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«A utopia of love between equals». Challenging narratives and language exploring non-normative relationships in *Die Freundinnen*, *Entmannung*, *Le corps lesbien*

ABSTRACT: This article explores three specific works: Johanna Moosdorf's *Die Freundinnen* (1977) Christa Reinig's *Entmannung. Die Geschichte Ottos und seiner vier Frauen* (1976) and Monique Wittig's *Le corps lesbien* (1973). The paper examines how these writers from 1970s German and French literature reflected on and challenged normative norms, particularly in their representation of relationships among women. These authors depict kinships that transcend societal conventions, questioning the power dynamics embedded in patriarchal family structures. A central theme in this analysis is how these writers, focusing on relationships among women and lesbian desire, oppose power dynamics typical of patriarchal and heterosexual relationships. While these authors' perspectives may appear somewhat dated today – relying largely on a binary framework – they remain valuable for understanding literary depictions of non-normative relationships. By non-normative, I refer here to a type of interpersonal relationship that deviates from the norm: specifically, those between women who reject heterosexual and patriarchal norms. The article emphasizes how these non-normative perspectives shape the form and style of the authors' works.

KEYWORDS: German literature; French literature; Christa Reinig; Johanna Moosdorf; Monique Wittig; Lesbian desire.

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1970'S: A "GOLDEN" AGE?

The 1970s in Europe served as a crucial epoch in the evolution of sexual culture, marked by a pronounced departure from conventional norms and a simultaneous surge in social and political activism. Within this transformative landscape, the burgeoning sexual liberation movement, initiated in the preceding decade, continued to gain momentum. This period was particularly noteworthy for the flourishing of diverse social movements, notably feminism and homosexual rights.

In West Germany, the establishment of Homosexual Action West Berlin in 1971 stood out as a significant milestone, symbolizing the rise of queer activism and its central role in advocating for LGBTQ+ rights. Key objectives included the decriminalization of homosexuality, the implementation of anti-discrimination laws, and the pursuit of societal acceptance. The legalization of homosexuality in West Germany in 1969 marked a ground-breaking legal shift, fostering a more tolerant environment and laying the groundwork for the vibrant expansion of queer culture throughout the subsequent decade. Simultaneously, the 1970s witnessed a notable upsurge in the representation of LGBTQ+ themes within various forms of media and the arts. Films, literature, and cultural expressions began to mirror a broader spectrum of identities and experiences, contributing significantly to the emergence of a more inclusive cultural landscape. Moreover, the establishment of LGBTQ+ community centers and organizations played a pivotal role, providing essential support, resources, and a sense of community for individuals who had previously experienced isolation and discrimination.

In France, a parallel transformation in sexual culture unfolded during the 1970s, reflecting broader societal shifts. The sexual liberation movement, extending its influence from the 1960s, gained traction as French society embraced the principles of sexual freedom and challenged established norms. Within the feminist movement, women advocated for reproductive rights and sought more equitable roles in relationships. The realm of French cinema and the arts, notably exemplified by filmmakers such as Catherine Breillat and Agnès Varda, engaged in a profound exploration of evolving attitudes toward female sexuality and societal expectations. Factors such as the availability of contraception, the promotion of alternative lifestyles, and the influence of the gay liberation movement further characterized this era, contributing to a more liberated approach to sexuality.

Legal reforms in both Germany and France mirrored the changing societal attitudes –in summation, the 1970s in Germany and France marked a crucial chapter in the liberalization of sexual culture and this era significantly influenced gender roles, relationships. In the FRG, the women's movement developed from various groups and «From 1970/71 onwards, groups formed that adopted radical feminist theories from the USA and – in contrast to these – groups that developed a socialist-feminist theory»¹ (Linhoff 1974: 38).

Consistent with what happens in other European nations, radical feminists developed their politics in conscious resistance to male domination «It is therefore only logical that many feminists are in favour of female homosexuality or bisexuality, as they consider sexuality to be an important dimension of psychological identification processes²» (*ibid.*: 11).

During this period, the positions of political lesbianism, as articulated for example in the manifesto *The Woman-Identified Woman* by the Radicalesbians, alongside other assertions from lesbian feminism, contributed to the formation of identity categories that were essential at the time. This perspective was particularly separatist and, in many respects, essentialist, as it sought to define and advocate for women's struggles against the backdrop of a patriarchal society.

The emphasis on a distinct lesbian identity and the choice of lesbianism also as a political statement allowed for a critical examination of the ways in which heterosexual norms dominated women's lives and relationships. By prioritizing connections among women, these movements aimed to create safe spaces free from male oppression, fostering solidarity and collective action. However, this approach will also raise questions about the rigidity of identity categories and the potential exclusion of women who did not fit neatly into these definitions, prompting ongoing debates within feminist and nowadays LGBTQIA+ and queer circles (cfr. Phelan 1989; Gambino 2021).

