in progress intrinsic in feminist theory. This apparent clearness creates a fog that transforms assumptions into epistemic facts “[...] feminist poststructuralist theorists are repeatedly positioned as the first to deconstruct ‘woman’, and as either heroic in surpassing past mistakes, or responsible for the ills of feminism in general. I dispute this characterization of poststructuralism for the simple reason that one of the abiding concerns for the majority of feminist theorists has always been, and remains, such a deconstruction.” (Hemmings, 2005:116)

Hemmings shows how feminist theory has been told on the premises of the Anglo-American academia and that the rest of the world, both non-Western and Continental European theorists, have had to take a stance and respond to whether aligning themselves to the Anglo-American trajectory or by being critic to it. This mandatory responsiveness has co-created the unitary block from which we get to tell and to apprehend our feminist stories. The process of assimilation goes beyond theory and becomes practice when there is a strong reiteration of a dominant narrative that Hemmings calls *common-sense gloss*, something that allows theorists and everyone dealing with gender studies research to have a clear and simple line in order to move on to the focus of one's own research without any major genealogic or epistemic preoccupations. This rationalization of what we probably do on a daily basis when it comes to research (both when we do active research and when we read others' research) inspires me especially when it comes to how these epistemic interruptions inform our perception of the sex/gender system.

“Such critical historiographic accounts of power, history and authorship allow a different set of questions to be asked about the feminist past. Rather than asking, for example, ‘What really happened in the 1970s?’ I want to ask, ‘How does this story about the 1970s come to be told and accepted?’ And following Spivak, ‘Why do I want to tell this story, and in telling it, what kind of subject do I become?’” (Hemmings, 2005:119)

If I ask myself that very question what can the answer be? Why do I want to tell the story of an appropriation? And in doing this, what kind of subject do I become? I must admit that when I first decided that this was going to be my thesis, I had in me the will to *correct* a chunk of feminist history and make the invisible, visible. There was no doubt in my mind that this operation was basically unproblematic and that I was going to re-adjust the focus on not only some theories but on some theorists as well. I see now that I was deeply engrossed in the enthusiasm of elaborating on something, I consider so important. I do not mean to say that I believe the appropriation did not happen, because it did, but rather that my intention to set the record straight has quickly transformed into the will to reclaim certain epistemological tools through paying attention at how a part of feminist genealogy opened-out for me during the research. In fact, the interruption in genealogy did not result into a vacuum or an absence of epistemology but rather in an unforeseen emergence of other paths to follow.

What does that do with me as a subject involved in the process of co-creation of genealogy? Why the need of (re)writing this narrative? I have come to understand that the need to tell this story is intertwined to the need to understand and re-interpret the current mainstream feminist

stories, especially when it comes to deconstructing the political use of the sex/gender system. Two concepts I find myself reflecting on quite a lot, and which are extremely mainstream now both in continental Europe and in the Americas, are: equality and inclusivity. I find both terms problematic although I recognize how they have come to be established as concepts useful to enhance feminist ideals into politics and laws.

“While radical feminists theorize the relations between the sexes, which are taken as biological givens, materialist feminists seek to understand the relations which constitute and construct the social categories of sex. Each system of social relations must be understood in terms of all levels of the social formation. Racial and sexual categories should not be relegated to the ideological instance of capitalist social relations and the sex-gender system just as the racial social formation cannot be reduced to class analysis.” (Juteau-Lee in Guillaumin, 1995:20)

The materialist feminists maintained the concept of “gender as a class” which means that: all women belong to the same social class or women are a social class by virtue of gender or gender is a social class to which all women belong. To understand this choice completely we need to look at it together with the French materialist feminists breaking away from the idea of class struggle in Marxism* and their effort to re-enter the subject back into history and class struggle itself. Ultimately, they theorized race as ideology at work together with gender and sex (as we will see better with Guillaumin) with the goal of destroying the class or social category of women and consequently that of men as, like Wittig wrote in her essay “One is not born a woman”: “there are no masters without slaves”. I needed to quote Juteau-Lee here because with the third wave feminist theory we have learned not only to deconstruct the category of woman/women but also to dread any kind of assimilation and hence to defer from concepts like “gender as a class” while still taking on the task of filling feminism with theoretical and political meaning. That is why Juteau-Lee points at something fundamental when she writes “understand the relations which constitute and construct the social categories of sex” because not only the materialist feminist theory leans on a radical anti-essentialism and denaturalization but they treat the category of sex as *ideology at work* and aim at deconstructing not the category per se but the pertinence given to the category of sex by means of the category of gender “We have continued to think of gender in terms of sex: to see it as a social dichotomy determined by a natural dichotomy.” (Delphy 1993:3)

The problem of materialist feminism falling through the cracks and being dispersed in the process of appropriation of French feminism can also be described considering the categories

used by US feminist scholars in the field of feminist theory and critical theory in the 1980s and 90s. The materialist feminist theory could have fit in the field of critical theory but at that time the German school of critical theory was the most sought after in the North-American academia. The German critical theory was defined as the neo-Marxist wave of Frankfurt School which, in turn, drew on Marxist and Freudian critical tools. I am aware that a master thesis does not allow for an in-depth analysis of such massive scale theories and I will not tap into this other debate, this is rather an additional reflection on academic reception and use of theory. In fact, the intertwining of Marxist and Freudian tools fits the theoretical narrative of Psych et Po especially if we consider the production of Irigaray, Kristeva and Cixous who are the chosen sacred trinity of French feminism in North-American academia.

Speaking of genealogy in the context of French feminism as appropriated idea, I find that Toril Moi gives the most clever and probably most honest angle. She was one of the major experts on French feminism (as feminism in France and psychoanalytic theory on female language and writing) and was often in France to witness the political and theoretical development of feminism. In the introduction to her book (edited collection) *French feminist thought* from 1987 she acknowledges very clearly the existence of different theoretical and political tendencies in the MLF and how the theorists were perceived in the English-speaking world:

“Although Christine Delphy, Monique Plaza and the many other women who take up positions similar to theirs, write within a recognizably French intellectual tradition, their work is relatively accessible to other Western feminists, precisely because of their emphasis on the historical and social reality of women’s experience. This is not to say, of course, that they would agree with an empiricist and positivist hypostatization of the category of experience. The paradox of their position in English-speaking countries would seem to be that these feminists have become less frequently translated and less well-known precisely because of their relative similarity: they have, in other words, been perceived as lacking in exotic difference.” (Moi, 1987:6)

It is striking that Moi would carve such an opening into ‘how we make feminist epistemology viable’ by just stating a simple fact: lacking of the *exotic*. By citing, even if partially, the historical and social analysis of the French materialist feminists Moi refers to some kind of similitude of their approach to that of other English-speaking theorist with a Marxist or socialist implant. This claimed similitude among social theories to justify the uprising of the narrative of *differance* and *woman* as the Other, which this thesis operates to dismantle,

constitutes one of the blanket narratives that co-build the very phenomenon of appropriated French feminism. For it is exactly the *exotic* (or lack thereof) that puts the epistemic machine in motion when it comes to what Delphy describes as an *invention* of a theory: that theory did not exist as such before, its theorists did not collaborate to create it and fill it with epistemic meaning, there is no genealogy to tap into unless one creates it ad hoc. It is a bit like the exotic Orient created or invented by Europeans that Said so well made evident to us. What Moi does here is clever and useful because it allows to take into consideration the fluctuation of interests of research especially in such an interdisciplinary branch as feminist and gender studies. She also allows to peel off another layer from the narrative of theories: the materialist feminists had created a genealogy and an epistemology working as a group of intellectuals to achieve a common political stance while the *holy trinity* (Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva) had not, they did barely know each other and did not claim to be feminists, but they still offered a kind of *exoticism* that quickly became a discourse to be sought after because, as Moi puts it, it was almost unknown to most Anglo-American feminists in the mid-1970s.

“It was surely this initial feeling of utter obscurity that created the image of French feminist theory as the terrifying negative of our own (British and American) practice. Where we were empirical, they were theoretical; where we believed in the authority of experience, they questioned not only the category of experience, but even that of the ‘experiencer’ – the female subject herself. [...] No wonder, then, that the myth of the French as the dangerous (or fascinating) Other rapidly became an all too common cliché of our own intellectual scene(s).” (Moi, 1987:5)

And no wonder how genealogies are made and what they are made of. The direct and refreshing claims of Moi are useful tools in my analysis of epistemology: they do not make the appropriation of French feminism a lesser issue but they also do not shut the door on acknowledgement and further analysis. Ultimately, what happens with the primacy of narrative or appropriation of narrative is the ‘common cliché’ Moi talks about or put differently, an epistemic tool that co-builds genealogies. And so it happened (and still happens to this day) that the narrative in the syllabus of every undergraduate and graduate programs for gender studies, at least in Europe and the US, mirrors exactly what I have tried to depict through different ways of analysis: French feminism is conflated with the psychoanalytic and philosophical French tradition and with the idea of *invented* French feminism I have given in these first two threads. One could argue that Monique Wittig is always present in gender studies programs to which I respond that she is conflated with a frame (difference feminism)

she strongly refuted and criticized or she is made into a humanist or read as an unknowingly queer theorist of some sort. At times the idea of French feminism as a theory embraces also Lacan, Derrida and Foucault and is further conflated with an idea of postmodernism. So, to answer a question I have heard many a time: no, the appropriation or invention of French feminism is not like any other appropriation. As I showed with the example of Norwegian feminism to apply the narrative of appropriation to any other feminism/country sounds impossible. In her book on Christine Delphy, Stevi Jackson writes:

“She asks how American women would feel if an unrepresentative handful of individuals were defined in France as constituting ‘American feminism’, for example, if Camille Paglia was elevated to a status in France comparable with that occupied by Julia Kristeva in the USA.” (Jackson, 1996:35)

But is not what I am doing here an utter way to set the record straight and readjust the hegemony of the narrative of feminist stories then? Is this whole thing nothing but a petty argument? I certainly hope not. My intent is actually merely to dismantle a blanket-narrative and sanitized way of embracing theory and epistemology in order to liberate both from their immanent place of abstraction and reunite them to the concept of political by reestablishing a connection where that connection has been interrupted. I do believe that our perception of the sex/gender system and its political construction is directly impacted by not only the kind of narrative we co-construct but also by the possibility (or lack thereof) to dismantle the epistemic systems we inherit.

The *strange case* of French feminism, as I call it, has really fascinated me for a very long time due to how I have encountered the theories that I try to discuss in this thesis. In Italy, where I was born and raised and where I spent some intense years as a lesbian-feminist activist (and still do), I have experienced the phenomenon of French feminism as *invented* theory as an activist, without the wall of academy. While ‘*il pensiero della differenza*’ (difference feminism) as it is called in Italy, was major among feminists with an academic background (especially social sciences, psychoanalysis and literature/cultural studies) with Kristeva and Irigaray as the main theorists, Wittig²⁵ and Delphy (a lot less than Wittig) were an underground political force among activists. There were two main reasons for this divide which, at that time, I did not have the epistemological means to understand: (1) the question of the translation of the texts which is rich when it comes to difference feminism and

²⁵ Together with Michelle Causse and Danelle Charest both materialist feminist theorists.

practically inexistent when it comes to materialist feminism²⁶, I myself have contributed with the translation of various essays, that circulated among political groups, of French and French-speaking theorists as a part of my activism. (2) The lesbian divide (discussed in the first thread) or the discussion of the difference between lesbian as a political stance that pushes towards the subversion of the heterosexual system.

Inspired by Hemmings' article, and by previous study of Spivak, Mohanty, hooks, Lorde and Scott, I engaged in this brief analysis involving genealogy because I have the need to rebuild a bridge that has forcibly been closed and dismissed both academically and politically through the use of the label essentialism applied to the 1970s decade, a label that is difficult to survive. It is even more important to create a reflection today when terms like 'radical' and 'radical feminism', two concepts used almost as synonyms of second-wave feminism, have made their way into an open and controversial battle inside the feminist discourse. It is commonplace nowadays to read the word radical especially in a critical way when interjecting concepts such as: TERF and SWERF²⁷ a (huge) discussion per se which I will not tap into if not for the sake of my analysis. In the two acronyms *radical feminist* is, politically, a synonym of essentialist while clearly representing the idea of a second-wave feminism fixated with women's sexual specificity. In my understanding, both academically and politically, the word *radical* and, in particular, radical feminism as a viable concept needs to be liberated from the conceptual shortcuts that has brought it to where it stands today. My ongoing question when it comes to epistemology and genealogy still is: 'How is it like today to tell a feminist story?'

