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Structuralist or Lesbian? Claude Lévi-Strauss and Monique Wittig on Rousseau’s “Science”

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In postwar France a proliferation of thinkers sought to move away from the dialectic of negation and synthesis. Two such writers turned to Jean-Jacques Rousseau as the source of a non-dualistic reflection. In 1962, Claude Lévi-Strauss laid claim to him as the “founder of the sciences of man,” and, inspired in part by his contact with Buddhism, he created a non-dualist version of the philosopher as a foil to Sartre. In 1989, Monique Wittig would also take up Rousseau, but in order to challenge Lévi-Strauss’s notion of the exchange of women. In her hands, Rousseau also became a non-dualist through whom she could formalize the insights of gay and lesbian community life as a theory of sex abolition: “the science of the oppressed.” With archival materials, close readings, and historical contextualization, this article explores the genesis and interactions of both interpretations and situates them on the broader horizon of postwar thought.

Introduction

“Language itself partakes of the social contract,” the lesbian novelist and theorist Monique Wittig declared on the syllabus of a class on feminist theory that she taught at the State University of New York at Buffalo in 1989.¹ The class derived from “On the Social Contract,” an essay Wittig had published in *Feminist Issues* that same year, and which she had first delivered as a lecture at Columbia University in 1987.² “My goal,” she explained to her students in the course description, “is to take you step by step in the analysis that led me to talk in terms of the social contract” and to develop “an analytical tool,” “the oppression of women as science—a science of the oppressed.” The assigned readings included Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, and a collective volume of feminist anthropological research, *L’arraisonnement des femmes*.

In her essay, Wittig cast Rousseau as the hero opposite the villain Lévi-Strauss. The latter decision is unsurprising: the anthropologist’s theory of the exchange of

¹“Feminist Theory [SUNY-Buffalo Syllabus],” 1989, Box 25, Monique Wittig Papers, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

²A few years prior, she had published a short article that anticipated the essay: “Breaking the Heterosexual Contract,” *Village Voice*, 26 June 1984, 11.

women, first expounded in the *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (ESK, 1949), had long attracted feminist attention and ire. But Rousseau's appearance should puzzle us, since Wittig was one of the twentieth-century's most radical feminists, a proponent of what we might now call gender abolition, while Rousseau promoted practices that sought to enhance sexual and gender difference. Moreover, during the period when Wittig was drafting her essay, feminists on both sides of the Atlantic were accusing him of having poisoned Western philosophy and politics against women.³ Why, then, would Wittig celebrate him as the first philosopher to have rejected "the right of the strongest"?⁴

A consideration of Lévi-Strauss's work can point us toward an answer. In his 1962 lecture "Jean-Jacques Rousseau, fondateur des sciences de l'homme," given in Geneva to commemorate the 250th anniversary of the philosopher's birth, the anthropologist depicted him as a non-dualist thinker who had both laid the epistemic groundwork of anthropology and articulated the only basis for ethical action in the world.⁵ With this in mind, the fact that Wittig's most virulent attack on Lévi-Strauss is conveyed through her most explicit engagement with Rousseau seems significant. Her published output evinces a consistent interest in the citizen of Geneva, and her archives reveal that she believed his influence to be fundamental for her literary, intellectual, and political projects. Witness this typewritten paragraph from an unpublished response to Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1991):

I am afraid to be interpreted out of context. I have worked all along these years with persons who developed together a theory of new materialism, a materialism that has to see [*sic*] with women and lesbians. It[']s not [M]arxist. It even developed in opposition to [M]arxism, although one cannot by pass [*sic*] Marx and Engels. Rather, it has gone back to the French materialist philosophers, those of the Enlightenment. In a pre-capitalist world that still concern[s] women. I have named a few names in my notes. But obviously the French feminist and gay movement developed along these lines[.]⁶ [Figure 1]

The "persons" whom Wittig refers to here are her comrades from the women's and lesbian liberation movements, several among them social scientists. One of these, the anthropologist Nicole-Claude Mathieu, worked in Lévi-Strauss's Laboratoire d'anthropologie sociale as a *chef de travaux* and the editorial secretary both for the journal he cofounded in 1961, *L'Homme*, and for the associated book series,

³Two examples: Sarah Kofman, *Le respect des femmes (Kant et Rousseau)* (Paris, 1982); Carole Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford, 1988). Wittig was not unaware of such criticism, as we can see in the 1997 French version of "On the Social Contract": see Monique Wittig, "À propos du contrat social," in Wittig, *La pensée straight* (Paris, 2013), 69–76, at 71. For an English translation see Sarah Kofman, "Rousseau's Phallocratic Ends," trans. Mara Dukats, in Lynda Lange, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (University Park, 2002), 229–44.

⁴Monique Wittig, "On the Social Contract," in Wittig, *The Straight Mind* (Boston, 1992), 33–45, at 39.

⁵Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale, deux* (Paris, 1973), 45–55; Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Monique Layton, vol. 2 (New York, 1976), 33–42.

⁶"On the Straight Mind w Notes + Comments on Judith Butler's Interpretation of Her Work," undated, 2, ¶1, Box 24, Monique Wittig Papers, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

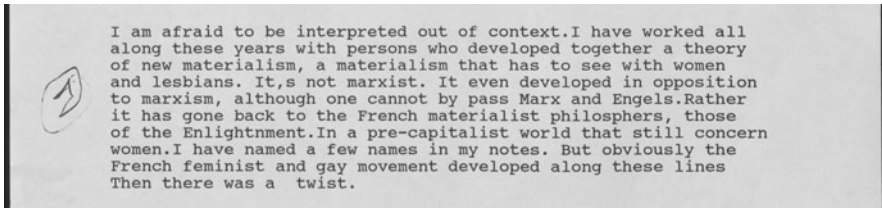


Figure 1. “On the Straight Mind w Notes + Comments on Judith Butler’s Interpretation of Her Work,” undated, 2, ¶1, Box 24, Monique Wittig Papers. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Reprinted with permission of the Monique Wittig estate.

Les Cahiers de l’Homme” (respectively from 1971 to 1983 and from 1971 to 1990).⁷ The sociologist Colette Guillaumin, completed her dissertation on *L’idéologie raciste* under Roger Bastide’s supervision (1967–8).⁸ Another sociologist, Christine Delphy, had worked in the University of California – Berkeley’s sociology department (where she had perhaps encountered Erving Goffman) from 1963–4. Delphy later reported that when she returned to France, she was told that no adviser would be willing to direct a feminist dissertation; it was only in 1998 that she would earn her Ph.D. at the Université du Québec à Montréal on the basis of previously completed research (*sur travaux*).⁹ Together, these activists/academics formalized a current, known today as materialist feminism, which held that the categories of “man” and “woman” were not natural, but constructed after the fact to bolster patriarchy.¹⁰ This latter term they defined as an economic mode of production, a relic of the feudal era, left untoppled by the French Revolution, which had persisted into the industrial age.¹¹ If patriarchy was the last remnant of feudalism,

⁷Marie-Élisabeth Handman, “Nicole-Claude Mathieu (1937–2014),” *L’Homme: Revue française d’anthropologie* 213 (26 Feb. 2015), 20.

⁸For more information on Mathieu, Guillaumin and the other materialist–feminist social scientists see Maira Abreu, “De quelle histoire le ‘féminisme matérialiste’ (français) est-il le nom?,” *Comment s’en sortir* 4 (2017), 55–79; Diana Leonard and Lisa Adkins, eds., *Sex in Question: French Materialist Feminism* (London and Bristol, PA, 1996).

⁹According to Delphy, it was Pierre Bourdieu who told her it would be impossible to do feminist work in France. Laurence Bachmann, Ellen Hertz, Marianne Modak, Patricia Roux and Lucile Ruault, “L’effet Delphy,” *Nouvelles Questions féministes* 41/2 (2022), 8–16; Shirley Roy, “Christine au Québec,” *Nouvelles Questions féministes* 41/2 (2022), 40–45.

¹⁰In the 1970s and 1980s, the thinkers associated with this current called themselves, variously, *féministes révolutionnaires* or *féministes radicales*. For a history of this current (or rather, what would be constructed retrospectively as one) that emphasizes its roots in the social sciences, see Abreu, “De quelle histoire le ‘féminisme matérialiste’ (français) est-il le nom?”

¹¹Collectif éditorial, “Variations sur des thèmes communs,” *Questions féministes* 1 (1977), 3–19; English translation: editors of *Questions féministes*, “Variations on Some Common Themes,” *Feminist Issues* 1 (1980), 3–21; Christine Delphy, *L’ennemi principal* (Paris, 1998); Monique Wittig, Gilles Wittig, Marcia Rothenburg and Margaret Stephenson (now known as Namascar Shaktini), “Combat pour la libération de la femme: Par delà la libération-gadget, elles découvrent la lutte des classes,” *L’Idiot international*, 1970, 13–16. For an English translation see Monique Wittig, Gille Wittig, Marcia Rothenberg, and Namascar Shaktini, “For a Women’s Liberation Movement,” trans. Namascar Shaktini, in Namascar Shaktini, ed., *On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, Political, and Literary Essays* (Urbana, 2005) 21–34.

the argument went, then restoring the theoretical arms of the Enlightenment, which had ended the *Ancien Régime*, might help overthrow it today.¹²

The organ of materialist feminism was the short-lived journal *Questions féministes* (1977–80), whose nominal editor-in-chief was Simone de Beauvoir. It sought to create a “feminist science,” an early version of Wittig’s “science of the oppressed,” through the study of the material oppression of women and the critique of the ideology that upheld it within the human sciences.¹³ First and foremost, this meant Lévi-Strauss’s structural anthropology and the theory of the exchange of women. The project of *Questions féministes* was therefore akin to that of many post-war French academics and lay intellectuals who, according to Jacob Collins, pushed back against “the political inadequacies of structuralism” by “politicizing” the field of anthropology, its findings, or its methods.¹⁴ Wittig, who published a short story in number 2, would join the editorial collective from number 4 (November 1978) and remain onboard until the journal’s closure in 1980. Simply put, the debate between feminist and structuralist varieties of social and human science in the 1970s and 1980s formed the backdrop of Wittig’s most explicit turn to Rousseau in “On the Social Contract.”