In West Germany and Switzerland, the first politically active lesbian groups emerged alongside gay male organizations, such as the HAW

¹ «ab 1970/71 formten sich Gruppen, die die radikalfeministischen Theorien aus den USA rezipierten, und – in Abgrenzung dazu – Gruppen, die eine sozialistisch-feministische Theorie erarbeiteten»

² «Es ist daher nur folgerichtig, dass viele Feministinnen für weibliche Homosexualität oder Bisexualität eintreten, da sie Sexualität für eine wichtige Dimension psychologischer Identifikationsprozesse halten»

Women's Group, established in 1971 within the Homosexual Action Centre West Berlin, with the women's center opening in March 1973, and the Homosexual Women's Group (HFG), formed in 1972 as part of the Homosexual Working Groups in Zurich (cfr. METZLER 1992). Within the women's movement, discussions began to emerge about the relationship between feminism and lesbianism. In February 1973, lesbian and heterosexual women from HAW and the Women's Centre organized their first joint initiatives, including distributing leaflets opposing the discrimination of lesbian women and screening women-directed films. This collaboration solidified the HAW women's group within the Women's Centre, where they played an active role in campaigns against abortion laws. Women from both the Women's Centre and the lesbian group extended their cooperation to other cities, fostering broader collaboration.

In October 1975, women established a "radical feminist lesbian group" as part of the HFG and released the inaugural issue of the magazine *Lesbenfront*. Most articles were authored by members of the radical feminist lesbian group, and the cover prominently featured two quotes from American radical feminist Jill Johnston: «all women are lesbians except those that don't know it yet» (METZLER 1992: 128), who insisted that until women recognize the potential for primary commitment in one another, they deny themselves the love and appreciation they so easily give to men, thus reinforcing their own second-class status.

This reflection comes very close to that carried out by Monique Wittig in her *Le Pensée Straight*, in which Wittig insists on the need to materialise the question of women as subordinate to men from a class perspective. Male discourse creates a society in which women are subaltern, in this sense Wittig argues that the dominant discourse is the discourse of heterosexuality, which inherently creates a dynamic of hierarchy, violence and vertical power. «The discourse that oppresses us lesbian feminists and gay men in particular, which takes for granted that heterosexuality is the foundation of every society, of all societies, denies us any possibility of creating our own categories»³ (WITTIG 1980: 48). What she calls "la pensée Straight" drawing inspiration from Lévi-Strauss's "pensée sauvage", «embarks on a totalizing interpretation of history, social reality, culture and societies, language, and

³ «Les discours qui nous oppriment tout particulièrement nous lesbiennes féministes et hommes homosexuels et qui prennent pour acquis que ce qui fonde la société, toute société, c'est l'hétérosexualité, ces discours nous nient toute possibilité de créer nos propres catégories».

all subjective phenomena»⁴ (*ibid.*: 49). In Wittig's perspective the terms "man" and "woman" are *political*, not natural, concepts – the connection that unites them is also the one that will abolish them. It is the class struggle between men and women that will ultimately dissolve the categories of "man" and "woman", and this will be possible only choosing to destruct the heterosexual paradigms: «disons que nous rompons le contrat hétérosexuel» (*ibid.*: 58), and consistently the struggle will be also that of destroying the "traditional" patriarchal family, based on the heterosexual thought, the subalternity of women and their relegation to (unpaid) care work (see GORBAN 2021). It is also important to argue that the standardized family «is a mythological creature [...]. Feminist scholars have critiqued deployment of "the family" as a normative construct by analyzing how households vary in composition, organization, and representation» (WESTON 1991: 17).

In the reflections of contemporary materialist feminists, a need emerges to move away from an essentialist perspective and consider gender as a social construct and not as a state of nature; something negative, but because it is socially determined, modifiable (DELPHY 2001: 246). A form of slavery, as Colette Guillemin stated:

Known as "slavery" or "serfdom" in the land economy, this type of relationship could be referred to as "sexing" in the modern domestic economy, when it concerns gender class relations⁵. (GUILLEMIN 1992: 19)

On this wake, in the 1980s, Christa Wolf, while reflecting on her novel *Kassandra*, will offer a profound critique of the patriarchal structures that have shaped Western thought and history. She explores the destructive tendencies of male-dominated reasoning, highlighting how it seeks not harmony with nature, but control over it. Wolf reflects on the process of learning through suffering, stating that women must «Lernen durch das Leid» (learn through sorrow). It seemed to her that these were the laws of Gods, «the path of male thinking, too, which does not want to love Mother Nature, but to see through her in order to dominate her and erect the astonishing edifice of a spiritual world far removed from nature, from

4 «se livre à une interprétation totalisante à la fois de l'histoire, de la réalité sociale, de la culture et des sociétés, du langage et de tous les phénomènes subjectifs».