The implication of looking at the workings of epistemology, for me, is to understand to which extent concepts around the sex/gender system become principles of reality allowing us sometimes to stop re-thinking those concepts as applying to our own lives. This flux of re-thinking life-applying concepts by taking into account and unveiling how feminist stories and theories are told, as Clare Hemmings does, makes me even more aware of what the epistemic act of knowing can mean.

Every theoretical aspect around the sex/gender system, in the case of this thesis, is completely if not directly tied to an aspect of our material life. I consider the epistemic act of knowing to be a holistic act where theory and practice are not divided nor have a cause-effect relation but are rather synchronic. The same synchronic relation exists, for me, between the theoretical

²⁶ In the month of April, a translation of Wittig's *The straight mind and other essays* is coming out almost thirty years after its publication.

²⁷ TERF: trans exclusionary radical feminist. SWERF: sex workers exclusionary radical feminist.

and the political. Acknowledging the sex/gender system is in itself an epistemic act that applies directly to our lives.

What Hemmings does with her study on genealogy and epistemology is to try and discuss about the kind of feminist telling we are institutionally allowed to produce, what story of ourselves as social agents will be intelligible and acceptable. The issues in our lives do not change at every turning of decade and specific common feminist issues (unequal pay, rape culture, racism and sexism to name a few) have stayed the same, or almost the same, for the past decades which is why I consider Hemmings' work so important especially in the way she unveils our tendency to perceive feminist theory as a "narrative of relentless progress or loss, proliferation or homogenization" (Hemmings, 2005:115)

Given all this, the intention of my work is to look at how (1) our issues and questions as feminists do not fit the narrative of progress/loss (2) neither does feminist epistemology and genealogy and (3) it is possible to find very refined epistemic tools in a 'feminist past' which has been discarded by a corrective history, as Spivak would put it.

Third thread

Key theorists of materialist feminism. Why and how.

I chose these three among the French materialist feminists for various reasons: 1) these authors' production is almost entirely available in English²⁸; 2) they each 'dig a hole' into the set of epistemic tools taken for granted giving back other tools that reach beyond the *chronologic* of epistemology. It is quite obvious to me that I could never dream of analyzing 'in depth' three theorists with such an extensive production and with such a rich political story behind them. I approach these theorists by presenting them briefly and then by selecting some of their most salient excerpts by having in mind questions such as: how does materialist feminism play out in the key concepts of these authors? Are both the authors and their epistemology still relatable? What is the red thread of their research and does it still speak to our 'nowadays' epistemology? How do they encompass the sex/gender system?

An important note to make here, before I start presenting the theoretic/political work of these social scientists and intellectuals, is that they were a group of intellectuals who were united by

²⁸ Although I speak French fluently and I am familiar with the texts of these authors in their original language, it seemed to me as a risky choice to have too many texts that would not be accessible in English. I am also aware of the fact that there are incredibly rich studies on hegemony of knowledge tied to translation into English but I cannot tap into that academic discussion due to lack of space although I consider this a fundamental issue in epistemology.

common feminist political struggles. They knew each other, engaged in political battles in the MLF and created materialist feminism as a theory by collaborating and co-creating the epistemology to fill materialist feminism with. Their materialist approach never changed notwithstanding the division of the group at a certain point in time that I described in the first thread in *From Questions feministes to Nouvelles questions feministes*.

“Monique Wittig stated the premise of materialist feminism with brisk economy in her 1976 essay “The straight mind”: “thought based on the primacy of difference is the thought of domination.” Although Wittig’s formulation has nothing like the currency of the catchphrase that emerged from US feminism – the personal is political – to my mind, it not only rivals but exceeds that phrase in critical purchase. With the insight that difference is the effect of domination rather than its target, the materialist feminists should be acclaimed for analyzing women’s oppression not in terms of sexual difference but against it. This is what makes theirs a *constructivist* materialism: they deny the materiality of sex in order to produce a materialist analysis of gender as an agency of oppression.” (Disch, 2015:830)

An important division must be made between the materialist feminism and new materialism’s way of understanding agency and materiality: while new materialism looks at the agency of things (matter), materialist feminism looks at the agency of sex and gender made material by oppression. Let me reformulate, instead of using the term agency as Lisa Disch does, I will use the term pertinence which is a recurrent concept in Delphy’s articles: materialist feminism looks at how sex is made a pertinent (viable) concept (by means of gender) by the oppressive systems rather than conceiving sex (and gender) as an already pertinent concept notwithstanding oppressive systems.

“For theorizing how gender is implicated in sex, and in doing so as early as 1981, the materialist feminists were the avant-garde with respect to deconstructing sex/gender in both the United States and France. I use the term *deconstructing* not in a casual but in a technical sense to credit the materialists with two important critical insights: First, they demonstrated that sex lacks any intrinsic meaning. Second, they established that gender renders sex socially significant. It follows that sex/gender is no binary opposition and there is no critical leverage to be gained by distinguishing between “sex” as given in nature and “gender” as a socially assigned role.” (Disch, 2015:834)

Christine Delphy. An introduction.

“Delphy coined the expression ‘materialist feminism’, and she changed the Marxist concept of class, showing it to be obsolete since it does not take into account the kind of work that has no exchange value, work that represents two thirds of the work provided globally [...]” (Wittig, 1992:xiv)

Delphy’s work as a theorist and an activist embraces a large period of time, she has been active from the start of the second wave feminism in the late 1960s in France and is still active academically and politically. Her academic formation in sociology at the Sorbonne helped to shape her political perspective “to seek explanations for women’s subordination in terms of social structure – the institutionalized relationships and hierarchies, characteristic of a particular society which shape the lives of its members.” (Jackson, 1996:1)

It was during her work with civil rights for the Eleanor Roosevelt Foundation in the United States that she started to form the idea of a feminist movement “Like many women who were politically active in the 1960s, she became aware that the oppression of women was absent from the agenda of liberation movements and hence of the need for women to organize themselves. Yet at that time, before the resurgence of feminism, the idea that women could create their own autonomous movement was revolutionary. Delphy says that she was convinced that others would think her ‘crazy’ for entertaining such a notion.” (Jackson, 1996:2)

After her return to France in 1966 she joins the political group FMA (Feminin-Masculin-Avenir)²⁹ that would also become key to the birth of the women’s movement in France. After the massive students’ and workers’ strikes against capitalism in 1968, the FMA, that had now forty active members (half of those were men), started to implement a series of discussions in order to create a political vision that would embrace women’s oppression in a more unitary way. Although the Marxist philosophical implant shaped the socio-political vision of the group, it was still only used in reference to class politics where a gender analysis and gender discrimination of the issues was totally absent and considered counterproductive for the logic of the class struggle. In her book *Close to home a materialist analysis of women's oppression* she reports the words of one of the men in the group and her reaction “He claimed that the oppression of women could not be equal in importance to that of the male proletariat since, he said, although women were oppressed, they were not ‘exploited’. I was well aware that there

²⁹ Feminine-Masculine-Future (my translation)

was something wrong with this formulation. In that group at least, we recognized that women earn half as much as the men and work twice as hard: but apparently their oppression had, in theory, no economic dimension!” (Delphy, 1984:15) This key moment in Delphy’s development of a political and theoretical vision pushed her analysis further and she began to concentrate her analysis around the argument that “women constituted an exploited class and the male civilization was sustained by women’s unacknowledged, unpaid labour” (Tristan and Pisan in Moi, 1987:37)³⁰

“Christine Delphy is a French radical feminist theorist and activist whose writings span the period from the earliest days of second wave feminism to the present. [...] She began to develop her distinctive perspective – materialist feminism – in the context of the French movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and has always retained the political commitment which provided her inspiration.” (Jackson, 1996:1)

Delphy was trained as a sociologist at the Sorbonne in Paris and after her graduation she moved to the US where she attended both the University of Chicago and Berkley in California. It was especially her studies as sociologist that forged her way to understand theory and the oppression of women by looking at the social structures that allowed for said oppression. By focusing on patriarchy as a structure of hegemony over women, Delphy is able to disentangle feminist epistemology from the Marxist impasse of capitalism oppressing working class that canceled any specific women’s issue.

“In 1964 she left university to do civil rights work, having gained a fellowship from the Eleanor Roosevelt Foundation for Human Relations for that purpose. It was through her involvement [...] that she began to envisage the possibility of a feminist movement. [...] Delphy says that she was convinced that others would think her ‘crazy’ for entertaining such a notion.” (Jackson, 1996:2)

Back to Paris Delphy started working as a researcher for the CNRS (Centre Nationale de Recherche Scientifique) while starting to engage in a political group called FMA (Feminin-Masculin-Avenir)³¹. During and after the violent demonstrations of May 1968 in France, the idea of raising women’s specific political issues became even stronger although the group remained mixed, with both men and women participating at the debates. It was a particular

³⁰ “Tales from the women’s movement” in Toril Moi

³¹ Feminine-Masculine-Future

debate with a male colleague that sparked an even stronger will to start a feminist movement in Delphy:

“He claimed that the oppression of women could not be equal in importance to that of the male proletariat since, he said, although women were oppressed, they were not ‘exploited’. I was well aware that there was something wrong with this formulation. In that group at least we recognized that women earn half as much as men and work twice as hard: but apparently their oppression had, in theory, no economic dimension!” (Delphy, 1984:15)

From that moment on she started to push towards two fundamental points: (1) that women’s issue could not and should not be subordinate to that of the working class and (2) that women should organize in non-mixed groups (women-only) in order to discuss issues specific to women from and for their own perspective. The FMA embraced the first point but refused the second, in fact the mere idea of both a feminist movement and a political group that would exclude men was unthinkable at the time in France. When finally, the FMA was joined by two other women’s groups, there came the right push to envision a feminist movement. In one of these women’s groups there were Monique Wittig, who was going to become a very well-known radical figure and Antoinette Fouque who shortly after gave life to the current of *Psychanalyse et Politique* as we have seen in the first thread of this thesis.

Concomitantly to her political engagement in the MLF and prior to that, Delphy studies deeply the life of rural families in France but as she is an assistant researcher at the CNRS, she does not get permission to study women’s situation and decides to focus on issues of inheritance of property hoping to be able to develop her interests afterwards. The ‘forced’ address of her early studies proved to be fundamental in the understanding of Marxist structures and the forging of materialist feminism for Delphy. A turning point in her analysis of women’s situation, family structure and capitalism came from the importance given to housework (as a site of oppression) by the second wave feminism. The absence of an economic exchange (work for retribution) made housework go unseen by the Marxist radar on capitalism ignoring totally the amount of work put almost exclusively on women’s shoulders. Delphy’s controversial statement was that women were exploited by a patriarchal structure: a statement that Marxists were not willing to embrace because capitalism was considered to be the only system of oppression in society.

“The domestic labor debate began from feminists’ attempts to challenge the orthodox Marxist view that housework was marginal to capitalism, but subsequently became a highly technical discussion About Marxist theory of value. the point of departure was Mark's observation that

workers' wages were converted into fresh labor power and also provided for their children the workers of the future. Marx himself ignored the domestic work this entailed - the cooking of meals and washing of shirts necessary to make the work are ready for each new day - and the fact that this work was done largely by women. Marxist feminists initially sought to establish that this work was socially necessary essential to the functioning of capitalism." (Jackson, 1996:56)

And she did not stop there, one of the first steps was to re-discuss the meaning and function of surplus value:

"Put simply, part of the wealth (value) produced by workers covers their wages the remainder, surplus value, is appropriated by capital and is the source of profit. If housewives produce labor-power and labor-power is the source of surplus value, then housework could be seen as indirectly producing surplus value." (ibid.)

The unfolding of this Marxist foundational concept with a rigorous deconstruction and analysis of patriarchy and capitalism as social systems became the incipit of Delphy's work and building of a new feminist epistemology: feminist materialism.