That turn has received little scholarly attention. To my knowledge, no study has focused on Wittig’s development of Rousseau’s ideas. This article will begin the work of understanding her interpretation of him by reconstituting a fraction of the horizon on which it took place. As I have been saying, this horizon was populated by feminist activists and scholars endeavoring to refound the epistemology of the social and human sciences with the tools of Enlightenment materialism in order to denaturalize sexual difference and, therefore, inequality. Wittig’s contribution to that project was what we might more properly call a “return to Rousseau”: a reappropriation of his social-contract theory for its epistemological and revolutionary potential, in pointed contrast to Lévi-Strauss’s own interpretation of the Genevan philosopher.

This article has two goals. The first is to read Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist Rousseau (from the 1962 talk) as an ethical, political, and epistemological response to existentialism’s perceived ethnocentric biases, colored by the anthropologist’s contact with Buddhism. In doing so, I argue that we should tie Lévi-Strauss’s

¹²Probably the most consistent representative of this view was Colette Capitan-Peter, “A Historical Precedent for Patriarchal Oppression: ‘The Old Regime’ and the French Revolution,” *Feminist Issues* 4/1 (1984), 83–89; Capitan, *La nature à l’ordre du jour, 1789–1793* (Paris, 1993).

¹³Collectif éditorial, “Variations sur des thèmes communs,” 4; Editors of *Questions féministes*, “Variations on Some Common Themes,” 2; [des lesbiennes radicales] de l’ex-Collectif Q.F., “Lettre au mouvement féministe,” 1981, Fonds Françoise Picq, Bibliothèque Marguerite-Durand; Françoise Picq, *Libération des femmes, quarante ans de mouvement* (Brest, 2011), 379–80; Ilana Eloit, “Trouble dans le féminisme: Du ‘Nous, les femmes’ au ‘Nous, les lesbiennes’: Genèse du sujet politique lesbien en France (1970–1980),” *20 & 21: Revue d’histoire* 148/4 (2020), 129–45. For histories that connect these to larger debates in the women’s movement see Claudie Lesselier, “Les regroupements de lesbiennes dans le mouvement féministe parisien: Position et problèmes, 1970–1982,” in in Groupe d’études féministes de l’Université Paris VII (G.E.F.), *Crises de la société: Féminisme et changement* (Paris, 1991). Christine Bard, “Le lesbianisme comme construction politique,” in Eliane Gubin, ed., *Le siècle des féminismes* (Paris, 2004), 111–26.

¹⁴Jacob Collins, *The Anthropological Turn: French Political Thought after 1968* (Philadelphia, 2020), 28–29.

Rousseauism to his curiosity about Eastern philosophy, each of which scholars have until now studied separately. The second goal is to demonstrate how Wittig's lesbian Rousseau allows her to formalize the insights of gay and lesbian communities in an epistemological critique of Lévi-Strauss's anthropology and, implicitly, his Rousseau. Both authors use Rousseau's work as a fulcrum to move beyond binary oppositions; this is remarkable, since his received reputation holds him to be a staunch dualist, even a Cartesian (on the strength of, say, the "Profession of faith of a Savoyard Vicar" in *Émile*). In the conclusion, I will locate both writers' projects within a broader refusal of the dialectic in postwar France.

Lévi-Strauss's Rousseau: "Western Buddhism"

"Jean-Jacques Rousseau, fondateur des sciences de l'homme" is one of the most significant of the countless references that Claude Lévi-Strauss made to the philosopher throughout his long career, including a notable encomium in the autobiographical *Tristes tropiques* (1955).¹⁵ This essay will focus only on the speech on Rousseau, which derived from a different point in Lévi-Strauss's career and, as his archives demonstrate, is the product of a round of research and reflection distinct from the treatment in his memoir.¹⁶ When he delivered the lecture in 1962, he had already become the most visible figure in the human sciences in France. Several popularly successful books had followed the publication of his groundbreaking *ESK* in 1949, leading to his 1959 election to the Collège de France. In 1962, then, he was speaking as a distinguished public intellectual considering the origins and epistemological bases of his discipline. The venue for the talk was the union-founded Université ouvrière de Genève, so he was addressing himself to a nonspecialist audience, pleading his case for the relevance of Rousseau (and anthropology) beyond the ivory tower. Later, a global readership would have access to the speech, since it was published in the volume *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* and reappeared in (at least) the Arabic, English, French, Russian and Spanish editions of the *UNESCO Courier*.¹⁷

Scholars who have studied Rousseau's influence on Lévi-Strauss have in the main viewed it through a dualistic lens. For example, Rousseau was both an "intellectual" forebear to whom Lévi-Strauss exaggerated his debt and the "temperamental" exemplar of the anthropologist's insider/outsider role and his love of paradox.¹⁸ Or else: Lévi-Strauss constructed a "scientific-idealist" Rousseau as a model by repressing the *philosophe's* "materialist-political" side.¹⁹ Or instead: Lévi-Strauss

¹⁵Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques* (1955) (Paris, 1998), Ch. 37, "Un petit verre de rhum," 458–72.

¹⁶Compare Boxes 11J and 86 in NAF 28150, fonds Claude Lévi-Strauss, Bibliothèque nationale de France.

¹⁷Université ouvrière de Genève and Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Genève, eds., *Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Neuchâtel, 1962). For English, French, and Spanish versions of the *UNESCO Courier*, see the March 1963 issues (sixteenth year), pp. 10–14 (the same pagination for each language). UNESCO provides more information at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000062935>. For further discussion of this article see Stefanos Geroulanos, *Transparency in Postwar France: A Critical History of the Present* (Stanford, 2017), 268, 430 n. 4, but note that he provides an incorrect publication date for the Spanish.

¹⁸Aubrey Rosenberg, "The Temperamental Affinities of Rousseau and Lévi-Strauss," *Queen's Quarterly* 82/4 (1975), 543.

¹⁹Timothy O'Hagan, "Rousseau: Conservative or Revolutionary. A Critique of Lévi-Strauss," *Critique of Anthropology* 3/11 (1978), 19–38. My title is a nod to O'Hagan's.

openly claimed Rousseau as his scientific and methodological inspiration, while in fact he was the secret source of Lévi-Strauss's ethics, which were undermined by the same epistemological principles.²⁰ In a related vein, some critics have divided Lévi-Strauss into a scientist, on the one hand, and, on the other, a philosopher influenced by Rousseau: thus we have a "structuralist" Lévi-Strauss who employed the value-neutral model of linguistics to study ethics, and another "Rousseauist" Lévi-Strauss whose ethical system was based in postulates that are, within the aforementioned value-neutral schema, unverifiable.²¹ Another author holds that Lévi-Strauss was both a "structuralist" with scientific pretensions and a Rousseauist "Romantic" whose work articulated a "cosmological worldview."²² Synthesizing these two trends, one critic writes that Lévi-Strauss created a perhaps distorted "epistemological" Rousseau for his own purposes as a structuralist, but that Rousseau's influence can be seen most clearly in the "spiritual and emotional" realm of ethics.²³ Common to some of these readings is the charge that Lévi-Strauss de-emphasized the political core of Rousseau's thought: he is accused of being "strikingly apolitical," privileging an "idealist" Rousseau to sidestep the commitments entailed by a "unitary," "idealist-materialist" understanding of his predecessor.²⁴

In what follows, I will argue that Lévi-Strauss's Rousseau is not, in fact, a divided figure: the epistemological, ethical, and political facets cohere to form a single picture. Yes, political: for although Lévi-Strauss's detractors accuse him of apolitical reserve, it is rather his *priorities* that they find fault with, because his concerns—international, between colonizing industrialized and colonized nonindustrial peoples, and ecological, between humans and nature—do not coincide with theirs (class struggle within capitalism, for instance). *Pace* those earlier critics, this is a consistent stance in which the ethical transitions seamlessly into the epistemological and the political.²⁵ First, Rousseau offers Lévi-Strauss a way of understanding the ethical experience of identification, which Rousseau calls *pitié*. Then Lévi-Strauss uses *pitié* as a blueprint for gathering knowledge through fieldwork: that is Rousseau's epistemological contribution as "founder of the sciences of man." Finally, Lévi-Strauss draws out the political implications of *pitié* and human-scientific research: first, that the process of transforming the identity of self and other into active identification should coincide with a protective posture toward the weak; and second, that nature requires our stewardship.²⁶ Perhaps these

²⁰Tobin Siebers, "Ethics in the Age of Rousseau: From Lévi-Strauss to Derrida," *MLN* 100/4 (1985), 758–79, at 758.

²¹Mark Hunyadi, "L'éthique dans le structuralisme de Claude Lévi-Strauss," *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 93/4 (1988), 529–53. This argument recalls Siebers's.

²²Axel Honneth, "A Structuralist Rousseau: On the Anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss," in Honneth, *The Fragmented World of the Social: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy* (Albany, 1995), 135–49.

²³T. M. Luhrmann, "Our Master, Our Brother: Lévi-Strauss's Debt to Rousseau," *Cultural Anthropology* 5/4 (1990), 396–413.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 40; O'Hagan, "Rousseau: Conservative or Revolutionary," 34.

²⁵For more recent similar views see Albert Doja, "From Neolithic Naturalness to *Tristes tropiques*: The Emergence of Lévi-Strauss's New Humanism," *Theory, Culture & Society* 25/1 (2008), 77–100, at 78; Geroulanos, *Transparency in Postwar France*, 272–3.

²⁶My argument here owes a lot to Frédéric Keck, "L'écologie négative de Claude Lévi-Strauss," *Esprit* 377/8–9 (2011), 65–76. That essay was originally published in Keck, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: Une introduction* (Paris, 2005).

concerns have not always been legibly political, but from today's perspective, they are undeniably so.