Delphy is the only one of the three French materialist theorists I chose for this thread who is still alive. She is active both as a sociologist for the CNRS and as a feminist activist, some of the main interests of her researches and writings are: (1) colonizing wars like the Afghanistan war disguised under a 'feminist premise' of liberating women from oppression, (2) the veil issue in France that revolves around the government ban of the Muslim veil, (3) non-mixité vs. mixité which opens up the discussion around separatism in political groups (women-only, black-only, black women-only etc.), (4) the social constitution of the categories of sex.

Dissecting patriarchy.

How can we understand gender as a class and patriarchy as a system? In her essay from 1981 "Patriarchy, Feminism and their Intellectuals" Delphy analyzes the intersection patriarchy, class and difference to explain how she came to envision women as a class politically. In the prodromes of the essay she explains how *patriarchy* as a viable political concept is one of the most important achievements of second-wave feminism (although she gives reference that first-wave feminists already had some kind of use for the term). Patriarchy is transformed from a mythical term used mostly as an adjective, patriarchal, and not necessarily in a negative acceptation but rather as 'poetic' way of remembering old societies based on tradition and community (non-capitalist), the abstract *mos maiorum* of western culture. From

the 1960s though, this term is taken out of its cultural realm and placed in the political realm with feminist movements. As a concept though, highlights Delphy, it was used quite differently inside the MLF in France in fact, the meaning put in the term patriarchy shows the splits inside the movement itself.

“For socialist feminists the oppression of women is due in the last analysis to capitalism and the main beneficiaries are capitalists. For radical feminists, on the other hand, women's oppression is mainly due to a different earlier system which although it is tightly intermixed with capitalism in the concrete society is nonetheless not to be confused or identified with it. It is men who benefit from this system and the system is patriarchy.” (Delphy loc?)

The differences Delphy points at are well represented in Juliet Mitchell's work *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (1975) where she defines patriarchy as *the* ideology which is untraceable in history and is, in fact, at the origin of human nature as such. By turning patriarchy into an ideology instead of a system, Mitchell dilutes its political value for women's oppression and makes it into an inevitable, natural, part of the social condition.

“Patriarchy is dictated by the nature of the social which is itself dictated by physical nature. The passage from nature to culture in this vision necessarily implies the oppression of women, because of the respective anatomies of men and women, or rather of males and females. Thus, the advent of patriarchy and its subsequent maintenance appears doubly exorable and justified.”

Utilizing this narrative on patriarchy as a counterweight she demonstrates that gender is a class and that capitalism does not explain women's oppression; she turns the attention to patriarchy as a system and shows how feminisms that base their analysis of oppression on difference ultimately conceive of patriarchy as something inevitable and intrinsic both in society as such and in the biological and social nature of difference. Ultimately, the main trait Delphy wants to make clear here is that if we consider patriarchy as an a-historical ideology and capitalism as the only social system of oppression than we say that the subordination of women to men in society is but a natural state of things which needs no explanation. From this passage it derives that for radical materialist feminists it is fundamental to reject everything about patriarchy in order to understand its functioning and destroy its ideology.

At this point of her analysis, Delphy comes to a turning point that makes Lisa Disch define her as a “poststructuralist feminist *avant la lettre*” (although admitting that Delphy would most probably not take that as a compliment)

“We must reject all its presuppositions, up to and including those which appear not to be such, but rather to be categories furnished by reality itself, e.g. the categories ‘women’ and ‘men’. Sketching in our current work very briefly, we think that gender, the respective social positions of women and men, is not constructed on the (apparently) natural category of sex (male and female), but rather that sex has become a pertinent fact, hence a perceived category, because of the existence of gender.” (Delphy, 2016:loc2581)

The mainstream narrative at that point goes the other way around and her analysis (she constantly uses *we* and *our* when she defines the theory she utilizes to point at the fact that theories are developed inside a political group) brings a new way of looking at interconnections between sex and gender where it is oppression which creates gender in the first place because the hierarchy of the division of labor comes before the division itself and creates the roles otherwise known as *gender*:

“*Gender in its turn created anatomical sex*, in the sense that the hierarchical division of humanity into two transforms an anatomical difference (which is in itself devoid of social implications) into a relevant distinction for social practice. Social practice, and social practice alone, transforms a physical fact (which is in itself devoid of meaning, like all physical facts) into a category of thought.” (Delphy, 2016:loc2790)

As she admits immediately after, this process of thoughts and political stance is not only controversial but a gamble that the materialist feminists place. Incredibly enough, as Disch notices in her article on Delphy, she had begun to “trouble” gender ten years before Butler did in *Gender Trouble* (1990) but “she did so by means of a social-structural, rather than linguistic-psychoanalytical, analysis. The distinctiveness and importance of this materialist iteration of what is frequently regarded as the archetypal radical constructivist argument – that gender does not rest on sex but creates it – have been overlooked in the United States” (Disch, 2015:829)

Gender as the principle of partition.

Delphy’s work on the sex/gender system continued along the years and went much further than its initial abovementioned steps, especially because her theorization was never detached from her political practice.

“In 1989, Christine Delphy made a potentially path-breaking intervention: she proposed to understand gender as the “principle of partition itself”. Rather than the social meaning that attaches, more or less arbitrarily, to the two “sexes”, Delphy conceived of gender as what

divides them into two in the first place, making sex consequential as a marker of group difference and a justification for social hierarchy. Gender, then, is not something an individual has by virtue of his or her sex; it is the agency by means of which sexed groups and individuals come into being.” (Disch, 2015:827)

The article I am inspired by in this brief analysis of Delphy’s work *Christine Delphy’s constructivist materialism: an overlooked French feminism* is part of a special issue of SAQ (The South Atlantic Quarterly) entirely dedicated to the 1970s feminisms which Lisa Disch curated in 2015. The interdisciplinary collection of articles has the intention of looking at the 1970s feminisms and find different ways to give back narratives of that period devoid of the plethora of (positive and negative) emblematic definitions that have transformed it from an epoch to an adjective. The only non-US feminism chosen to be included in the collection is the French. In her article, Lisa Disch exhumes some of Delphy’s fundamental steps in sex/gender analysis and does so with the intention of looking at how major gaps in feminist genealogy continue to shape the way in which we think of feminism as both an academic tool and a political movement.

It is in her article *Rethinking sex and gender* (1993)³², that Delphy develops her ideas on gender even further. As we read in Disch’s quotation, Delphy defines gender as the principle of partition itself and does so through a systematic analysis of how we understand reality through sex and gender itself. There are many points of possible discussion in this text which I will list under as I have perceived them and then analyze the theoretical process behind them.

- The analysis starts from the claim that most work on gender has been based on the assumption that sex precedes gender and that this has prevented us from rethinking gender in an unbiased way.
- The notion of gender has been theorized from that of sex roles which is attributed to the anthropologist Margaret Mead. She described societies as divided into two *roles* (men and women) but did not ‘question’ it. She detected disadvantages for example for homosexuals but also many advantages for society itself, and for culture and civilization. She sees the division of labor as natural due to the different reproductive roles and different physical strength of males and females. This has represented ‘commonsense’ for a long time even for feminists.

³² The article came out in French in 1991 and was then translated by Diana Leonard and came out in English in 1993.

- The idea of sex roles was developed between the 1940s and the 1960s (Komarovsky, Klein, Myrdal, Michel) and was defined as ‘role equals the active aspect of a status’ (prestige within society). In this theory people’s material conditions and activities are to derive from the social structure rather than *nature* (already denaturalizing the respective roles); the role is not simply psychological as in Margaret Mead’s analysis but relies on a social structure.
- The desire to escape domination and the fear to lose fundamental social categories (like the sex categories) has prevented women from thinking rigorously about the relationship between division and hierarchy as the question that mirrors the relationship between sex and gender.
- To achieve a deep understanding and the possibility to change reality we must accept a temporary pain for an increased uncertainty about the world and how we know it.

The first issue she deals with is the misplaced understanding of the difference between *division* and *hierarchy* when it comes to sex and gender which she attributes to the political and personal fear of losing something we (women, feminists) have come to understand as indispensable while at the same time claiming the desire to destroy domination. This almost philosophical claim will be the undertone of her following analysis.

In her writings on the division of society into two sex roles, Margaret Mead highlights a couple of points she proceeds from when looking at said division: temperament (inner feelings), culture, biology. In *Sex and Temperament* (1935) she works on how *innate differences* of temperament and cultural influences form the nature of sex roles in determinate social cultures while in her *Male and Female* (1949) she develops her arguments by claiming that the roles are based on ‘primary sex differences’ and on anatomical differences plus different roles in reproduction. No wonder with these premises that Betty Friedan would consider Mead’s views on sex difference as the cornerstone of her *Feminine Mystique* (1963).

The division of labor and the different status of men and women, then, says Delphy are *natural* (given, immutable) for Mead who also does not interrogate the hierarchy between the two sexes: so neither division (claimed to be natural) nor hierarchy (left unquestioned) find a place in this analysis that later informed, and continues to do so, big part of feminism both politically and academically in *rethinking* gender. The question of the *innate differences* in temperament and feelings for example was utilized to support the individuals’ right to express

their individuality *freely* (as nature commands). “In the process it was implied that ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ traits together constitute and exhaust the whole of human possibilities” (Delphy, 1993:2)

She moves on to highlight how the idea of sex roles (that actually was a term Margaret Mead never used per se) was critically developed by the authors I mentioned in my list and how they would utilize a structural-functionalist method to define role as “the active aspect of a status” and status as “the equivalent of the level of prestige within society, and each status had roles which the individuals” (ibid.) While moving the attention from the psychological (Mead) aspects of temperament given by innate differences to the social division of labor, this theory still “confirmed the arbitrary aspect of the division of qualities between the sexes, this time by an epistemological diktat, that is, by their postulate that everyone plays roles.” (ibid.)

The concept of gender derived in the 1970s from this initial idea of sex roles that had been discussed, embraced and criticized in many ways by both scholars and feminists. Ann Oakley’s *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972) is the text Delphy refers to and quotes:

“‘Sex’ is a word that refers to the biological differences between male and female: the visible difference in genitalia, the related difference in procreative function. ‘Gender’ however is a matter of culture: it refers to the social classification into ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’.”

(Oakley in Delphy)

Delphy’s account of Oakley’s theory brings us a step forward:

“Oakley’s use of the concept of gender thus covers all the established differences between men and women, whether they are individual differences (studied by psychologists), or social roles or cultural representations (studied by sociologists and anthropologists). [...] But one thing which is missing from Oakley’s definition [...] and which has become central to the feminist positions which have been developed subsequently, is the fundamental asymmetry and hierarchy between the two groups, or roles, or sexes, or genders.” (Delphy p. 3)

With the advent of the concept of gender, Delphy sees a three-way opening in the epistemology of the sex/gender binary although this opening remains a possibility and not necessarily a reality: (1) all the differences between the sexes were gathered in one concept (2) the use of the singular (gender as opposed to genders) allowed to move from the two divided parts to gender as the principle of partition (3) the idea of hierarchy is firmly anchored in the concept, at least in theory. The discrepancy between ‘in theory’ and ‘in practice’ for Delphy is made evident by the fact that the idea of genders and of sexes have grown apart or,

better, have become independent from each other: both genders (as the content) independent from both sexes (as the container). “We have continued to think of gender in terms of sex: to see it as a social dichotomy determined by a natural dichotomy. We now see gender as the *content* with sex as the *container*. The content may vary, and some consider it *must* vary, but the container is considered to be invariable because it is part of nature, and nature, ‘does not change’. Moreover, part of the nature of sex itself is seen to be its *tendency to have a social content/to vary culturally*.” (ibid. p. 3)

The cul-de-sac for Delphy arises when this ‘independence’ is never questioned and that the most important issue of the relationship between sex gender translates in questions such as “what sort of social classification does sex give rise to?” But there’s something that remains unchallenged for Delphy:

“What they never ask is why sex should give rise to any sort of social classification.” (ibid.)

Here, finally, we can understand the radical break of the materialist theorization of the sex/gender binary. Even slightly implying that sex precedes gender leads, for Delphy, to two possible lines of argument, I quote: (1) biological sex and different functions in procreation for males and females necessarily gives rise to a minimal division in labor and (2) biological sex as physical trait which is not only suitable, but destined by its intrinsic ‘salience’ (in psycho-cognitive terms) to be a receptacle for classifications. When it comes to the first line of argument and its naturalist premises, Delphy highlights how it fails to explain both the natural reason for this division and the reason this division is subsequently extended to all the fields of social activity. When it comes to the second line of argument and its implications of the necessity of classification of human beings, it fails to explain and prove that sex is indeed more prominent than other physical traits which are equally distinguishable.

Last but not least is her discussion of what she calls the ‘cognitivist argument’. Cognitivist here refers to Levi Strauss’ theory that, I quote, all human societies share in the irrepressible and pre-social (hence psychological) need to divide everything in two (p.4) and a similar operation is detected with Derrida and his idea of the importance of *différance* (I briefly discuss this term in the chapter on genealogy). On Delphy’s account, while it is not problematic to justify the importance of dividing and classifying in order to know things by differentiation this theory again fails to envision and explain the hierarchy.

“It is worth pausing here, because the ‘cognitivists’ think sex is a ‘prominent trait’ because they think physical sex is strongly correlated with functional differences, and because they

assume that the rest of humanity shares in this ‘knowledge’. [...] To them it is self-evident that there are two, and only two, sexes, and that this dichotomy exactly crosschecks with the division between potential bearers and non-bearers of children.” (ibid. p. 5)

How can we, then, break and question this syllogism that conflates, by not ignoring them, division and hierarchy creating not only a continuum between hierarchical difference and hierarchical value but also a principle of reality where biological/social-determinism adds up to human or, better, becomes the only accessible way into humanity?

“To try to question these ‘facts’ is indeed to try to crack one of the toughest nuts in our perception of the world. We must therefore add to the hypothesis that gender precedes sex the following question: When we connect gender and sex, are we comparing something social with something natural, or are we comparing something social with something which is *also* social (in this case, the way a given society represents ‘biology’ to itself)?” (ibid. p. 5)

Cracking the nut of how we perceive the world means for me creating a rupture in the way we *know*, in our epistemic act of knowing which, I agree with Delphy (and the feminist materialists in general) is possible only by envisioning, embracing a new utopia which, in its original meaning of *ū* ‘not’ and *tópos* ‘place’, indicates a place that does not (yet, I would add) exist.

“All feminists reject the sex/gender hierarchy, but very few are ready to admit that the logical consequence of this rejection is a refusal of sex roles, and the disappearance of gender. Feminists seem to want to abolish hierarchy and even sex roles, but not difference itself. They want to abolish the contents but not the container. [...] at the very least they want to maintain the classification.” (ibid. p. 6)

In order to come to that place that does not yet exist it is necessary to envision it and believe that it is possible to *know* the world otherwise; still, this has to happen on a political (as in the personal is political and the political is personal) level which means that there has to be an underlying will to change the status quo up.

“Delphy’s conceptualization of gender as “the principle of partition” belies two of the stories that have presented the seventies and nineties as theoretically and politically different feminisms. As a constructivist materialist approach to theorizing gender, Delphy’s formulation defies the “developmental narrative” that positions “feminist poststructuralist theorists...as the first to deconstruct ‘woman’, and as either heroic in surpassing past mistakes, or responsible for the ills of feminism in general” (Hemmings)” (Disch, 2015:829)

Delphy's abrasive voice and her rigorous sociological work have made it a heavy job for me to 'translate' the deeply transformative, even to this day, nature of her research. As Lisa Disch points out in the quotation above, what Delphy offers with her relentless work on sex and gender is to break the path of the developmental narrative we have seen with Hemmings and the discourse on genealogy.

Colette Guillaumin. An introduction.

Colette Guillaumin was an important French sociologist whose work started to circulate and influence feminist and gender studies in France since 1968. She was, just like Christine Delphy and Monique Wittig, very active in the MLF. Her work has a big theoretical and political impact on the concept of race, sex and gender especially with the intersectional understanding of nowadays feminist theory which also derives from the American Black Feminist Studies and Critical Race Studies. The main interest of her studies revolved around the sociology of racism, but her work remains to these days largely unknown to a larger audience and one of the main causes resides in the translations of her work which came about almost thirty years after her first publications in French. Starting with her own graduation thesis translated by Danielle Juteau-Lee in 1995 with the title "The specific characteristics of racist ideology." (*L'idéologie raciste. Genèse et langage actuel*. Paris, La Haye, Mouton, 1972), her theoretical trajectory takes a completely new path which she pioneers: she studies racism as a thinking system originated in the XVIII century. This system, as Chetcuti-Osorovitz and Sanos explain³³, produces 'race' as 'modalité de distinction' (modality of distinction) anchored in Nature and biology and organizing the social and political exclusion. In the 1970s Guillaumin engages in a fierce academic battle to raise interest in the intersection of the sociology of racism and the sociology of the social relation of the sexes, both branches of sociology were heavily disqualified in the French academia notwithstanding the great influence of theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Colette Audry and Frantz Fanon.

Together with other materialist feminists such as Monique Wittig, Nicole Claude-Mathieu and Christine Delphy she founded the journal QF in 1977 with Simone de Beauvoir as publishing director. The journal was characterised by a strongly anti-essentialist, multi-disciplinary and

³³ Bulletin des Archives du féminisme.

theoretical approach and Guillaumin gave some important contributions such as “The practice of power and belief in Nature” and “The question of difference”³⁴.

“Guillaumin invents the concept of *sexage* (analytic category that takes into account the notions and practices of slavery and serfdom) to apprehend and analyse the material reality of power relations and their mental form in a materialist perspective; she does this starting from her own analysis of racism as an ideological form that marks the bodies with a so-called ‘natural’ difference.”³⁵

Through her work Guillaumin wants to lay-out that the classes of sex are constituted via the material and ideological appropriation of women through the appropriation of time, social and sexual obligation in marriage and the juridical legitimation of the discourse on Nature. It is the social relations that constitute the social group woman, “just like racism produces race, and not the way around, sexism produces sex through the relation of domination that reduces the dominated to things or natural objects.” (ibid.)

The intent that lies under Guillaumin’s work can be summarized as uncovering self-evident categories both as social categories and mental categories. Danielle Juteau-Lee clearly states it in the introduction to the translation of Guillaumin’s work into English “a relentless pursuit to uncover the social relations of domination which structure social inequality and (dis)organize our mental categories. Her *demarche* identifies the processes constructing ‘race’ and ‘sex’ as given and self-evident categories and more importantly the social relations within which they are embedded.” (Juteau-Lee 1995:1)

³⁴ I quote the articles directly with their english titles translated by Danielle Juteau-Lee in 1995.

³⁵ Chetcuti-Osorovits and Sanos in «Colette Guillaumin (28 janvier 1934 – 10 mai 2017) published in Bulletin des Archives du féminisme. My translations.

#All lives matter! Race and Sex: the marks of a systemic ideology.



THE NEW YORKER



"My, what a big blind spot for institutionalized racism you have, Grandma."

36

"The idea of a race. What is this self-evident notion, this 'fact of nature'? It is an ordinary historical fact – a social fact. I deliberately say *idea* of race: the belief that this category is a material phenomenon. For it is a heterogeneous intellectual formulation, with one foot in the natural sciences and one foot in the social sciences. On the other hand, it is an aggregate of somatic and physiological characteristics – in short, race as conceived by the physical anthropologists and the biologists. [...] social characteristics that express a group – but a social group of a special type, a group *perceived as natural*, a group of people considered as materially specific in their bodies. This naturalness may be regarded by some people as fundamental (a natural group whose nature is expressed in social characteristics). Or it may be regarded by others as a secondary fact (a social group that 'furthermore' is natural). In any case, in the current state of opinion, this naturalness is always present in the approach which the social sciences take, and which the social system has crystallized and expressed under the name of 'race'." (Guillaumin, 1995: 133)

In this article from 1977 "Race and nature: the system of marks.", Guillaumin takes into consideration the idea of 'natural groups' and 'natural relations' in society. It is important to remember that, for the French materialist feminists, the term natural indicates something specific, immutable, essential. This specific passage reminds me of the double bind between

³⁶ Image taken from a post on the Facebook page of the blogger «Cranky Fat Feminist» (april 4th 2019)

gender and sex according to Delphy: the biological dichotomy that precedes, founds and perpetuates the social dichotomy while being perceived, as a whole system, as natural: a group of people perceived as materially specific in their bodies, as Guillaumin writes, applies to the category of women as well. If, in fact, the notion or idea of race is a self-evident one, how would it be possible to trace it back in history?

Guillaumin's research revolves around the social and historical frames of the production of racism which, in turn, produced the concept of race itself. By affirming this she means that race as a notion or the epistemic act we do when we talk about race, derives from a specific social imaginary or a discourse on race that has been created in order to justify exclusion and domination. To deconstruct the self-evidence with which we perceive race she gives a precise historical (a term that materialists oppose to nature) frame. Race is, according to Guillaumin, the representation of tangible, brutal material and social conditions for those classified as 'the eternal Other' in the race imaginary. This system of perceptions was formed during the 17th, 18th and 19th century when, especially in Europe (with France leading the way), there was a great focus on equality of all individuals. In that particular historical moment, the discourse on race and the racist ideology lost their merely social connotation and evolved into a naturalist discourse forged by a scientific stamp. In a passage from her article «Specific characteristics of racist ideology. » Guillaumin shows how to trace back to the 'origin' of the racist ideology by detecting the change in meaning (as a signifier with its corollary) of the word 'race'. She chooses two of the most important and popular dictionaries in France (Wailly and Robert) and goes through different definitions of 'race' that span through two centuries.

«Race. 18th c.: Lignée: (line of) descent, all those who come from the same family.

[Conversely, under lignée we find race]

So, the term refers strictly to family continuity. NB: continuity of the family, not genetic continuity, which is not mentioned here, in contrast to later definitions.

20th c. [We are told that the word goes back to the 16th]: 1) Family considered in its successive generations. 2) Subdivision of species, itself divided into sub-races and varieties, constituted by individuals with common hereditary characteristics which represent variations within the species. 3) With reference to human groups: subdivision of the human race, equivalent to the division of an animal species into 'races' (breeds).

1749. (Buffon). In the strict sense, each ethnic group which is differentiated from others by a set of hereditary physical characteristics representing variations within the species. 19th c.

(By ext., or improperly). Natural group of people with similar characteristics deriving from a

common past... This broad meaning, quite close to that of '(line) of descent', is often used and understood as in 2), in disregard of the scientific facts. » (Guillaumin, 1995:40)

And further «These meanings all seem self-evident to us today, and are completely integrated in our perception of the term. The word *generation* marks a shift, for in becoming the corollary of the 'family' definition, it introduces a biophysical schema ('generation' comes from 'engender') in place of a legal concept, that of 'line of descent'. Thus, a biological continuity replaces a juridical continuity. » (ibid. 1995:41)

The idea and the perception (immediate associations, 'rationalized' and 'true' facts etc.) that we have of race has then been engendered quite recently. These ideas and perceptions form a system that allows us to essentialize the concept of race through shared characteristics that are perpetuated immutably through the generations. As we understand from the excerpt above, the word *generation* (coming from 'engender' that means generate, procreate – with the word offspring as a corollary) determines the shift from juridical to biological that is to say that race goes from being a signifier connotating social facts to a concept connotating a fact of nature (which is to be considered immutable). Long before this shift in meaning it did not exist a racial narrative even in the most 'exotic' storytelling of all times, those of Marco Polo.

Guillaumin points out that in all the travel histories of the world-famous adventurer there is no mention of race (with its subsequent biophysical corollary) when describing people from all over the world. It is not until the 19th century that terms such as *Aryan*, *yellow* and *Semitic* appeared as epistemic facts.