Before discussing "Jean-Jacques Rousseau," it is appropriate to draw out some relevant background material from *ESK*. In that book, Lévi-Strauss had proposed that the incest prohibition was a kind of non-dual feature of human societies: both natural and cultural. Since it was a universal, its origin must lie in nature; yet, because its rules were subject to fantastic variation from group to group, it was also cultural. The duality of the prohibition made it into the "fundamental step" that, according to Camille Robcis, "brings men from the scattered state of nature into an integrated 'social'" in Lévi-Strauss's conjectural history of society (which showed signs of Rousseau's influence).²⁷ His structural account claimed that the incest prohibition was less a taboo against marriage or sex with certain classes of women, than an obligation to trade those women with other men in order to create new social bonds through marriage.²⁸ This practice created or reinforced links between families or groups because it was a form of exchange in which women moved between men as tokens, like words in conversation or goods in trade (as Lévi-Strauss infamously wrote).²⁹ Thus what made incest "abusive" was not inbreeding, but the fact that it *halted circulation*.³⁰ This is the exchange of women or, as Gayle Rubin memorably renamed it, "the traffic in women."

Much like its predecessor, structural linguistics, Lévi-Strauss's anthropology required binary oppositions to operate (in this instance, nature/culture and man/woman), but even early in his career, Lévi-Strauss seemed ambivalent about them, as Jacques Derrida pointed out in 1966.³¹ By *The Savage Mind* (1962), the anthropologist was writing, "The opposition between nature and culture to which I attached much importance at one time [in *ESK*, Chs. 1, 2] now seems to be primarily of methodological importance."³² When, in 1967, he revisited *ESK*, he would explain at greater length that "the contrast of nature and culture ... should be seen as an artificial creation of culture," which itself "belong[s] to nature."³³ In other words, nature had generated culture, which in turn defined itself in contrast to

²⁷Namely the 1755 *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men* and the *Essay on the Origin of Language*, published posthumously in 1781. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté* (Paris and The Hague, 1967), 29, 156; Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, ed. R. Needham, trans. J. H. Bell and John Richard von Sturmer (Boston, 1969), 24–25; Camille Robcis, *The Law of Kinship: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in France* (Ithaca, 2013), 71–72; Gayle S. Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex" (1975), in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham, 2012), 33–65, at 44.

²⁸Lévi-Strauss, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, 552, 568–70; Lévi-Strauss, *Elementary Structures*, 481, 495–97. Hereinafter citations will indicate page numbers as follows: French page(s)/English page(s).

²⁹Lévi-Strauss, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, 568–70/495–7.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 568/495–6. The English translator used the word "misuse" for *abus*, which I translate here as "abusive."

³¹Famously in Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," in Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato, eds., *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man* (Baltimore, 1972), 247–72, at 253; see also Doja, "From Neolithic Naturalness to *Tristes Tropiques*," 83.

³²See Derrida's description of Lévi-Strauss's relation to binary oppositions in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences," 254; Robcis, *Law of Kinship*, 79 ff.

³³Lévi-Strauss, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, xviii/xxix–xxx.

the very nature from which it had ultimately emerged. Even in the early the 1960s, Lévi-Strauss was trying to move beyond this opposition, so it makes sense that in his lecture he would read Rousseau's concept of *pitié* as overcoming it. (Let it be said in passing that definitions of *pitié* vary across Rousseau's work, but these differences need not detain us here, since what is at stake is Lévi-Strauss's understanding of the term.³⁴)

In the second *Discourse*, Rousseau defined *pitié* as "an innate repugnance to see [one's] equal suffer," to which phrase Lévi-Strauss gave a capacious interpretation: an automatic, instinctual identification with and desire to protect the other, including not only humans, but any living being: anything that suffers or might suffer.³⁵ Corollary to this identification with the other is a refusal of self-identification, in such a way that the other precedes the self. To put this another way, *pitié* makes me identify with you before I identify with myself.³⁶ That is one aspect of the concept's non-duality; another lies in the fact that *pitié*, like the incest prohibition, houses apparent antitheses: it is natural, therefore universal, yet mediated by particular cultural structures; it is felt by both humans and animals; it is a feeling and a source of knowledge.³⁷ In the state of nature (following Lévi-Strauss's version of Rousseau), humans felt *pitié* for everything around them up until a contingent accident of some kind stimulated population growth, which caused humans to spread into new territories, where their faculty of reason had to develop to cope with novel environments, which it did by devising instrumental schemata that divided first animals into different species, then humans from other animals, and finally humans among themselves.³⁸ Such schemata marked humanity's entrance into the social state, in which a dualistic worldview came to displace *pitié*.

A most eloquent example of *pitié* in action is music, which induces a "first state" similar to humanity's awakening to consciousness in prehistory. In Lévi-Strauss's words,

As for music, no other form of expression is better suited, it seems, to impugn the double Cartesian opposition between material and spiritual, body and soul. Music is an abstract system of oppositions and relations—alterations in ways of range which, when brought into play, have two consequences: firstly, the reversal in the relationship of the self and the other, since, when I *hear* music, I

³⁴On these see Pierre Force, "Rousseau and Smith: On Sympathy as a First Principle," in Helena Rosenblatt and Paul Schweigert, eds., *Thinking with Rousseau: From Machiavelli to Schmitt* (New York, 2017), 115–31; Force, *Self-Interest before Adam Smith: A Genealogy of Economic Science* (New York, 2003), 14–20; Jean Starobinski, "Essai sur l'origine des langues," in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 5 (Paris, 1995), cci–ccii.

³⁵Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau, fondateur des sciences de l'homme" (1962), in Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale, deux*, 45–56, at 54; Lévi-Strauss, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Founder of the Sciences of Man," in Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 2: 33–43, at 41; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, in Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3 (Paris, 1964), 109–237, at 154; Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality (Second Discourse), Polemics, and Political Economy*, trans. J. R. Bush et al., in *The Collected Writings of Rousseau*, ed. R. D. Masters and C. Kelly, vol. 3 (Hanover and London, 1992), 1–96, at 36.

³⁶Lévi-Strauss, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau," 51/39.

³⁷Ibid., 50/37.

³⁸Ibid., 50/38.

listen to myself through it [*je m'écoute à travers elle*]. And secondly, by a reversal of the relationship between soul and body, music *lives itself* in me [*la musique se vit en moi*].³⁹

Note first of all the identification of the social state with a caricatural Cartesian dualism. Over and against this, Lévi-Strauss poses a Rousseauism that expresses itself through reflexive verbs—“*je m'écoute à travers elle*,” “*elle se vit en moi*”—which signal a move, first beyond the grammatical opposition of active and passive, because the subject and object coincide; then beyond the logical opposition of subject and object, because listener and music exist each through the other; and finally beyond the metaphysical opposition between the physical (sensation) and the moral (feeling).⁴⁰ This example is paradigmatic: the same structure of interdependence governs our relation to nature and to other human beings.⁴¹

The non-duality of *pitié* allows it to resist the corrosive power of reason “because anterior to it.”⁴² It is also this non-duality that aligns *pitié* with what Lévi-Strauss calls “the great religions of the Far East.”⁴³ The term is vague, but in his archives, notes contained among the drafts of the speech shed light on what he meant: Rousseau represented a “Western Buddhism” (Figure 2).⁴⁴ This metaphor suggests that in writing about *pitié*, Lévi-Strauss had in mind the non-duality of self and other, a core notion of Buddhist philosophy. Let us gloss the concept as a relationship in which apparent oppositions are found to be co-constitutive, residing in what the twentieth-century philosopher Nishida Kitarō called “a contradictory self-identity.”⁴⁵ In the words of a common Zen adage, “Not one, not two.”⁴⁶

Further support for this view comes from an early draft of the speech's conclusion, where Lévi-Strauss wrote that he hoped Rousseau would “transcend” the contradiction not between “my societies [*sic*] and other societies,” as in the final draft, but between “orient and occident.”⁴⁷ Eastern philosophy had been on the anthropologist's mind for a decade at this point, since, in 1951, he published an article in which he dated his familiarity with it to the previous year and argued that the West ought to learn from the East's understanding of the “inseparability” of the physical and the spiritual—in other words, non-duality.⁴⁸ Five years later, in *Tristes tropiques*, Lévi-Strauss would show a degree of insight into Buddhism's fundamental concepts, and remark on the striking similarity that some of those shared

³⁹Ibid., 51/39, original emphasis.

⁴⁰See the discussion of Rousseau's use of reflexives in Martin Rueff, *À coups redoublés: Anthropologie des passions et doctrine de l'expression chez Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Sesto San Giovanni, 2018), 87–9.

⁴¹Lévi-Strauss, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” 51/39, 55/43.

⁴²Ibid., 54/41.

⁴³Ibid., 54/42.

⁴⁴“1962–250e anniversaire de Jean-Jacques Rousseau Genève 28 Juin 1962,” Fonds Lévi-Strauss, Box 86 (“Discours”).

⁴⁵Nishida Kitarō, *Last Writings: Nothingness and the Religious Worldview*, trans. David A. Dilworth (Honolulu, 1993).

⁴⁶For example, Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, ed. Trudy Dixon (Boston, 2005), 25.

⁴⁷Lévi-Strauss, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” 55–6/43; Fonds Lévi-Strauss, Box 86 (trans. mine).

⁴⁸Reprinted as Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Foreword to Documents on South Asia,” *International Social Science Journal* 50/157 (1998), 326–7.