«The idea of determinism in Nature was the chief victory of the new scientific spirit; it was to develop slowly and have many consequences. In the nineteenth century, then, social amalgams became groups of individuals – individuals linked together by their natural character. The expression of the group idea in such terms as 'Aryan' or 'Negro' was something quite different from its expression in terms of slaves or nobles. It is irrelevant that the term 'Negro' came to be used in relations involving slavery: eighteenth-century dictionaries give 'slave' and 'Negro' as equivalents; or that 'Aryan' is derived from linguistic analysis and the classification of languages into Indo-European and Semitic. Both terms soon came to form part of a naturalist conception of social groups, and to signify what had just been invented, namely the idea that social groups were 'races' or 'natural amalgams'. » (ibid. 1995:71)

Before the 19th century race was a concept that attained the sphere of cultural differences influenced by criteria such as geography, psychology and socialization. The racialized implant of biology that started from the 19th century pushed towards an essentialization of all

humanity by establishing groups that were meant to be immutable and unchangeable (that's to say: natural). Just to be clear, speaking of essentialization (referred to essentialism) means creating an indelible mark, to say it with Guillaumin, that makes a category, a sign, a signifier the direct expression of an ideology with a systemic nature; this conception, as I have pointed out before in the thesis and as I will encounter again soon in this chapter, is what also lies at the prodromes of the debate on sexual difference.

In our epistemic act of utilizing the category race then, there is a whole epistemic process that is being invisibilized: namely the creation of a perception of race as a natural, self-evident fact (notwithstanding the intention of being racist or not). This raises my attention especially towards the French materialist feminists' ability to turn the tables on the most common of our syllogisms by uncovering how we get to know, how we get to be knowers. Another of the materialist core tools of analysis is the focus on relations that prove to be the solid base of the racist ideology. Guillaumin points out how the belief in the physical existence of race opens the way to the belief in what she calls 'the idea of natural relationship', how does this paly out?

«It is vitally important for us to know how and upon what grounds arose the idea that certain social relationships are *natural*, irrespective, in the last resort, of politics or economics, and reflecting only Nature itself together with its constraints and its inevitability. For let there be no mistake: what is urged upon us in the form of racial (or natural) symbols is the great law of obedience to order and necessity, the law enjoined in so many different ways by oppressors upon the oppressed. » (ibid 1995:62)

This little gig I am reporting from a one-man show explains very easily the socialization of race, the idea of the mark represented by the color that never really corresponds to one's own skin color but that is assigned socially because it stands for a specificity that the racialized bring with them.

“My son was born and raised in America. I remember one day he came home from school, when he was five years old and said to me:

Son: Hey, dad! I learned American history today. Now I really feel bad for black people!

Father: Yeah, they are really mistreated in American history!

Son: Yeah! And I am so glad that I am white!

Father: Hold on! You're not white!

Son: Then what am I?

Father: You're yellow!

He took a look at his own hand and said: Daddy, this doesn't look yellow to me!

Father: Yes, I know! But this is America and everybody has to have a color, and that's the color they gave us! You better deal with it!

But my son has a good point, though. Nobody in America, especially a person of color is exactly the color they were assigned. This is not exactly yellow, it's kind of brown. A black person is not exactly black, they are kind of...brown. So, we're pretty much all different shades of Mexicans!"³⁷

It is interesting to look at what kind of paradigm we embark in when it comes to the relation to the Other. That paradigm, as we have seen, has been trans-formed through the centuries and Guillaumin points out how it emerged, as we know it today, with the idea of nations and sense of belonging, the bourgeoisie and the colonization. With the emergence, during the 18th century, of colonization as civilization (of the Other) it was born the idea of the white Man come to liberate the colonized from all sorts of infirmity: lack of modern tools of production, lack of culture and moral (and it is still to this day a very strong idea). Another strong example is represented by Judaism in the 19th century which went from being a (different) religion to being a (different) race with immutable characteristics.

“The era of positive definition was therefore followed by a time of definition by negation, and auto-reference by altero-reference: the bourgeoisie is not black, nor Jewish, nor proletarian. So that leads to an apparently paradoxical situation. Racism in the modern sense first arose in a ‘democratic’ society, a mass society whose expressed ideals were fraternal and egalitarian [...] At the moment in history when the murder of the king had opened the door to a ‘society of equals’, when the night of August 4 1789 had thrown privilege of all types to the winds, when Catholics, Jews and Protestants were no longer anything but citizens, when slavery was about to be abolished, there lurked behind this rosy picture of egalitarianism [...] the grim shadow of an unbreakable determinism, a closed world: human groups were no longer formed by divine decree or royal pleasure, but by irreversible diktat of nature. [...] ‘such are the laws of Nature, from which no one is exempt...’. The gradually accumulating doctrines of the existence of races, [...] the combined forces of atheism, determinism, individualism, democracy and egalitarianism in fact served to justify the system of oppression which was being built at the same time. By proposing a scheme of immanent physical causality (by race, colour, sex, nature), that system provides an irrefutable justification for the crushing of resourceless classes and peoples, and legitimacy of the elite.” (ibid 1995:56,57)

³⁷ <https://youtu.be/x4nn3QkOZCA>

Laugh therapy: My Asian son thinks he's white! (featuring Joe Wong)

How come we *see* race then if it is a construction of the racist ideology? Should we stop believing in our ability to *see*? How can we deal with what we *see* and why we *see* it?

Guillaumin's materialist epistemology shakes our act of knowing to its core. The point is that what we see is the mark of the racist ideology rather than race. What she means is not that it is crazy to see the difference between whites and racialized or acknowledging that people have different appearances but rather that whenever a racialized subject is looked at what is being seen is a person who is materially and psychosocially very specific in their own body. To see the mark is to avail the racist ideology that has created that mark. Our act of perceiving race has been created by the racist ideology and cemented through the centuries, whether we are racists or not. What is a mark according to Guillaumin?

«The characteristics of the mark vary, and its indelibility, as well as its more or less close proximity to/association with the body, is a function of: (1) the assumed permanence of the position that it is a sign of; and (2) the degree of subjection that it symbolizes. The convict under the *ancien regime*, the contemporary concentration camp victim and the American slave bore the mark on their body (tattooed number or brand), a sign of the permanence of the power relationship. The dominating group imposes its fixed inscription on those who are materially subject to them. » (ibid 1995:140)

The mere idea of dominance summed to the idea of race creates a relation of dominance between the *invisible* (a subjectivity that does not require to see itself because it is the term against which everybody else – different – gets assigned a specificity) and the *different*. The same discourse of dominance and difference is constructed around sex.

“The dominance relationship produces the idea that there are ‘different’ races (and therefore racial relationships), that there are ‘different’ sexes (and therefore ‘sex’ roles), that there is a whole set of functions operating in a continuous society (and therefore continuity between classes). Domination conceals itself behind the idea of ‘difference’: in other words, the ideal that all belong to the same universe, that all possess the same reference but in terms of different kinds of being, fixed forever. Such theories tend to show us as being heterogenous in principle and separate by nature but linked together in an everlasting high order, the order of hierarchy, of groups arising out of relationship. Social agents, those who embody social relationships, are brought forth fully armed by the transcendent universe of Nature.” (ibid 1995:64)

“Guillaumin transformed the point of view on materialism and materiality in such a way that after her it cannot be recognized. One has to read Guillaumin to understand that what we have called materialism until now was very far from the mark, since the most important aspect of materiality was ignored.” (Wittig, 1992: xiv)

and later:

This quote from Wittig help me point out why I chose the #Alllivesmatter image: for me it gives the measure, in our day to day imaginary, of the ‘natural racial relations’ that have been created through the last two centuries and have become true as ideological constructs where psychological and moral connotations are given to material bodies by making them into a social group. It also gives me the measure of how a racialized group always know that they are a certain race just like a sexualized group always know they are a certain sex: no person of color does not know that they are black or non-white, no woman does not know that she is a woman.

White is not a racialized group because it represents the universal point of view, and man is not a sexualized group for the same reason.

“‘Race’ and ‘sex’ are real, but only as ideological constructs used to identify groups socially constituted in the context of a relation of appropriation.” (Juteau-Lee in Guillaumin, 1995:13)

My reflections point at the fact that we may not be able to ‘unsee’ race or sex especially if our standpoint is an ‘invisible’ center that cannot see itself (as race or sex) but we can do the epistemic act of deconstructing the ideological constructs by creating a reflection around concepts such as: difference, specificity, subordination. Guillaumin has always sustained that difference was one of the tools of the norm to maintain a status quo of the oppressed; in fact, according to the theorist what racialized and sexualized group have in common and share as sociological trait is not that of ‘being different’ but rather that of being subordinate. To explain it even further, Guillaumin, presents racism and sexism as norms that are not necessarily violent but also ‘celebratory’ of specificities and differences, a tool that helps keeping in place a hegemony and a universal point of view that creates, in turn, a subordinate and specific point of view. “Thus, her relentless critique of *le féminisme de la différence* does not come as a surprise. [...] *différence* [...] renders invisible the social construction of the naturalist discourse and perpetuates it. It occludes that women, blacks and other dominated social groups are not categories existing of and by themselves; that they are constructed in the context of a social relation of domination and dependence.” (Juteau-Lee in Guillaumin, 1995:17)

This particular epistemological and sociological strand was extremely controversial in the post '68 France where different ethnicities and movements were fighting for their own rights. But as Danielle de Juteau-Lee explains in the introduction to Guillaumin's anthology of essays, the idea of difference as a political tool has always presented many downfalls and has opened the way to a renewed domination.

“The extreme Right in France has taken over slogans of difference and uses them to justify returning foreigners to their countries of origin [...] this approach fosters the development of an essentialist theory of identity and identity politics by making invisible the processes constituting groups as a social category.” (ibid. 1995:18)

In comparison, the materialist analytical tool does not exclude the element of diversity:

“Belonging to a sex class, Guillaumin would argue, does not entail sameness, identity of situation of interests and of life-styles; it means being part of an appropriated category constituted as females.” (ibid. 1995:12) and the same goes for racialized groups; furthermore, this *modus operandi* allows to detect the structural differences between women who are only appropriated as sex and the ones who are also appropriated as race opening for an intersectional encompassing of sex, gender and race.

Monique Wittig. An introduction.

Monique Wittig was the daughter of catholic rightwing parents, her mother introduced her to literature and theatre and her sister was a painter and a fellow feminist. Aged fifteen her family moved from Alsace to Paris due to Nazi invasion. Together with her sister Gille she engages in the project of becoming a writer and a painter. She studies literature and Chinese and in 1986 she obtains her degree in social science from EHESS (Ecole des hautes etudes en sciences sociales) with a thesis called *Le chantier litteraire* (The literary workshop) that was published post mortem. Before being a published writer, she worked as a teacher and eventually as a translator (Marcuse, Barnes). From 1976 she lived in the US and taught in various universities such as Berkley, NYU and Vassar College before she was offered a professorship at the University of Arizona in 1990 where she made tenure in 1998.

In 1964 Wittig published her first novel *L'Opoponax* that was destined to become a great international success and that won her the prestigious Prix Medici. The style of the novel is inspired by the movement Nouveau Roman (which anticipated shortly the movement of Nouvelle Vague) engaging in a new way of writing that goes beyond plots and psychological portraits of the characters and focuses on the role of language and its possibilities. Wittig's work on language and its epistemic power starts with this novel, language as a source of

social oppression is a research that will invest all of her political essays as well as her other novels. In fact, if language for her is the instrument that allows to change social reality, it is also the medium that spreads the dominant thought. Language is for her “the first social contract, permanent, decisive”. About this Namaskar Shaktini argues that:

«Language, its power, its role in constructing the genderized world, and its role in constructing the subject was the constant focus of Wittig’s work, whether in literature, theory, or politics. For Wittig, a materialist, the revolution will take place only if it is an epistemological revolution. » [...] In fact, Wittig conceives language as a “solid body”, that has in turn not only a physical, real, cumbersome dimension but also a more abstract one, that is to say the signification. » (Shaktini, 2005:4)

In *The Opoponax* Wittig works on taking language and words to their unrefined state to find this solid mass that is language before all the superstructures imposed on it in the everyday use. The reality is perceived through the exiguous and scattered descriptions of the main voice of whom we know little, Christine Legrand. The constant use of the French impersonal pronoun *on* is a means for the specific epistemological revolution Wittig engages in and is still a source of debate among feminists and translators.

In 1969 *Les Guerilleres* is published: this book is the start of Wittig’s more accurate reflection on heterosexuality as a political system to fight against. In this novel the main subject changes from *on* (the impersonal subject utilized in *The Opoponax*) to *elles* which corresponds to the French feminine plural subject (they). This choice reflects Wittig’s effort of universalizing the lesbian point of view operating towards another step of the epistemological revolution she has started years before and that will translate also in her production of political essays. The book is an epic poem that represents unapologetically the relationship between the categories of sex as a mortal battle that women must win in order to stay alive, to exist bodily, politically, materially. Going from an impersonal subject (*on*) to a plural one (*elles*) indicates not only a substitution of the explicit or implicit universal male subject that represents all kinds of subjects in an apparently inclusive neuter, but also adds a collective quality to the subject(s) whose universalized point of view becomes the reader’s access to reality. The collective quality of the subject I refer to is however not indicative of a compact formation or an identity/identitarian block but rather a collective of situated bodies who are subjects in history and in the storytelling. This theme is also present in her political essays as a reference to both her preoccupations with the inexistence of the subject in Marxist theory of class struggle and her epistemological effort of universalizing a point of view that is particular.

I think it is fundamental to highlight here that for Wittig the use of *elles* does not represent the will to shift from a universal male to a universal female or, to use a term very into vogue, to feminize the storytelling of reality, but it is rather an expedient, another step towards her epistemological goal:

“To destroy the categories of sex in politics and philosophy, to destroy gender in language (at least to modify its use) is [...] part of my work in writing, as a writer.” (Wittig, 1992:81)

The same reflection extends to another important work published in 1973: *Corps lesbien* (The lesbian body). This text is a new strand of experimentation with language and style, Wittig defies the canonic way to think of the body in all its meanings. A political goal here is to unapologetically tell the story of lesbian desire which passes through the body and is made invisible in heteronormative society. In order to do this, Wittig disintegrates the body and gives it back to the reader particle by particle: organs, skin, fluids, flesh and blood. The disintegration makes space to re-invention, re-signification of the body and the desire which do not really exist until they are thought of and uttered beyond the systemic heterosexuality. Wittig’s fragmented body reflects a fragmented subject as well: *j/e* (the fragmented subject of the French *je*, I).

“*J/e* is the symbol of the lived, rending experience which is *m/y* writing, of this cutting in two which throughout literature is the exercise of a language which does not constitute *m/e* as subject. *J/e* poses the ideological and historic question of feminine subjects. (Certain groups of women have proposed writing *jee* or *jeue*.) If *I [J/e]* examine *m/y* specific situation as subject in the language, *I* am physically incapable of writing ‘I’ [*Je*], *I [J/e]* have no desire to do so.” (Wittig 1975:10) the lesbian body

The work and influence of Wittig extends to literature, philosophy and politics, making her materialist feminist theoretical stance pretty unique and misunderstood primarily because of the disconnection from the materialist thought in the analysis of her work: “If American feminists have not always understood Wittig’s thought it is perhaps because they lack the tradition of materialist feminism developed in France by Wittig, Christine Delphy, Nicole-Claude Mathieu, Colette Guillaumin and others. These social scientists, emerging from a French Marxist/socialist tradition, conceptualize society in terms of concrete relations among groups of people. The relationships between men and women rest on the material exploitation of women’s labor – including reproductive and sexual labor – by men. Wittig’s debt to Marxist theory is evident from her earliest essays. [...] Wittig recognizes that Marxism is inadequate to the needs of feminist analysis. She criticizes it [...] because it rests upon a fundamental binarism that always fails to resolve itself into the desired synthesis.” (Griffin Crowder 2005:64)

The straight mind and the destruction of the sexes.

As Louise Turcotte puts it in the foreword to the 1992 edition of “The straight mind and other essays”, the work of Wittig is one that constantly intersects theory and political struggle.

Theory is the instrument to shape and create strategic key concept in order to achieve the overthrow of heterosexuality conceptualized as an institution and not anymore as a sexuality. This entails that heterosexuality be taken into account as a system and not only as an acting upon a sexual desire.

Her questions revolve around the human and its conceptualization: who has and has had the primacy of defining “human”? what is “the human” according to said definition? Her analysis points at the impossibility of categories to be “natural givens” or pre-existing a definition, a conceptualization, pre-existing society. When it comes to how we envision *human*, Wittig is very clear in her essay ‘Homo sum’:

“[...] for all its pretensions to being universal what has been until now considered to be ‘human’ in our Western philosophy concerns only a small fringe of people: white men, proprietors of the means of production, along with the philosophers who theorized their point of view as the only and exclusively possible one.”

In her essay *Homo sum* Wittig observes how the shift from the material to the metaphysical renders possible a hierarchical construction of the categories of sex where there is the “*One*” and the “*Other*” which are loaded with positive (the one) and negative (the other) moral concepts. The vision of Wittig involves a transformation: reconciling the dichotomic categories in order to destroy them and achieve a monistic view once again. The *Other* must take over the side of the *One* but only to abolish orders and hierarchies. It’s important to add here that Wittig was the only one among the French materialist feminists to take into account the revolution of the symbolic order which was a concept much more developed by the group P&P and a more cultural, psychoanalytic feminist theory:

“As the only literary writer among this group of thinkers, Wittig also contends that the symbolic order, which Marxism relegated to the superstructure, is itself a material force in society. Expanding upon the insight of Simone de Beauvoir that men are the One and women the eternal Other within all social realms including language, Wittig maintains that the symbolic order is as much a fundamental political category as economics or other concrete social relations.” (Griffin Crowder 2005:64)

According to Wittig it is fundamental to apply a materialist approach to dialectics and to do this she starts from the change operated by Marx and Engels on Hegel's essentialist categories, as she defines them.

“Our political thought has been for more than a century shaped by dialectics. Those of us who have discovered dialectical thought through its most modern form, the Marxian and Engelsian one, that is, the producer of the theory of class struggle, had, in order to understand its mechanism, to refer to Hegel, particularly if they needed to comprehend the reversal which Marx and Engels inflicted on Hegel's dialectics. That is briefly a dynamization of the essentialist categories of Hegel, a transport from metaphysics to politics (to show that in the political and social field metaphysical terms had to be interpreted in terms of conflicts and not anymore in terms of essential oppositions and to show that the conflicts could be overcome, and the categories of opposition could be reconciled).” (Wittig, 1992:47)

The change is determined by the shift from metaphysics to politics, a move that consented to read the metaphysical terms as conflicts and not as essential oppositions thus creating the possibility to overcome the conflicts and reconcile the oppositions. This epistemological choice for me is a way to develop further thought on the apparent pair of opposition difference/equality (which a mainstream way to think feminist positions) as a dichotomy based on a prescriptive metaphysical vision which entails a universal human subject and a specific set of unspoken questions that relate to that subject, such as: different from whom? Equal to whom? Wittig's approach to sexual categories entails this kind of analysis. In fact, when she theorizes sex and sexual categories in terms of *destruction* rather than *deconstruction* it is an effort to *reset* “the human” epistemologically by destroying the metaphysical categories based on hierarchical dichotomies that cannot be de-constructed but only challenged and destructed. To do this, Wittig demonstrates the political *nature* of said categories and the urgency of challenging them in their apparently innate hierarchy: there is no way an epistemology that does not aim at destroying sexual categories based on a specific hierarchy and essentialism can be an epistemology of liberation, of revolution.

The next step for Wittig is applying a feminist approach to what she defines ‘an operation of reduction’ in Marx and Engels materialist theory as they reduce every struggle to two terms only (class struggle, capitalists/workers) doing away with racism, antisemitism, sexism and all the terms that are not directly interpretable in terms of capitalist economic value. Dealing with these issues, recognizing and changing the epistemics of this reductionism is one of the fundamental elements defining materialist feminism. The failure of the Marxist dialectics (in

the end the proletarians did not change the world for the better) causes for Wittig a return to essentialist metaphysical terms and the loss of a transformative dynamics. To examine women's situation from a lesbian political philosophical point of view Wittig points out that one has to go back to:

"[...]Aristotle and Plato to comprehend how the categories of opposition that have shaped us were born." (Wittig, 1992:49)

And that is 'the original locus' lying behind the Hegelian dialectics. It is at this point that Wittig detects an important change from monism (no division in Being) to duality due to the contribution of the Pythagorean adopted by Aristotle who introduced the tables of opposites in his *Metaphysics* making these opposites into moral categories (male/female right/left good/bad etc), ethical concepts coopting the Pythagorean series originally created for mathematics. Here Wittig points at the change from monism to metaphysical and moral differentiation in Being. With Aristotle there is even a further step from practical to abstract concepts where the concepts go from making measurement possible to being translated into a metaphysical dimension (dimension of Being) "and pretty soon they got totally dissociated from their context." (ibid p. 50)

The revolution in epistemology for Wittig, passes through this exact knowledge of the shift in meaning perpetrated through philosophy with a normative and prescriptive use of metaphysics which influences much of feminist epistemology and political vision.

Why is Wittig pointing at that? She highlights the importance of looking at women's sociohistorical situation from a lesbian political philosophical point of view in order to deal with the dualism (by going further back the Hegelian dialectics) applied to metaphysics that has wiped out monism as such (that is to say the idea that Being does not entail any division nor hierarchy) and created not only a division, a difference but a hierarchical division and difference (One and the Other). This means that sexual categories not only have been the expedient to phagocytize the mere idea of *human*, but also that their relation can **only** be hierarchal as One and the Other.

The epistemological revolution initiated by Wittig both in her novels and political essays is contained in this idea, controversial for some, that lesbians do not add up to 'human'. In the essay "One is not born a woman" (1981) she claims her most famous stance saying that "lesbians are not women" which encloses her political and theoretical point of view while clearly delineating a non-naturalist, anti-essentialist and materialist praxis.

Wittig's materialist standpoint acknowledges that in order to *be human* one has to enter humankind through the category of sex as there is no intelligible subject beyond those categories. One has to *be* (man or woman) and carry out a specific role in the regime of heterosexuality where, as a holy trinity, man/woman/heterosexual relationship adds up human. This theoretical passage catapults us into the realm of the materialist feminist theory by making it even more clear that what *makes a woman* is the relation.

Lesbians are beyond the human because they are beyond the categories of sex (which are in turn the categories through which one gets to '*be*' - intelligible as - human in the first place), beyond man and woman in their institutionalized heterosexual relationship of interdependence. *Lesbian* is a disruptive category as long as it retains its revolutionary potential of overthrowing the heterosexual system. This passage of theory could be used to understand the kind of epistemology that materialist thinkers apply to the sex/gender system as I am going to illustrate. One gets to be human, be intelligible in the world, only by *being* (identified or identifying as) male/man or female/woman (here it becomes also clear what we have seen with Delphy: a social dichotomy – gender – explaining a natural dichotomy – sex).

Humanness or *being* does not pre-exist nor exist outside of that “natural” dichotomy and as that dichotomy is both a hierarchical one where male/man overpowers female/woman and a complementary one where male/man and female/woman are not categories of their own in the sex/gender system but exist only in the presumption of heterosexuality. Stating these prodromes one can more easily understand the reach of Wittig's statements such as *lesbians are not women, lesbians are the outposts of humanity* and the *category woman (and man) should be destroyed* (for there are no slaves without masters): in fact, if, as also post-structuralist theorists such as Judith Butler affirm that, there is no idea of humanness pre-existing the idea of sex/gender and, as the materialist feminism insists on, the categories of sex are conceived hierarchically then a strategic way to theorize the sex/gender system could be to destroy these categories or, saying it with Delphy, to destroy the *pertinence* that sex/gender has for subjects in social practice.

“For as long as oppositions (differences) appear as given, already there, before all thought, “natural” – as long as there is no conflict and no struggle – there is no dialectic, there is no change, no movement. The dominant thought refuses to turn inward on itself to apprehend that which questions it.” (Wittig 1992:3)

Making this point of view the universal one immediately disrupts the dual metaphysical pre-existent the perfection of the “One and the Other”. In fact, if lesbians are not women (nor

human) their point of view not only exceeds the One and the Other by creating another alternative but actually refutes dualism and reaches beyond it.

From this starting point derives that in order to understand or consider the potentiality of humanness we need to stop considering categories as natural givens, as we saw with Guillaumin and the concept of race, and adopt an oblique point of view. For Wittig this can be found in the point of view of lesbians which is “paradoxically the most human point of view” as they find themselves at “the outposts of the human”.