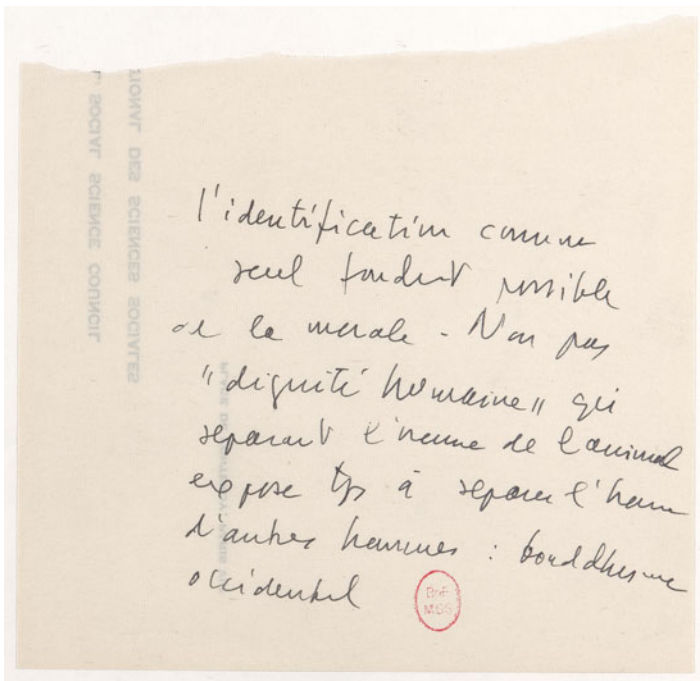


Figure 2. “1962–250e anniversaire de Jean-Jacques Rousseau Genève 28 Juin 1962,” box 86 (“Discours”), fonds Lévi-Strauss. NAF 28150 86. Reprinted with permission of Monique Lévi-Strauss.

with the central ideas of Marxism.⁴⁹ In a passage close to the end of the book, he asked,

What else, indeed, have I learned from the masters who taught me, the philosophers I have read, the societies I have visited and even from that science which is the pride of the West, apart from a few scraps of wisdom which, when laid end to end, coincide with the meditation of the Sage at the foot of the tree?⁵⁰

Why, then, does Lévi-Strauss in his speech on Rousseau abandon the metaphor of “Western Buddhism” for the wavier suggestion, “These teachings were perhaps already contained in the great religions of the Far East”?⁵¹ Maybe because, although his understanding was “consistent,” it was “unconscious or intuitive, rather than carefully studied,” as Brian J. Nichols, a scholar of Buddhism, wrote, while still a student, in an article read by the anthropologist himself: aware of this, Lévi-Strauss might have toned down the comparison.⁵² Deeper knowledge would

⁴⁹On this see Sungdo Kim, “Une rencontre singulière entre structuralisme et bouddhisme: Saussure, Bouddha, Lévi-Strauss,” *Protée* 39/2 (2011), 19–29, at 25–6.

⁵⁰Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques* (Plon, 1984), 475; Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes tropiques*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman, 1st American edn (New York, 1974), 411.

⁵¹Lévi-Strauss, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” 54/42.

⁵²Brian J. Nichols, “The Buddhism of Claude Lévi-Strauss,” *Centennial Review* 39/1 (1995), 109–28, at 127 n. 1, 110.

come only later, when he would write the catalog essay for an exhibition of work by the monk Sengai, in which he would emphasize the overcoming of dualism and the consequent demotion of the self-contained ego in Zen.⁵³ (In that essay, he would propose that Montaigne was the Western thinker closest to Buddhism.⁵⁴)

Readers have compared Lévi-Strauss's structuralism to Buddhism at least since Octavio Paz's 1967 introduction to his ideas.⁵⁵ The Durkheimian sociologist of religion Ivan Strenski made a thorough comparison between structuralism and Theravada Buddhism in 1980, claiming that Lévi-Strauss's "citation of Buddhist notions as well as [his] grasp of Buddhist concepts rate serious attention," and this despite the anthropologist having "denied explicitly any knowledge" of them in personal correspondence with him.⁵⁶ For Daniel Dubuisson, a historian of religion, Lévi-Strauss's thought evinces the influence of a kind of Buddhism, "doubtless idealized, atemporal, denuded, and austere, reduced to superior principals."⁵⁷ (Dubuisson also claims that Lévi-Strauss declared to him in 1989, "I have always thought of myself as a Buddhist."⁵⁸) In addition to Nichols—quoted above, who developed a comparison between Lévi-Strauss's ethics and the Buddhist notion of compassion (*karuṇā*), quite close to Rousseau's *pitié*—I should also note the theologian Olivier Abel, who believes that Lévi-Strauss found in Rousseau "a junction of Schopenhauerian Buddhism (the strategy of *pitié*) and Marxist humanism (the critique of alienated representation)," an interpretation cited by Kim Sungdo, a specialist in the history of linguistic theory who has also written on this topic.⁵⁹

I will retain two points of agreement from these discussions: that Lévi-Strauss's interest in Buddhism intersects with his enthusiasm for Rousseau,⁶⁰ and that he uses Buddhist or Buddhist-like concepts in his critique of Jean-Paul Sartre.⁶¹ This is significant since both the speech on Rousseau and *The Savage Mind* responded to Sartre's attack on structuralism in his 1960 *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Lévi-Strauss would dedicate his 1960–61 seminar at the École pratique des hautes études to the *Critique*; his seminar notes are where we first find him drawing a contrast between Sartre and Rousseau, and he referred to the class in

⁵³Reprinted in Claude Lévi-Strauss and Junzō Kawada, *L'autre face de la lune: Écrits sur le Japon* (Paris, 2011), 109–26. See also the voluminous notes for his introduction to Sengai: *Moine Zen (1750–1837)*, in Fonds Lévi-Strauss, Box 80 ("Préfaces"), and the fichier 164 ("Japon").

⁵⁴Lévi-Strauss, *L'autre face de la lune*, 125.

⁵⁵Octavio Paz, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: An Introduction*, trans. J. S. Bernstein and Maxine Bernstein (New York, 1974), *passim*, but esp. 152.

⁵⁶Ivan Strenski, "Levi-Strauss and the Buddhists," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 22/1 (1980), 3–22, at 6, 9.

⁵⁷Daniel Dubuisson, "A Buddhist among the Bororo," in Dubuisson, *Twentieth Century Mythologies: Dumézil, Lévi-Strauss, Eliade*, trans. Martha Cunningham (London, 2006), 161–70, at 161–2. Originally in Dubuisson, *Mythologies du XXe siècle (Dumézil, Lévi-Strauss, Eliade)* (Lille, 1993), 203–14.

⁵⁸Dubuisson, "A Buddhist among the Bororo," 161 n. 2.

⁵⁹Olivier Abel, "Postface au structuralisme anthropologique de Lévi Strauss," at <https://perma.cc/R3PS-WFFC> (accessed 17 May 2023); Kim, "Une rencontre singulière," 28 n. 8.

⁶⁰Strenski, "Levi-Strauss and the Buddhists," 19; Nichols, "The Buddhism of Claude Lévi-Strauss," *passim*; Abel, "Postface"; Kim, "Une rencontre singulière," 28 n. 8.

⁶¹Strenski, "Levi-Strauss and the Buddhists," 22; Dubuisson, "A Buddhist among the Bororo," 165; Nichols, "The Buddhism of Claude Lévi-Strauss," 120.

preparatory documents for the speech as well as for the preface to *The Savage Mind*.⁶² (The debate with Sartre forms one dimension of a multifaceted context, including previous readings in the French or German sociological traditions, which lie outside the purview of this essay.)

In Sartre's ontology, freedom derived from a radical separation of the human from the natural world.⁶³ The final chapter of *The Savage Mind*, "History and Dialectic," counterattacked Sartre on that score, alleging that his understanding of dialectical reason left him trapped in a dualistic, "egocentric," and "Cartesian" "prison" of a worldview, in which Indigenous peoples were consigned to the "meta-physical function of Other" in opposition to the self of "historical" or industrial societies.⁶⁴ Not only does this response to Sartre quote from Rousseau's denunciation of ethnocentrism in footnote xii of the second *Discourse*, but it also shares whole sentences with the Geneva speech, including its attack on Cartesianism.⁶⁵ The crossed reference to Rousseau and Buddhism in this context is not accidental, then, but an important moment in Lévi-Strauss's ongoing criticism of existentialism.⁶⁶ According to "the traditional opposition between existentialism and structuralism," Sartre was both "Lévi-Strauss's rival on the intellectual field" and "an intellectual model" that stimulated the evolution of his philosophical anthropology.⁶⁷ Viewed in this light, both Lévi-Strauss's turn to Rousseau and his metaphor of "Western Buddhism" represent attempts to marshal intellectual resources as he developed a non-dual alternative Sartre's ideas.⁶⁸

⁶²Notes for Maurice Panoff's 21 Dec. 1960 presentation, in the folder labeled EPHE 5e Section 1960–61 Seminaire [sic] Sartre, Box 19 ("La pensée sauvage"); and in the folder labeled 1962 – 250e anniversaire de Jean-Jacques Rousseau Genève 28 Juin 1962, Box 86 ("Discours"), Fonds Lévi-Strauss. See also Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris, 1962), 11; Frédéric Keck, "Individu et événement dans La Pensée sauvage," *Les temps modernes* 628/3 (2004), 38–41.

⁶³Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant: Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*, ed. Arlette Elkaim-Sartre (Paris, 2017), 809–10; Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique, précédé de question de méthode*, ed. Arlette Elkaim-Sartre (Paris, 1985), 146–52; William L. Remley, "Sartre and Engels: The *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and the Confrontation on the Dialectics of Nature," *Sartre Studies International* 18/2 (2012), 19–48, at 40. This reading requires understanding the in-itself as Nature, which is how Lévi-Strauss seems to read it; for an objection to that view, see *ibid.*, 39.

⁶⁴Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, 329–30, 341 n. I do not have the space to discuss the fairness of this reading of Sartre.

⁶⁵*Ibid.* 326–7. Note, however, that Lévi-Strauss thinks Rousseau would not have accepted his "physico-chemical" determinism with its quest to "reintegrate culture into nature." On shared sentences, compare Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage*, 329–30, with Lévi-Strauss, "Jean-Jacques Rousseau," 48.

⁶⁶Vincent Descombes, *Le même et l'autre: Quarante-cinq ans de philosophie française (1933–1978)* (Paris, 1979), 89, 100, 127–30; English translation as Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge and New York, 1980), 72, 81, 106–9; Frédéric Worms, *La philosophie en France au XXe siècle: Moments* (Paris, 2009), 471–75; Étienne Balibar and John Rajchman, "Introduction," in Balibar and Rajchman, with Anne Boyman, eds., *French Philosophy since 1945: Problems, Concepts, Inventions* (New York and London, 2011), xvii–xxiii, at xviii–xix.

⁶⁷Frédéric Keck, "L'aventure de l'ordinaire chez Sartre et Lévi-Strauss," *Les temps modernes* 632, 633, 634/4 (2005), 181–92, at 181–2 n. 1, my translation. Keck makes a convincing argument that a thoroughgoing comparison of Sartre and Lévi-Strauss would be fruitful; in this article and his piece on *La pensée sauvage* (cited above), he has laid the groundwork for such a study.

⁶⁸This project would then be comparable to that of his contemporary, the phenomenologist Nishitani Keiji (1900–90). See Nishitani Keiji, *Religion and Nothingness* (1961), trans. Jan van Bragt (Berkeley, 1983). It is notable as well that Maurice Merleau-Ponty had observed the non-dual thrust of

Let us now return to *pitié*. As described above, the experience of *pitié* sets in motion a kind of substitution of self for other: “I am not ‘me,’ but the weakest, the most humble of ‘others.’”⁶⁹ To situate ourselves on the horizon of the other in this way forces us to relinquish our preconceptions, and it is through this change in perspective that we can create new knowledge. Rousseau insisted upon this point in endnote x of the second *Discourse*, where he exhorted his contemporaries to study the varieties of humankind without prejudice, without projecting European norms onto them.⁷⁰ The simultaneous ethical and epistemological shift caused by *pitié* is the very foundation of the human sciences, according to Lévi-Strauss, and its emblematic form is anthropological fieldwork. For must not the anthropologist, by cohabitating with an Indigenous people, come to identify with them? And in so doing, will they not also come to share the group’s pressing concerns about the brutality of colonialism and extraction? Lévi-Strauss blamed such violence on a “vicious cycle,” which humans had inaugurated in prehistory by opening a rift between themselves and nature, and perpetuated since then in the form of ever greater distinctions of class, ethnicity, and so on.⁷¹ The West in particular was at fault for having first consigned its others to nature, and then claiming dominion over the world.⁷² On this view, colonialism traced back to the primordial division between self and other—an “antagonism which philosophy alone sought to stimulate [*exciter*],” he declared in a jab at Sartre.⁷³ The exercise of *pitié*, however, could “free” self and other to “recover their unity”: therein lies its political importance: it creates the conditions in which a “we” might emerge from the “I” and the “thou.”⁷⁴ Even in the state of society, having once experienced *pitié*, we must then adopt a protective posture towards those who cannot defend themselves or who can only do so in a limited way, especially Indigenous peoples and nature.⁷⁵ In brief, the Rousseau constructed by Lévi-Strauss is a proponent of the conservation of ecological and human diversity in the face of colonialism, extraction, and industrialization.⁷⁶

“The real present existence of the social contract”: Wittig’s Rousseau

Monique Wittig’s critique of Lévi-Strauss was bound up with her appropriation of the Enlightenment from an early date, as we can see in her second book, *Les guérillères* (1969), a nonlinear prose epic about a war between the pronouns *ils*

Lévi-Strauss’s thought as early as 1959; see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “De Mauss à Claude Lévi-Strauss,” in Merleau-Ponty, *Signes* (Paris, 1960), 143–57, at 155; Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, 1978), 113–25, at 123.

⁶⁹Lévi-Strauss, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” 50/39.

⁷⁰*Ibid.*, 45–6/34–5.

⁷¹*Ibid.*, 53/41.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 55/42.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 52/40.

⁷⁴*Ibid.*

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 51–2/39–40.

⁷⁶See also Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Race and history,” especially Section X, “The notion of progress,” where he writes, “It is the fact of diversity which must be saved, not the historical content given to it by each era (and which no era could perpetuate beyond itself).” Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale, deux*, 417, 418 ff.; *Structural Anthropology*, 2: 335, 336 ff.

and *elles*. She would later describe the book as a “meeting place of several texts” because its composition involved numerous adaptations of, allusions to, and borrowings from other writers, which she called “prélèvements” (in a financial context, debits; or in a medical and scientific one, tests or samples).⁷⁷ Among these, we find caricatures of Lévi-Strauss’s ideas and references to Choderlos de Laclos’s “Des femmes et de leur éducation,” a feminist rewriting of the conjectural history of Rousseau’s second *Discourse* (composed in 1783, but only published in the twentieth century).⁷⁸

A comprehensive study of the Wittig–Rousseau connection has yet to appear, but scholars have alluded to it since the early days of her reception in queer theory.⁷⁹ These and later references acknowledge that Wittig’s engagement with Rousseau was serious and that it might carry philosophical implications.⁸⁰ The inclusion of “On the Social Contract” in the collective volume *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* concords with this assessment; in her introduction to the book, Lynda Lange observes that Wittig’s entry stood out because it went “beyond the oppositional stance of feminism as critique and locate[d] feminist thought in a tradition that both constitutes, and is constituted by, historical gender differences.”⁸¹ One of the book’s contributors, Linda M.-G. Zerilli, has published substantial work on both Wittig and Rousseau. She understands Wittig’s social contract as similar to Rousseau’s because it is an unwritten code of rules governing society.⁸² In an essay on the posthumous and understudied *Chantier littéraire* (2010), Christine Planté points out that the central position of heterosexuality in Rousseau’s social-contract theory stands as an obstacle in the path of anyone trying to adapt his thought to feminist ends, and so, she argues,

⁷⁷On these see Aubrey Gabel, “Ludic Intertexts in Les Guérillères: Reading as Training in Popular Warfare” (Drafting Monique Wittig, Beinecke Library, Yale University, 10 Oct. 2019); Catherine Écarnot, *L’écriture de Monique Wittig à la couleur de Sappho, voyage à travers les textes de fiction de Monique Wittig* (Donnemarie-Dontilly, 2023), 55–59; Dominique Bourque, *Écrire l’inter-dit: La subversion formelle dans l’œuvre de Monique Wittig* (Paris, 2006), 70–72. Wittig would later compare this practice to Lévi-Strauss’s *bricolage*; see the first chapter of *The Savage Mind* and Wittig, *Le chantier littéraire* (Lyon and Donnemarie-Dontilly, 2010), 79.

⁷⁸For Lévi-Strauss see, in particular, the passage in Monique Wittig, *Les guérillères* (Paris, 1969), 166–7; and discussion of the same in Rubin, “Traffic,” 368–9 n. 54. See also Namascar Shaktini, “Figuring Circulation: Claude Lévi-Strauss and Monique Wittig,” in Margaret Attack and Phil Powrie, eds., *Contemporary French Fiction by Women: Feminist Perspectives* (Manchester and New York, 1990), 141–50. Wittig lists Laclos’s book as a source at the end of *Les guérillères*, but I have not yet located a specific reference to it.

⁷⁹Teresa de Lauretis, “The Female Body and Heterosexual Presumption,” *Semiotica* 67/3–4 (1987), 259–79, at 277 n. 1; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 124, 168 n. 9.

⁸⁰See Armengaud, who alludes to Rousseau’s utopian social contract. Françoise Armengaud, “L’entreprise littéraire de Monique Wittig: Une réélaboration utopiste du contrat social?,” in Sam [Marie-Hélène] Bourcier, Suzette Robichon, and Françoise Armengaud, eds., *Parce que les lesbiennes ne sont pas des femmes: autour de l’œuvre politique, théorique et littéraire de Monique Wittig: actes du colloque des 16-17 juin 2001, Columbia University, Paris* (Paris, 2002), 137–60, at 143.

⁸¹Lynda Lange, “Introduction,” in Lange, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Re-reading the Canon* (University Park, 2002), 1–23, at 23.

⁸²Linda M.-G. Zerilli, “A New Grammar of Difference: Monique Wittig’s Poetic Revolution,” in Shaktini, *On Monique Wittig*, 87–114, at 95, 112 n. 36; see also Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago, 2005), Ch. 2.

Wittig could not merely take his ideas on, but had to operate a critical “displacement.”⁸³ In her playful 2011 preface to Wittig’s *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* (1976, co-written with her partner Sande Zeig), Anne F. Garréta remarks on a similar subversion of “la philosophe et promeneuse solitaire Jeanne-Jacqueline.”⁸⁴ The lack of a thoroughgoing examination of Wittig’s career-spanning engagement with Rousseau’s work seems significant.⁸⁵ Nevertheless, her references to him are so variegated with respect to tone, register, depth, and context that no single article could do all of them justice, let alone historicize a lacuna in the scholarship, so here I only bring into focus the way in which her use of Rousseau in “On the Social Contract” helped her articulate a critique of Lévi-Strauss from within the very genealogy of anthropology that he had traced in his 1962 speech.

Wittig first published the essay in *Feminist Issues*, then included it in *The Straight Mind* (1992), the title of which was a “joke” about Lévi-Strauss’s *The Savage Mind*.⁸⁶ If we take her at her word, then we can read *The Straight Mind* as a critical and parodic exercise in anthropological theory, turning Lévi-Strauss’s own words, the concepts of the social sciences, and their link to Rousseau against him.⁸⁷ In this regard, Wittig’s essay resembles nothing more than her novels, which take up traditional literary genres like the autobiography or the epic only to subvert them from within. We can therefore extend analyses of intertextuality like those of Catherine Écarnot and Dominique Bourque to *The Straight Mind*, just as Christine Planté has done for *Le chantier littéraire* (written around the same time).⁸⁸ Like *L’Opoponax* (1964) or *Le corps lesbien* (1973) before it, the essay collection adopts and adapts a preexisting “form in order to create an ‘estrangement’ or ‘defamiliarization effect’ that discloses a disconcerting perspective on the world.”⁸⁹

Wittig credited Rousseau with a similar defamiliarization in the history of political thought when she declared him “the first philosopher who [did] not take it for granted that, if there is such a thing as a social contract, its nerve is ‘might makes

⁸³Christine Planté, “Le contrat social,” in Monique Wittig, *Le chantier littéraire* (Lyon and Donnemarie-Dontilly, 2010), 207–14, at 209. Wittig herself notes this; see note 3 above. Kim is one of the rare scholars to have studied *Le Chantier*: see Annabel L. Kim, *Unbecoming Language: Anti-identitarian French Feminist Fictions* (Columbus, OH, 2018), Ch. 2. Kim and Lynne Huffer have translated the book as *The Literary Workshop*, to be published in 2025.