In a famous article by Teresa de Lauretis *When lesbians were not women*, I find many interesting points of analysis proposing an angle on Wittig’s political work that resonate with me. Teresa de Lauretis comes from a political background of Italian feminism; she is deeply acquainted with materialist feminism in France and the split between *Questions Feministes* and *Psych et Po*. In her writing I find a questioning of the dominant discourses on the sex/gender system that really speak to me because she does that through the analysis of some concepts that seem to have fallen through the cracks but that she is not afraid to pick up. I read this article a long a time ago and it pushed me towards a deeper understanding of French materialist feminism and of Wittig’s conception of the lesbian subject in a moment of my life when I was debating between lesbian as a political stance and lesbian as a sexual identity.

The first thing de Lauretis points out is the importance of Wittig in her life and in her epistemological vision: reading Wittig’s work in the 1980s brought de Lauretis to rethink the production of theory and fired in her the necessity of dividing between feminist theory and lesbian theory. The texts that brought her to make that shift were “One is not born a woman”, “The straight mind” and *The lesbian body* (all quoted and analyzed above in this chapter) and the element that ideally unites these texts is Wittig’s most controversial statement that lesbians are not women.

“a new figure—a conceptual figure—emerged from those works and was encapsulated in the statement ‘lesbians are not women’. Generally misunderstood and criticized from many quarters, nevertheless that statement did fire the imagination and indeed, from the vantage point of today, has proved to be prophetic: as I said a moment ago, today’s lesbians are many other things—and only rarely women.” (de Lauretis, 2005:51)

I do not quite agree here with this statement of de Lauretis as I perceive “lesbians are not women” not so much as an enigmatic prophecy for the future but as the materialist definition

of the revolutionary potential of lesbians as a political reconfiguration. “Lesbians are not women” is not a reconfiguration that concerns lesbians and women only, but sexual categories per se that exist and are named in the realm of heteronormativity within the irreducible interdependence and dichotomy of man/woman. It is a prophecy for the past as well as for the future. Wittig is smashing the metaphysical dichotomy man/woman as both gender and sex categories to bring them back to their materialist reality and analyze them as materialist apparatuses. She is unveiling how that “*truth*” was made historically and how that “*truth*” is not metaphysical nor universal, it can be unmade and rewritten. How can we utilize these categories in our political struggle? That, for me, seems to be Wittig’s main concern. Categories for Wittig are a tool to unite materialist, political knowledges (and not metaphysical ones) and purport a political struggle: this means that we need to utilize the category woman in order to establish a materialist narrative that helps us in the struggle, but can be dismissed in terms of metaphysical identity as it does not contain any universal truths pre-existing society. Ultimately, she talks about lesbians because she starts from her own situated knowledge. For Wittig sexual categories are not metaphysical identities but rather materialist (political) ones and they are necessary as long as we need to destroy the categories woman and man (historically constructed on the model One/Other) in order to destroy the heteronormative/heterosexual system. In the glimpse of a fairly utopian future Wittig advocates for the ability to exist beyond gender and sex and see for ourselves that as a matter of fact it is gender that creates sex and not the other way around, it is not the sexual difference that creates oppression but rather oppression that creates difference. Without the political regime of heterosexuality, we would not experience nor see sexual difference (as an oppressive apparatus) or, in other words, without women’s oppression there would not be the concept of gender, which Wittig uses only in the singular form as it creates the feminine as the gender juxtaposed to the general (men).

What is this conceptual figure and how does it play out epistemically? For de Lauretis the fundamental tool created by Wittig’s vision was to open up a conceptual space and to make it thinkable. In fact, what the hegemonic heterosexuality had rendered invisible was what de Lauretis then called “the eccentric subject” that up until Wittig’s had remained untheorized (and untheorizable) by all discourses feminism included.

“For, if lesbians are not women, and yet lesbians are, like me, flesh and blood, thinking and writing beings who live in the world and with whom I interact every day, then lesbians are social subjects and, in all likelihood, psychic subjects as well.” (ibid., 52)

That subject is eccentric not only because it deviates from the norm but also because it, literally, does not center itself in the institution of heterosexuality (the straight mind) and, in addition to that, it cannot be envisioned but that institution. The eccentric subject could never be foreseen in the institution of heterosexuality. I find this a brilliant way to explain the still controversial and misunderstood statement “lesbians are not women”. In fact, I think that the statement is not misunderstood per se but rather epistemologically misunderstood: when the dominant discourses on sex and gender revolve around sexual and gender identity it becomes difficult to understand such a statement and, in the worst-case scenario, it becomes an absurdity, a utopia.

“What characterizes the eccentric subject is a double displacement: first, the psychic displacement of erotic energy onto a figure that exceeds the categories of sex and gender, the figure Wittig calls “the lesbian”; second, the self-displacement or disidentification of the subject from the cultural assumptions and social practices attendant upon the categories of gender and sex.” (ibid., 52)

The point is, brilliantly explained by de Lauretis, that the operation initiated with Wittig’s epistemic shift consists in a change of “the conditions of possibility of both knowing and knowledge” (ibid. 52). In my own words Wittig opens the door to what I have called in this thesis the epistemic act of knowing that comes from constantly challenging dominant discourses not only as apparatuses of knowledge that *are there* before us but also as the apparatuses that create (or invent?) the veracity of knowledge, how we are allowed to perceive and reproduce knowledge and, ultimately, how we are allowed to understand our material lives through categories. Here lies, in my opinion, the ultimate value of Wittig’s work and of the materialist stance.

“[...] Wittig mobilized both the discourse of historical materialism and that of liberal feminism in an interesting strategy, one against the other and each against itself, proving them both inadequate to conceiving the subject in feminist materialist terms.” (de Lauretis 2005:55)

Here de Lauretis points out how Wittig insisted on conceptualizing class consciousness (as a Marxist concept) and individual subjectivity (as a feminist concept) together and not separately as it had been done up to that point. Wittig called this vision a ‘subjective cognitive practice’ which could be summarized in the lesbian subject as a position that de Lauretis calls “eccentric to the institution of heterosexuality and therefore exceeding its discursive-conceptual horizon” (de Lauretis, 2005:56)

For this epistemological position, Wittig was heavily criticized and accused of essentialism, dogmatic separatism and more importantly criticized for trying to utilize a Marxist theoretical implant when theorizing a lesbian society because, as de Lauretis reports, “You can speak of lesbian society only in the liberal political perspective of free choice, according to which anyone is free to live as they like and that, of course, is a capitalist myth.” (ibid., 54)

But what is this “lesbian society” that Wittig presents as an already existing and therefore not utopian prospect of society? de Lauretis explains that it is certainly not a “collectivity of gay women” living together that Wittig was trying to theorize but rather a space carved out of society where there is place to experience all contradictions without having to resolve them. A society where its members undertake the task of defining the individual subject in materialist terms and to do so in a horizontal way, all the subjects define the individual subject or, in other terms, create the possibility of its existence. This is the subjective, cognitive practice that Wittig entails when theorizing the lesbian subject. The *destruction* of woman as a category, then, is theorized according to this possible space carved out of society where women can only and exclusively exist in an oppressive position. In fact, as we have seen, for Wittig *woman* is but a myth and is only intelligible as a subject in an asymmetric relation:

“We have been compelled in our bodies and in our minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the *idea* of nature that has been established for us. [...] Distorted to such an extent that in the end oppression seems to be a consequence of this nature within ourselves (a nature which is only an *idea*). “[...] not only is there no natural group ‘women’ (we lesbians are living proof of it), but as individuals as well we question ‘woman’, which for us, as for Simone de Beauvoir, is only a myth. [...]” (Wittig, 1992:9)

The disappearance of woman, then, is the disappearance of the epistemological idea of woman, far from being the psychic annihilation because for the French materialist feminists there is no such thing as an essentially women’s psyche. The kind of liberation that Wittig tries to achieve is the breaking away from the patriarchal asymmetric relations between the categories of sex and the epistemic freedom of being able to think the subject beyond the categories of sex.

“However, as we know nothing about work, about social production, outside of the context of exploitation, we know nothing about the reproduction of society outside of its context of exploitation.” (Wittig 1992:6)

When it comes to the disappearance of women, de Lauretis introduces a paradox she has detected in feminist studies and which I briefly touched upon in the introduction. The paradox finds place in the epistemological sphere of the postmodern theorization of the concept of women. As de Lauretis notices, women have disappeared from the feminist lexicon starting from the late 1980s when identity politics would no longer allow for a unitary conception of women because of the participation of women of color, straight and lesbians, to the feminist studies and movements. Already in the beginning of the 1990s it was considered wrong to use the idea of women without adding the concept of race, class, ethnicity and other differences to specify an oppression that went beyond sex and gender. The post-structural (referred to Derrida and Foucault, as de Lauretis puts it) concept of women had emptied that idea of all physical and psychic contents and made it into a discursive construct through and through. In this specific realm of epistemology and genealogy in which the French materialist feminist theory had had no place at all, Wittig's concept of the disappearance of women and appearance of the lesbian subject as a "subjective, cognitive practice" falls into the deep pit of essentialism, naturalism and humanism because connected to the lived experience that was an important feminist tool of theorization in the 1970s. The paradox continues and becomes more cemented with Butler's *Gender Trouble* where she describes Wittig's positioning of the subject beyond the category of sex as a "problematic humanism based on a problematic metaphysics of presence." (Butler, 1999:157)

The analysis offered by de Lauretis at this point connects with the strange case of French feminism or the invention of it, as Delphy would put it. The recurrent use of the phrase "metaphysics of presence" shows the influence of Derrida on Butler's *Gender Trouble* which has the value of having made Wittig known for a non-lesbian and non-feminist audience. Moreover, the book mainstreamed Wittig as a French feminist theorist but it also attached it to two other names of the "same" disciplinary context who were Kristeva and Irigaray.

"Like other critics, Butler failed to understand [...] the subject of a cognitive practice based in the lived experience of one's body, one's desire, one's conceptual and physical dis-identification from the straight mind [...] and tossed her theory in the dump of surpassed and discarded philosophies: to the reader of *Gender Trouble*, Wittig appears to be an existentialist who believes in human freedom, a humanist who presumes the ontological unity of Being prior to language, an idealist masquerading as a materialist [...]." (de Lauretis, 2005:57)

Ultimately, de Lauretis article brings us to understand more about both the strange case of French feminism by showing how Wittig's work was interpreted and mainstreamed devoid of

its materialist nature, how dominant discourses work in feminist epistemology by pointing at Butler's insistence on concepts like ontology, humanism and essentialism far from having anything to do with Wittig's epistemology.

Getting even closer to Wittig's work than before and tuning in to its political reach, it baffles me that there is so little interest in the theorization of the destruction of the sexes as she theorizes it, and that when conversations are made on this subject a lot of reactions revolve around the fact that it is completely utopian (impossible, out of place) because 'how are we supposed to do that'? The reaction could be caused by the fact that we perceive sex as the immanent, natural part of the system sex-gender and gender as the social, cultural explanation or deployment of said natural, immutable element; we still maintain a structure/superstructure kind of internalized understanding of the sex/gender system. Since the destruction of the sexes was theorized as a strategy to achieve economic, cultural, political, material liberation from sexism and patriarchy it baffles me even more that the most powerful bit of this theory is confused with the fear of losing the specificity of the feminist battle; the materialist view on the issue of difference is also revolutionizing because it posits two further issues: 1) it enhances the political importance of focusing on the deterministic social pertinence given to sex rather than the research of an essential specificity or difference deriving from sex (the French materialist feminists look at sex as an exclusively political construct and not a natural or immanent concept although in any way denying the difference of reproductive organs) and 2) the unsustainability of difference feminism because of the terms in which it explains oppression: while difference feminism finds the roots of the oppression of women in their sex (as to say: women are oppressed because their sex is female or because they *are* women) materialist feminism claims that it is not sex that creates sexism but sexism that creates sex. From this it derives that sex (and gender) and its pertinence and relevance in our material lives is a political construction (how relationships are constructed) and has to be looked at as anti-essentialist and anti-naturalist to be strategic. What I am pointing at here, is the major invitation to an epistemic revolution that the French materialist feminists have managed to open up to, a revolution that has very little to do with a prescriptive way to imagine the subject and the category of sex and a lot to do with the reframing of how we know the subject and the category of sex.