⁸⁴Translation mine. Anne F. Garréta, “Préface,” in Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig, *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* (Paris, 2011), 7–16, at 14–15; on the relationship between Wittig and Garréta see Kim, *Unbecoming Language*, Ch. 3. See also the interview with Wittig conducted by Garréta, “French Lesbian Writers?”, *Yale French Studies* 90 (1996), 235–41.

⁸⁵Note as well a 2019 conference presentation on the “divided body” (*corps morcelé*) in Wittig’s *Corps lesbien* and Rousseau’s gory *Lévite d’Éphraïm*: Adam Schoene, “Wittig’s Rousseau” (Drafting Monique Wittig, Beinecke Library, Yale University, 10 Oct. 2019).

⁸⁶Monique Wittig, “La pensée straight,” *Questions féministes* 7 (Feb. 1980), 45–53, at 49; Wittig, “The Straight Mind,” *Feminist Issues* 1/1 (1980), 103–11, at 107; Wittig, “The Straight Mind,” in Wittig, *The Straight Mind* (Boston, 1992), 20–32, at 27; Wittig, “La pensée straight,” in Wittig, *La pensée straight* (Paris: Amsterdam, 2013), 57–67, at 62; e-mail to Guillaume Dustan, “Re: pensée,” 20 March 2000, Box 24, Monique Wittig Papers.

⁸⁷On Wittig’s humor see Julia “Jules” Balén, “No Straight Faces: Wittig’s Trojan Horse Humor” (Drafting Monique Wittig, Beinecke Library, Yale University, 10 Oct. 2019).

⁸⁸In the preface to Wittig, *Le chantier littéraire*, 16–17.

⁸⁹Bourque, *Écrire l’inter-dit*, 21; compare Écarnot, *L’écriture de Monique Wittig*, 11. This is the *reversement* studied by Erika Ostrovsky, *The Constant Journey: The Fiction of Monique Wittig* (Carbondale, 1991).

right.”⁹⁰ Here we find an allusion to Rousseau’s denaturalization of inequality in the second *Discourse*, in which he had distinguished between a genuine social contract, grounded in consent, and his historical conjecture of a bogus or fraudulent one imposed by the rich upon the poor and justified by the false claim that such was the natural order of things.⁹¹ Wittig identified Lévi-Strauss’s theory of the exchange of women with the bogus contract: “with this theory we [feminist theoreticians] have revealed the whole plot, the whole conspiracy, of fathers, brothers, husbands against half of mankind.”⁹²

It stands to reason, then, that she would look to *The Social Contract*—the treatise in which Rousseau sought to resolve the problems raised by his conjectures in the *Discourse*—for guidance. Here is how she explained her decision: “Clearly, in what Rousseau says, it is *the real present existence of the social contract* that is particularly stimulating for me—whatever its origin is, it exists here and now, and as such is apt to be understood and acted upon. Each contractor has to reaffirm the contract in new terms for the contract to be in existence.”⁹³

The four drafts held in Wittig’s papers testify that the wording of this passage took a good deal of thought (Figures 3–6).⁹⁴ In each, Wittig laid emphasis on something like the “here-and-nowness” of the social contract. She seems to have started with the phrase “the contemporary character of the social contract,” before settling for a moment on the formulation “[its] existence in terms of actuality” (Figures 3, 4, 6). Interpreted through the lens of the French word *actualité*, the word “actuality” might signify news or the present day (thus Figure 5’s “up-to-dateness”), or else it might refer to the opposite of potentiality in the Scholastic tradition of Aristotelianism. In that context, potentiality is the capacity of an entity to be something, or to undertake a particular action, while actuality is the state or process of being such a thing or undertaking such an action.⁹⁵ In other words, the contract exists as a possibility but can only become real or active when the contractors affirm it.

With the final draft (Figure 6), Wittig moves fully into the vocabulary of theology, since the adjectives “real present” cannot but recall the Christian concept of the real presence.⁹⁶ In many churches in the Western tradition, prayers spoken by the priest over the bread and the wine convert their “substance” wholly to the

⁹⁰Wittig, “On the Social Contract,” 38.

⁹¹Rousseau, *Discours/Discourse*, 176–9/52–4 and 184 ff./59 ff.

⁹²Wittig, “On the Social Contract,” 42.

⁹³Ibid., 38, added emphasis.

⁹⁴Box 5, Monique Wittig papers.

⁹⁵“Actus et Potentia,” in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, at www.newadvent.org/cathen/01124a.htm (accessed 6 June 2022). Thanks to Elena Comay del Junco for helping me understand these terms.

⁹⁶Christian intertexts are very common in Wittig’s literary and theoretical works. For more on this see Erika Ostrovsky, “Religion in the Fiction of Monique Wittig,” in Morny Joy, Kathleen O’Grady, and Judith L. Poxon, eds., *Religion in French Feminist Thought* (London and New York, 2003), 191–202; Écarnot, *L’écriture de Monique Wittig*, 72–80, and esp. 76–80 on the Eucharist. Écarnot also recently presented further research on this question: Écarnot, “Christa, Sappho ... Amen! Le travail du corpus chrétien dans *Le Corps Lesbien*” (Monique Wittig: Twenty Years Later/Vingt ans après, Université de Genève, 28 June 2023). Even a cursory reading of *L’Opoanax* shows that Wittig absorbed quite a bit of Catholic intellectual culture, on which see Émilie Notéris, *Wittig* (Paris, 2022), 20; and Yannick Chevalier, “Wittig Reading Pascal; Or, How to Lesbianize Angst with Some Opoanax” (Monique Wittig: Twenty Years Later/Vingt ans après, University of California, Berkeley, 17 March 2023).

According to Rousseau the social contract is the sum of fundamental conventions which "even though they might have never been formally enunciated are nevertheless implied by living in society." Clearly it is the ^{existence in terms of actuality} ~~contemporary~~ character of the social contract that is particularly stimulating, ^{for what} in Rousseau ~~views~~ ^{says}. Whatever its origin, it exists here and now and, as such, it is apt to be understood, and acted upon. Each contractor has to reconstitute the contract in new terms for the contract to be in existence. 1)

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Figures 3-6. Box 5, Monique Wittig Papers. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Reprinted with permission of the Monique Wittig estate.

body and blood of Christ while leaving their physical attributes or “accidents” untouched (more Aristotelian jargon). This process, known variously as transubstantiation or consubstantiation, brings the real presence of Christ to inhabit the two species of the Eucharist; in other words, Christ’s potential presence is actualized, made real, in the bread and the wine. Just so, for Wittig, whenever two speakers communicate, the social contract becomes a real presence between them, because “the first, the permanent, and the final social contract is language. The basic agreement between human beings, indeed what makes them human and what makes them social, is language.”⁹⁷

The linguistic nature of Rousseau’s social contract makes it revisable, “apt to be understood and acted upon” (potential); it also requires that “[e]ach contractor ... reaffirm the contract in new terms for the contract to be in existence” (actual).⁹⁸ Even if its articles are implicit—say, that everyone must be either a man or a woman—they open up for revision once “the contractors are reminded by the term itself that they should re-examine their conditions.”⁹⁹ This is why Wittig refers to the term as an “instrumental notion,” for the phrase itself makes us aware that our society is not natural, but the product of historical choices and conventions from which we might withhold our consent. In this sense, the social contract might be redescribed as a feminist consciousness-raising mechanism.

To drive home the epistemological import of all this, I must now make a brief digression back to Rousseau, before returning, via Lévi-Strauss, to Wittig’s essay. Recall that Rousseau wrote the second *Discourse* in response to the Académie de Dijon’s essay contest about the origin of inequality and the possibility that natural law might justify it. In his preface, he wrote that this question presupposed another, more radical one: the problem of human nature. “Man,” he famously declared, was the subject about which knowledge would be most useful but which was most lacking.¹⁰⁰ Much like the statue of Glaucus, he went on, deformed by the continuous action of the elements, the human soul had been so disfigured by social life as to become unrecognizable; to understand what natural law might authorize today, and to learn how inequality had emerged, we must discover what the human soul was like in its pre-social, natural state. Therefore Rousseau first addressed his own prerequisite questions: “*What experiments would be necessary to achieve knowledge of natural man? And what are the means for making these experiments in the midst of society?*”¹⁰¹

These two questions imply that our life in a particular society shapes and limits our ability to apprehend what lies beyond (before, after, or outside) it; yet, according to Rousseau, we might still be able to shift or enlarge the horizon of knowability by means of experimentation. At issue is *how* to undertake such experiments from within a given society. As I discussed earlier, on Lévi-Strauss’s reading of Rousseau,

⁹⁷Wittig, “On the Social Contract,” 34.

⁹⁸Ibid., 38.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l’origine et les fondements de l’inégalité parmi les hommes*, in Rousseau, *Oeuvres complètes*, 3: 122.