"Notice that in civil matters color as well as sex still must be "declared". However, because of the abolition of slavery, the "declaration" of "color" is now considered discriminatory. But

that does not hold true for the “declaration” of “sex”, which not even women dream of abolishing. I say: it is about time to do so.” (Wittig 1992:8)

Conclusion

Why, at last, would I inconvenience my self with going deep into a theoretical implant that has long been discarded as ‘dated’, ‘not modern’? Because I think that feminist epistemology takes a dangerous turn when it portrays feminist and gender issues as decade-based or as not applying to the current day and age and when it dismisses questions on the sex/gender system as outdated.

“[...] the realm of sexuality – sexual practice and sexual preference – is particularly sensitive, invested as it is in contemporary society with the capacity to fill subjectivity: to provide a personal identity. Sexual activity both defines *people* as male or as female and defines them as people in a society where you are *nobody* if you are not one or the other. [...] What the language imposes has been confirmed by psychosocial studies: the notion of “human being” does not exist in our societies, or rather, there are two ideas of “human being”. There is a “male human being” and a “female human being”.” (Delphy, 2000:179)

It seems somehow clear to me that we’ve been stuck on that same political page that Delphy so well describes here and that it still applies nowadays and all over the world but especially in the new political formations in all of Europe with the constant advancing of the far-right ideologies. The issue it proposes is that there is no thinkable nor imaginable existence outside of what Guillaumin and Wittig call the marks. This happens despite the queer narrative that focuses on the individual identity as a strategy to break this core asymmetric relation.

An article by Jules Falquet “Rompre le tabù de l’eterosexualite” poses a very inspiring interpretation for me as she writes at the very start: “We must rejoice for the nowadays growing number of movements and researches on sexuality/ies. One of their numerous perks, and not the least important, is to give visibility day by day to every kind of practices and persons all around the world courageously contesting the existing sexual order. Nevertheless, by focusing almost exclusively on sexuality as a set of *sexual practices* and/or on the *individuals* expressing desires and giving considerable importance to the intervention on the body and its aspect – also in this case a principally individual intervention – it seems to me that the major current of these movements oversees a part of its goal. In fact, if this is about contesting gender or sex binarism and above all their so-called naturality – a project the feminist and lesbian movements have engaged in for the last thirty years or so – the

focalization on personal identity and daily practices may end up dragging us towards a dead end.”

I find the article inspiring because it engages in questions of sex and gender without the fear to use an *outdated* implant and without the fear to discuss a *modern* epistemology that can benefit from discovering unknown genealogies.

Materialist feminism’s goal is to break with the nowadays dilemma of gender as inclusive/exclusive concept, to break with the idea altogether that gender (as an identity) and specifically a more inclusive gender identity, is the way to end oppression. The idea is to theorize a deep understanding of gender as the powerful concept with social agency that makes sex pertinent and relevant for social practice. In fact, isn’t it so that something, a category for instance, more inclusive and less exclusive still is exclusive (that relies on the exclusion of a part/a group big or small) or inclusive (that relies on the inclusion of a part/a group big or small); the two terms may have a different immediate meaning but they refer to the same system and systematization of sexual and social categories.

The materialist feminists’ utopia includes the possibility of imagining the subject’s existence beyond gender/gender identity, sex roles and the binomial sex/gender. And if some of us were to panic and think: how am I going to understand reality, myself and others then? This would be the ultimate proof that the analysis developed by the French materialist feminists is definitely up to something. They challenge us to wonder: can a subject *be* in any sense beyond the narrative of gender/gender identity, sex role and the binomial sex/gender however transformative and inclusive these narratives we say might be? How would our practices change? Would we still be capable of falling in love, have sexual desire or is it so that what makes our desire (be it heterosexual, homosexual etc.) is the sanitized consciousness of gender/gender identity, sex roles and the binomial sex/gender? The work that the materialist feminism does as a theory is to break the dichotomic tragedy of naturalism vs constructivism by putting the focus on sexual categories as political systems rather than as identity categories: this marks the political intention of the materialists to trans-form rather than transgress, re-code rather than include/exclude.

I see a lot of my friends wearing a very cool and in t-shirt where it is written in big blocks “**gender is dead**” and every time I see it, I think: “Really?!” I am inclined to think that *gender* is more alive than ever and that it has become the new site of battling inside and out of academia, inside and out of the political and cultural movements and inside and out our material lives. The point is not to find a place in the infinite possibilities of sexual and gender

identities or in the strict binary of differences but rather to first acknowledge and then turn the tables on the pertinence applied to said differences: to destroy the system of evidences and marks that claim and order our existence as humans through sex/gender categories.

The point with this brief study, as I have pointed out along the chapters, is not to find and grasp ‘the truth’ (given that there could be *one*) but rather to understand what serves the cause of a political, transversal revolution and what does not from my point of view. The theoretical strand of Psych et Po and difference feminism is not ‘*less true*’ or ‘*more true*’ than the one of materialist feminism but my question is: what kind of purpose do each one of these strands serve though? With that question in mind I have engaged in this particular analysis and, sometimes, the comparison of different strands. My analysis is also totally influenced and motivated by my work as an activist: the intertwining of academic studies and feminist activism has brought me, through the years, to the epistemological position of not dividing theory and practice but rather to embrace the contradictions and canalize them into my epistemic act of knowing. If I take Wittig’s political principle “we need to theorize in a way that is strategic for us” and apply it to the two different perspectives taken into account here what I see is (1) difference feminism takes as a principle of immanent reality the existence of *woman*, the feminine that has to be researched and brought to life and highlighting the incompatibility of *woman* and its inscription in society and history considered to be male and (2) materialist feminism that moves the focus from difference to subordination and turns the tables on principles of reality, or pertinent concepts to say it with Delphy, by theorizing sex, gender, sexuality and race as marks of sexism and racism turning thus the equation of difference on its head: sexism creates sex and racism creates race rather than the other way around.

What (pre)occupies and motivates me is to not be done with the sex/gender question, or even simpler, to not be done with questioning this binomial as a system which the fundamental reason I proposed the brief question in the preliminary thoughts to this study. The intention was to create a moment to assess something that, in my empirical opinion (an opinion I have created through years of observation), we have a tendency to take for granted or, worse, are afraid to be wrong about. Sex and gender are such played out elements that they sometimes can result into an internalized knowledge that is difficult to challenge, a sort of common sense that can leave us lost for words or, better, lost for the possibility to re-imagine the individual subject. What I like to imagine is the possibility to create a shift from *common sense* to

common ground, a shift that requires a more political (in the sense of polis) reach from which to rethink reality.

But my question remains: can we really tell a feminist story given despite the power of dominant discourses in genealogy and epistemology? I feel that my answer comes with frustration and hope all swirled up together. I feel like the solution lies in the question and particularly in the call for continuing to *tell* embracing the never-ending fragmentation. It certainly comes with the acknowledgement and the refusal of a linear, straightforward timeline-like conceptualization of genealogy and epistemology and a more circular, active recodification of both considering not only what this operation does for academic production but also what kind of material lives and subjects this operation produces.

In the end, is materialist feminism still relatable? I do not even know if I should allow myself to make this question without falling into the trap of the old and new, modern and non-modern, theory and post-theory once again. Nevertheless, I will answer: I do not think that materialist feminism is still relatable, I know so by how its theorists still are able to challenge many of the questions we still have in feminist epistemology. I am aware of the fact that I made the controversial choice to present a genealogy and an epistemology that have never been ‘institutionalized’ as such by disentangling them from a narrative that has been institutional for three decades now. I did so with the intention of challenging my own internalized thoughts such as: is it so that we do not consider a certain knowledge valuable or even believable unless a certain genealogy is in place? When and how is it that knowledge becomes *true*?

There is, in the end, an eternal double bind between blurring the line of genealogy and epistemology while creating a common ground for political battles. Audre Lorde wrote that “we can never dismantle the master’s house with the master’s tools” and my question is whether there still is common ground to allow us to see what these tools are, who the master is and, ultimately, how we are going to dismantle the house of power.

References.

- Adkins, Lisa Leonard, Diana 2005, "Sex in question: French materialist feminism". *Taylor and Francis e-library*.
- Butler, Judith 2008, "Gender Trouble". *Routledge Classics*.
- de Lauretis, Teresa 2005, "When lesbians were not women" in Shaktini, Nmascar 2005, "On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, political and literary essays". University of Illinois Press.
- Delphy, Christine 1993, "Rethinking sex and gender". *Women's Studies Int. Forum*, vol. 16, no. 1, p. 1-9.
- Delphy, Christine 2000, *The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move*. *Yale French Studies*, (97), p.166.
- Delphy, Christine 2015, "Critique of the naturalizing reason". *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 114:4 p. 697-851.
- Delphy, Christine 2016, "Close to home. A materialist analysis of women's oppression". *University of Massachusetts Press*. (e-book version)
- Delphy, Christine Leonard, Diana 1980, "A materialist feminism is possible". *Feminist Review* no. 4, p. 79-105
- Disch, Lisa 2015, "Christine Delphy's Constructivist Materialism: An overlooked "French Feminism". *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 114:4 p. 697-851.
- Duchen, Claire 1987, *French connections*. 1st ed. Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Duchen, Claire 1986, "Feminism in France: from May '68 to Mitterand." 1st ed. London, England: Routledge & Kegan Paul plc.
- Falquet, Jules 2009, "Rompre le tabou de l'hétérosexualité, en finir avec la difference des sexes: les apports du lesbianism comme mouvement sociale et théorique politique". *Genre, Séxualité et Societé*. Printemps vol. 1
- Griffin, Diane Crowder 2005, "Universalizing materialist lesbianism" in Shaktini, Nmascar 2005, "On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, political and literary essays". University of Illinois Press.
- Guillaumin, Colette 1995, "Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology". Routledge.

Guillaumin, Colette 1995, "The idea of race and its elevation to autonomous scientific and legal status" in "Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology". Routledge.

Guillaumin, Colette 1995, "Race and Nature: the system of marks" in "Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology". Routledge.

Guillaumin, Colette 1995, "The question of difference" in "Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology". Routledge.

Guillaumin, Colette 1995, "The practice of power and belief in Nature" in "Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology". Routledge.

Hemmings, Clare 2005, "Telling feminist stories". *Feminist Theory*, SAGE publications, vol 6(2), p. 115-139.

hooks, bell 1991, "Theory as a liberatory practice". *Yale journal of law and feminism* vol. 4 no. 1 p. 1-12.

Jackson, Stevi 1996, "Christine Delphy". *SAGE Publications Ltd.*

Jackson, Stevi 1999, "Heterosexuality in Question". *SAGE Publications Ltd.*

Juteau-Lee, Danielle 1995, "Introduction (Re)constructing the category of 'race' and 'sex': the work of a precursor". in Guillaumin, Colette 1995, "Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology". Routledge.

Lee Bartky, Sandra Fraser, Nancy 1992, "Revaluing French Feminism: Critical essays on difference, agency and culture.". INDIANA UNIVERSITY PRESS.

Lorde, Audre 2007, "Sister Outsider". Crossing Press.

Moses, Claire Goldberg 1998, "Made in America: "French Feminism" in Academia". *Feminist Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2 p. 241-274.

Moi, Toril 1987, "French feminist thought". Wiley.

Shaktini, Nmascar 2005, "On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, political and literary essays". University of Illinois Press.

Wittig, Monique 1992, "The straight mind and other essays". 2nd ed. Boston: Beacon Press.

Wittig, Monique 1992, "The straight mind" in "The straight mind and other essays". 2nd ed. Boston: Beacon Press, p. 21

Wittig, Monique 1992, "One is not born a woman" in "The straight mind and other essays".
2nd ed. Boston: Beacon Press, p. 9

Wittig, Monique 1992, "The category of sex" in "The straight mind and other essays". 2nd ed.
Boston: Beacon Press, p. 1

Wittig, Monique 1992, "Homo sum" in "The straight mind and other essays". 2nd ed. Boston:
Beacon Press, p. 46

Wittig, Monique 1992, "The point of view: universal or particular" in "The straight mind and
other essays". 2nd ed. Boston: Beacon Press, p. 59