¹⁰¹Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, 123–4; Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, 13, original emphasis.

pitié enables us to make this change in perspective. When previous philosophers had tried to glimpse the state of nature, Rousseau wrote, they had made the mistake of looking for it through the lens of concepts and behaviors found only in society, and when they had sought the origin of inequality, they had only projected the familiar social structures of Europe onto nature: “All of them, finally, speaking continually of need, avarice, oppression, desires, and pride, have carried to the state of Nature ideas they had acquired in society: they spoke about savage man and they described Civil man.”¹⁰² Rousseau was targeting here the species of confirmation bias known as the naturalistic fallacy, defined by Lorraine Daston as “a kind of covert smuggling operation in which cultural values are transferred into nature, and nature’s authority is then called upon to buttress those very same values.”¹⁰³

Wittig’s prosecution of the naturalistic fallacy was as relentless as Rousseau’s, and she charged Lévi-Strauss with it on account of his concept of the exchange of women. It had played a critical role in the anthropologist’s conjectural history of the origin of human societies, which he staged in the last pages of *ESK* via the threefold comparison between women, words, and goods.¹⁰⁴ At first, language had possessed “affective, aesthetic and magical implications,” but as it began to express more abstract ideas with greater clarity and specification, those traits weakened.¹⁰⁵ This point echoes Rousseau’s *Essay on the Origin of Language*, in which language described an arc from a context-dependent orality capable of causing tremendous emotional response in its listeners to a context-neutral, emotionally cold written form.¹⁰⁶ On Lévi-Strauss’s view, the development of symbolic thought initiated by the expansion of language “must have required” (“devait exiger”) the exchange of women like words, since this was the only way for men to reckon with the “two incompatible aspects” of women’s status: “the object of personal desire, thus exciting sexual and proprietorial instincts” and “the subject of the desire of others, and seen as such, i.e., as the means of binding others through alliance with them.”¹⁰⁷ But unlike a word, “woman could never become just a sign and nothing more, since even in a man’s world [*un monde d’hommes*] she is still a person, and since in so far as she is defined as a sign she must be recognized as a generator of signs.”¹⁰⁸ Women, then, would never be fully interchangeable, because as human beings, they produced signs themselves; indeed, they would always retain a

¹⁰²Rousseau, *Du contrat social*, 132; Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, 19.

¹⁰³Lorraine Daston, *Against Nature* (Cambridge, MA, 2019), 4.

¹⁰⁴A concise summary of these ideas can be found in Claude Lévi-Strauss, “La notion de structure en ethnologie,” in Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale* (Paris, 1958), 303–51, at 326 ff.; Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, vol. 1 (New York, 1963), 296 ff. Note that this essay opens with an epigraph from the second *Discourse*.

¹⁰⁵Lévi-Strauss, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, 568–9/496.

¹⁰⁶Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Essai sur l’origine des langues: Où il est parlé de la mélodie et de l’imitation musicale; suivi de Lettre sur la musique française; et Examen de deux principes avancés par M. Rameau*, ed. Catherine Kintzler (Paris, 1999), Ch. 5, p. 73; Ch. 8, p. 81; Ch. 12, p. 101. Of course, on this connection, see Derrida, *De la grammatologie*.

¹⁰⁷See Butler’s interesting reading of *devait exiger* in this passage; they do not mention, however, how Lévi-Strauss seems to be borrowing from Rousseau’s second *Discours*: “Tel fut, ou dut être, l’origine de la société et des lois.” Lévi-Strauss, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, 569/496; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 41.

¹⁰⁸Lévi-Strauss, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, 569/496, added emphasis.

“particular value” due to their “talent” at being in a couple.¹⁰⁹ For Lévi-Strauss, “This explains why the relations between the sexes have preserved that affective richness, ardour and mystery which doubtless originally permeated the entire universe of human communications.”¹¹⁰

Forty years later, Wittig’s “On the Social Contract” would condemn this conclusion, not simply for its rosy-hued vision of heterosexuality, but also for its epistemological premises. For although Lévi-Strauss had taken pains to characterize the exchange of women, like *pitié*, as non-dual, Wittig located within his ideas an unacknowledged dualism that underwrote the theory: the category of sex. “Heterosexuality is always already there within all mental categories,” she wrote, telegraphing an argument she would make in 1990’s “Homo Sum.” “It has sneaked into dialectical thought (or the thought of difference) as its main category.”¹¹¹ (Clearly, she ranged Lévi-Strauss among the dialecticians.) For Wittig, the paradigm of Western philosophy’s approach to conceptual opposition was sexual difference: the primordial thesis and antithesis. Against the two great models—Hegelian–Marxist dialectics, which “has let us down,” and Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism, both of which contained “a core of nature that resists examination”—Wittig proposed the destruction of binaries, the abolition of the sexes through the drafting of a new social contract.¹¹²

To quote once again her critique of Lévi-Strauss, “Each time the exchange takes place it confirms between men a contract of appropriation of all women. For Lévi-Strauss, society cannot function or exist without this exchange. By showing it he exposes heterosexuality as not only an institution but as *the* social contract, as a political regime.”¹¹³ In these deft and dense lines, Wittig not only brings to the fore Lévi-Strauss’s reference to Rousseau, but also displaces it from the question of nature’s relation to society toward that of history and politics. Within Lévi-Strauss’s system, the exchange of women is necessary, because natural and therefore eternal, yet at the same time variable, because social and historical. Wittig, however, abandons nature completely;¹¹⁴ she renders the exchange wholly social and historical—and therefore subject to abolition through the creation of “voluntary associations” capable of “reformulat[ing] the social contract as a new one.”¹¹⁵

Wittig believed that lesbian and gay life in France and the United States had given rise to such voluntary associations, which “by [their] very existence ... destroy[ed] the artificial (social) fact constituting women as a ‘natural group.’”¹¹⁶ Born out of stigma and domination, gay and lesbian subcultures rejected both the heterosexual contract and the straight mind, and constructed their own implicit

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 569/496.

¹¹⁰Ibid., 569/496.

¹¹¹Wittig, “On the Social Contract,” 43; on French universalism in this context see Ilana Eloit, “American Lesbians Are Not French Women: Heterosexual French Feminism and the Americanisation of Lesbianism in the 1970s,” *Feminist Theory* 20/4 (2019), 381–404.

¹¹²Monique Wittig, “Preface,” in Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, xiii–xvii, at xiv; Wittig, “The Straight Mind” (1992), 27. For an extended discussion of the dialectic see Wittig, “Homo Sum,” in Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, 46–58.

¹¹³Wittig, “On the Social Contract,” 43.

¹¹⁴ “[T]here is no nature in society.” Monique Wittig, “One Is Not Born a Woman,” in Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, 9–20, at 13.

¹¹⁵Wittig, “On the Social Contract,” 45.

¹¹⁶Wittig, “One Is Not Born a Woman,” 9.

epistemological and political concepts: witness, on both sides of the Atlantic, the publication of movement and literary texts that called for the abolition of sex or the proliferation of sexual identities as well as the creation of intentional communities for gay men and lesbians.¹¹⁷ In a possible reference to such communities, Wittig had dedicated “The Straight Mind” to “American lesbians,” and in the same essay, she proposed a strategy of disidentification: “If we, as lesbians and gay men, continue to speak of ourselves and to conceive of ourselves as women and as men, we are instrumental in maintaining heterosexuality.”¹¹⁸

It is by design if this sentiment sounds like a weird echo of Lévi-Strauss, who had written that “Rousseau’s revolution, preshaping and initiating the ethnological revolution, consists of refusing forced identifications, whether of a culture with that culture, or of an individual member of a culture with a character or social function that this same culture tries to impose on him.”¹¹⁹ In her response to Lévi-Strauss, Rousseau’s ideas and language, lesbianized and made strange, enabled Wittig to formalize the knowledge produced within lesbian and gay communities:¹²⁰ “the science of oppression created by the oppressed.”¹²¹ This refusal of identification allowed lesbians and gay men to draft a new social contract, in which the category of sex as it had hitherto been understood disappeared: “For us, there are ... not one or two sexes but many (cf. Guattari/Deleuze), as many sexes as there are individuals,” Wittig declared in “Paradigm” (1979), with reference to the history of the Front homosexuel d’action révolutionnaire and the women’s liberation movement.¹²² Thus through disidentification would the archaic duality of man and woman break down, giving way to a kind of individualism.¹²³ The “repercussions upon straight culture and society”—science and politics included—“are still unenvisionable.”¹²⁴

¹¹⁷See, for example, Front homosexuel d’action révolutionnaire, ed., *Rapport contre la normalité: le Front homosexuel d’action révolutionnaire rassemble les pièces de son dossier d’accusation simple révolte ou début d’une révolution?* (1971), new edn (Montpellier, 2013), 66, 73, 76, 83–8; Radicalqueens, “Radicalqueens Manifesto #2,” in Penny A. Weiss, ed., *Feminist Manifestos* (1973) (New York, 2020), 254–55; Larry Mitchell, *The Faggots and Their Friends between Revolutions* (1977) (New York, 2019); Milo, “A Faeryist Not-Man-Ifesto,” *RFD*, Winter 1980, 56–8. Eloit, “Trouble dans le féminisme,” 139 ff., demonstrates the connection between Wittig’s theoretical output and lesbian activists’ work to support rape survivors.

¹¹⁸Wittig, “The Straight Mind” (1992), 30. Compare this with the words of two activists. In the 1971 tract “Pour une conception homosexuelle du monde,” in Front homosexuel d’action révolutionnaire, *Rapport contre la normalité*, 71–7, at 73, an anonymous Front homosexuel d’action révolutionnaire activist wrote, “we homosexuals refuse all roles because it is the very idea of Role that repulses us. We want to be neither men nor women” (my translation). And in 1983 lesbian activists declared, “We do not resemble men or women, but dykes.” Cited in Eloit, “Trouble dans le féminisme,” 145 (my translation).

¹¹⁹Lévi-Strauss, “Jean-Jacques Rousseau,” 52; Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology*, 2: 39–40.

¹²⁰Wittig, “The Straight Mind” (1992), 32, 102 n. 1.

¹²¹Wittig, “One Is Not Born a Woman,” 18–19.

¹²²Monique Wittig, “Paradigm,” in Wittig, *Homosexualities and French Literature: Cultural Contexts, Critical Texts* (Ithaca, 1979), 114–21, at 118; Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, vol. 1, *L’anti-Oedipe* (Paris, 1972), 352. As Théo Manton has pointed out to me, it seems significant that Wittig reverses the usual order of Deleuze and Guattari.

¹²³I think this individualism is more anarchist than liberal, but I do not have space to delve into that question here. See Monique Wittig to Monique Plaza *et al.*, undated (1981), 1, Box 29, Monique Wittig Papers.

¹²⁴Wittig, “The Straight Mind” (1992), 32.

Conclusion

Claude Lévi-Strauss's Rousseau and his *pitié* stand leagues apart from Wittig's Rousseau and his social-contract theory. Two additional clarifications will sharpen this contrast, which will in turn, and paradoxically, afford us a better understanding of how these two appropriations cohere within a particular moment in the intellectual history of France.

At the outset of this article, I proposed that Wittig's political philosophy bears some comparison with what is now called gender abolition. It would be more accurate, however, to refer to her as a sex abolitionist, for she believed that the social contract, through its epistemological concepts, conditioned even human morphology. Here is what she says in "On the Social Contract": "For even abstract philosophical categories act upon the real as social. Language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it. For example, the bodies of social actors are fashioned by abstract language (as well as by nonabstract languages). For there is a plasticity of the real to language."¹²⁵ We find an extended explanation of this enigmatic idea in her earlier essay, "One Is Not Born a Woman" (1979):

We have been compelled in our bodies and in our minds to correspond, feature by feature, to the *idea* of nature that has been established for us. Distorted to such an extent that our deformed body is what they call "natural," what is supposed to exist as such before oppression. 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*).¹²⁶

This passage seems almost to allude to Rousseau's image of the statue of Glauco, deformed by the elements over the course of centuries; somewhat hard to understand, it deserves a fuller treatment than I can give here, but its thrust is quite clear: for Wittig, it is not just grammatical gender, but sex itself, that must be destroyed.¹²⁷ What would bodies, what would sexuality, be like in a world without sex? That is precisely what is "unenvisionable," and in books like *Le corps lesbien*

¹²⁵This sentence recurs in "The Mark of Gender" and twice in *Le chantier littéraire*; Wittig credits it to her partner Sande Zeig's 1985 article "The Actor as Activator," which was assigned reading in her feminist theory course alongside Rousseau. Wittig, "On the Social Contract," 44; Wittig, "Preface," xv; Monique Wittig, "The Mark of Gender," in Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, 76–89, at 78; Sande Zeig, "The Actor as Activator: Deconstructing Gender through Gesture," *Feminist Issues* 5/1 (1985), 21–5. Wittig, *Le chantier littéraire*, 46, 133.

¹²⁶Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman," 9, original emphasis. I cannot enter into the question of anatomy in Wittig's work here, but see Judith Butler's two rather contrasting discussions of it, some seventeen years apart. See also Wittig, *Le chantier littéraire*, Ch. 4. "Le langage à travailler," Section 2. "Les mots matériels"; Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 114–17; Judith Butler, "Wittig's Material Practice: Universalizing a Minority Point of View," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13/4 (2007), 519–33. The phrase "the idea of nature" is a reference to Colette Guillaumin, *Sexe, race et pratique du pouvoir: L'idée de nature* (Paris, 1992); cf. Wittig, "One Is Not Born a Woman," 13.

¹²⁷Wittig goes into much more detail about this in *Le chantier littéraire* and in her novel *Virgile, non*. Monique Wittig, "Les questions féministes ne sont pas des questions lesbiennes," *Amazones d'hier, lesbiennes d'aujourd'hui* 2/1 (1983), 10–14, at 11; republished in Wittig, *Dans l'arène ennemie: Textes et entretiens 1966–1999*, ed. Sara Garbagnoli and Théo Manton (Paris, 2024), 244–52; Wittig, *Le chantier littéraire*,

and *Virgile, non*, as well as the cowritten encyclopedia–novel *Le brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes*, Wittig wanted to open her readers’ minds to the possibility of anatomy liberated from heterosexuality: “Lesbianism opens onto another dimension of the human (insofar as its definition is not based on the ‘difference’ of the sexes). Today lesbians are discovering this dimension outside what is masculine or feminine.”¹²⁸

Although derived from discourses within the lesbian and gay movements, this idea has proven both marginal and controversial; indeed, it provoked conflict between Wittig and her erstwhile allies among the radical feminists. So it is perhaps not surprising that in Lévi-Strauss’s 2000 response to criticism of his theory of the exchange of women, in the “Postface” of a special issue of *L’Homme*, he did not address her specifically. He did write, however, that it was “irrelevant” whether men exchanged women or vice versa.¹²⁹ His project had been to reduce the dizzying variety of marriage and kinship rules to a few simple types from which more complex relationships could be deduced; this had nothing to do with sex: “Simply invert the signs and the system of relationships will remain unchanged.”¹³⁰ He went on to note that the reverse order—women exchanging men—seems to exist or does exist in a very small number of instances, one of which he had already brought forward as a counterexample; and that he had also called for further research into that very question.¹³¹ He even suggested that if sexual equality is one day achieved, “we will be able to say ... that groups composed of men and of women exchange kinship relationships between themselves” without altering the operations of the underlying system.¹³² Though the theory could cope with such a modification, he wrote, the data available in 1949 had nevertheless compelled him to formulate the exchange in the way that he had; the most parsimonious model was the one that hewed closest to the most statistically probable arrangement. Nevertheless, the postface is evidence that Lévi-Strauss’s views on kinship continued to develop after the publication of the *ESK*, even as the 1990s and 2000s witnessed the “resurgence of a largely anachronistic structuralism” that remobilized the 1949 book to combat legal recognition of same-sex couples and their right to adoption.¹³³

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105–13, 119–25; Wittig, *Virgile, non* (Paris, 1985), 23; Wittig, *Across the Acheron*, trans. D. Le Vay (London, 1987), 20.

¹²⁸Wittig, “Paradigm,” 117.

¹²⁹Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Postface,” *L’Homme. Revue française d’anthropologie* 154–5 (1 Jan. 2000), 713–20, 717. All translations mine.

¹³⁰*Ibid.*, 717.

¹³¹*Ibid.*, 717–18. Cf. Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*, 57/47; Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, 135/116.

¹³²Lévi-Strauss, “Postface,” 717.

¹³³Judith Butler, “Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?”, in Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York, 2004), 118–27, 121; for a critique of Lévi-Strauss with regard to the PACS (civil-partnership) debate see Jeanne Favret-Saada, “La-pensée-Lévi-Strauss,” *Journal des anthropologues: Association française des anthropologues* 82–3 (1 Dec. 2000), 53–70; and for a thorough historical account, including Lévi-Strauss on such uses of his ideas, Robcis, *Law of Kinship*, Pt. 3.

Lévi-Strauss and Wittig read Rousseau in ways which, though incompatible, both sought to leverage the philosopher's ideas against other thinkers and their overreliance on dangerous binary oppositions. We might understand the differences between Wittig and Lévi-Strauss as two radicalizations of Rousseau's thought: one of his philosophy of nature, the other of his political philosophy. On the one hand, in Lévi-Strauss's Rousseauism, thesis and antithesis are not abolished and transferred into a higher synthesis, but remain in a dynamic opposition-in-unity. Thus for nature and culture, and thus for sexual difference. The model of this kind of thinking was Rousseau's *pitié*, which Lévi-Strauss set up as the internal other of the Western tradition's dialectic as it had developed in the previous century and a half. Rousseau's lesson was that identification with the other—most especially Indigenous peoples and nature—would lead to an epistemological, ethical, and political shift that could reform the human sciences and Western society writ large. It would lead us, according to Lévi-Strauss, to a science and a politics of conservation (of diversity and its knowledge). This conservation is the heart of Lévi-Strauss's structuralism, since its principle is that oppositions need not be resolved: they can remain in relationship without one overcoming the other. On the other hand, in Wittig's lesbianism, the contradiction of thesis and antithesis, neither conserved in synthesis, is broken through and overturned. She looked to Rousseau because she believed his social-contract theory still applied to the status of women, still bound to a precapitalist mode of production. She found it especially useful since it was both a political concept (the agreements that bind us) and an epistemological one (rules about the production and distribution of knowledge) that would allow her to draw out the consequences of sex-abolitionist ideas circulating in lesbian and gay communities.

Despite their divergences, if we take a step back, we can see that a single horizon encompasses both Lévi-Strauss's Rousseau and Wittig's. Indeed, they share two principal reasons for turning to the Genevan philosopher. With respect to epistemology, both sought a way to formulate the insights of minoritized groups—lesbians and gays, for Wittig, or Indigenous peoples, for Lévi-Strauss. Both found in Rousseau's critique of the naturalistic fallacy the means to remove the lens of European or heterosexual presuppositions, and thereby to challenge the prevailing modes of conceptual production. This leads us to the second attraction that Rousseau held for Lévi-Strauss and Wittig: he seemed to offer an alternative to dialectics. Our wider angle shows us that each was moving away from the dialectical tradition as it was understood and practiced within post-Hegelian philosophy at the time. In this, they are of a piece with their historical moment, in which other writers now associated, variously, with structuralism and post-structuralism—even those who continued to avail themselves of Marx (like Althusser) or phenomenology (like Derrida)—also sought to escape what they felt was a conceptual gridlock, and to come up with, in Vincent Descombes's words, "a non-contradictory, non-dialectical consideration of difference."¹³⁴ A particularity of these efforts was

¹³⁴Descombes, *Le même et l'autre*, 160, cf. also 93. Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, trans. L. Scott-Fox and J. M. Harding (Cambridge and New York), 136, 75, 119 ff.; on Althusser see Descombes, *Le même et l'autre*, 140 ff.; Worms, *La philosophie en France au XXe siècle*, 463–64, and Pt III, Ch. 1; Balibar and Rajchman, "Introduction," xviii–xix; and Balibar and Rajchman's introductions to

the return to philosophical sources, resulting in “a ‘new’ Nietzsche, a new Spinoza, a new Bergson, Marx, Freud, Machiavelli, even a new Kant, themselves brought together in ways that departed from Hegel’s or Heidegger’s great narratives of a history of spirit or history of metaphysics.”¹³⁵ What distinguished Wittig and Lévi-Strauss from many of their contemporaries, while making them into strange bedfellows, is precisely their renewal of Rousseau: their efforts to make him into the forebear of structuralist anthropology or of lesbian political philosophy.

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Parts III (“Difference”) and V (“The Subject”), in Balibar and Rajchman, *French Philosophy since 1945*, 117–21 and 191–8 respectively.

¹³⁵Balibar and Rajchman, “Introduction,” xix.

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