5 «Nommé « esclavage » ou « servage » dans l'économie foncière, ce type de rapport pourrait être désigné sous le terme « sexage », pour ce qui concerne l'économie domestique moderne, lorsqu'il concerne les rapports de classes de sexe».

which women are henceforth excluded⁶» (WOLF 1993: 75). This worldview, which seeks to dominate and suppress both nature and women, prioritizes «Progress through suffering: the formulas, named four hundred years before our era, that underlie Western civilisation⁷» (*ibid.*: 77).

From this perspective, making lesbianism visible is not only crucial for identity, but it serves as creating space for interdependent relationships that challenge and resist prevailing social norms, and it represents a fundamental political act. By bringing lesbian identities and experiences into the open, authors try to actively confront the patriarchal family and societal structures that divide people into classes and reinforce the subordination of women. This visibility is vital in dismantling the stereotypes and prejudices that marginalize lesbian relationships, allowing for a broader understanding of love and intimacy. Furthermore, recognizing and affirming lesbianism as a legitimate and valuable part of the social fabric empowers individuals to break free from oppressive family and societal bonds, ultimately fostering solidarity and resistance against the systems that perpetuate inequality and female subalternity. In this way, the visibility of lesbianism contributes not only to individual identity formation but also to a larger movement for social justice and equality. Literary representations, in aesthetic experience, thus serve to break the heterosexual discourse by creating other forms and other languages.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that challenges persisted. Despite legal advancements, instances of homophobia and discrimination remained prevalent, and queer individuals continued to encounter obstacles in their personal and professional lives. The 1970s thus emerges as a nuanced era, characterised by both progress and ongoing struggles. The activism and evolving societal attitudes during this time laid the foundation for further advancements in LGBTQ+ rights and acceptance in the ensuing decades. In the book *Sexual Culture in Germany in the 1970s. A Golden Age for Queers?*, edited by Janin Afken and Benedikt Wolf, the contributors show a collective portray of the situation of German queer people in the 70s, dealing with the invention of media, the canonization of the idea as the 70s

⁶ «der Weg des männlichen Denkens auch, das die Mutter Natur nicht lieben, sondern durchschauen will, um sie zu beherrschen und das erstaunliche Gebäude einer naturfernen Geisteswelt zu errichten, aus der Frauen von nun an ausgeschlossen sind»

⁷ «Fortschritt durch Leid: die Formeln, vierhundert Jahre vor unserer Zeitrechnung benannt, die der Kultur des Abendlandes zugrunde liegen».

as a “golden age”, asking themselves: «what precisely contributed to the 1970s being deemed a “legendary decade”? What revolutionary potential and ground-breaking political and aesthetic strategies defined it? What elements, movements, and memories were marginalised to construct the historical narrative of this “legendary” decade?»

What is certain is that this historical period provides a range of media and literary contributions that are representative of an attempt to portray queer desire.

In this article, I will attempt to examine how three authors in the 1970s explored non-normative relationships through narrative representation. By non-normative, I refer here to a type of interpersonal relationship that deviates from the norm: specifically, those between women who reject heterosexual and patriarchal norms, whether because they are lesbians or because they reject subordination. Although these representations are marked by a certain gender binarism, which has since been surpassed by transfeminist critiques and practices, they remain valuable. These narratives not only reflect the tension between conformity and resistance in that era but also encourage us to reflect on social norms that continue to persist, in both overt and subtle ways, even today. By examining these works, we can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural struggles around gender and sexuality, both past and present. I decided to focus on two less-known texts – *Die Freundinnen* by Johanna Moosdorf and *Entmannung. Die Geschichte Otto und seiner vier Frauen* by Christa Reinig, both never translated in any language – and text which is more famous not only among academics: *Le corps lesbien* by Monique Wittig.

SEARCHING FOR ONE’S OWN STORY

«The story of love between two women told here is the outline of a utopia of love between equals, without claims to power and subjugation, an undogmatic, sensitive emancipation novel⁸» (MOOSDORF 1977). The back cover of *Die Freundinnen*, a text published in 1977 by Johanna Moosdorf seems to be a perfect summary of the attempt made by several writers in the 1970s to reflect on the power dynamics underlying heterocentric and patriarchal family relationships.

⁸ «Die Geschichte der Liebe zwischen zwei Frauen, die hier erzählt wird, ist der Entwurf einer Utopie von Liebe zwischen Gleichen, ohne Machtanspruch und Unterwerfung, ein undogmatischer, sensibler Emanzipationsroman»

The book was only published in 1977, even if Moosdorf began to write it in 1970, because at the time lesbian relationship and their representation were still tabooed; as a matter of fact, the publishing house Suhrkamp – that had published Moosdorf’s previous novel – refused to publish *Die Freundinnen* (MARTI 1991: 154).

Set in Berlin in the 1970s, the novel focuses on the relationships among Stefanie, Irina, and Lene Andras. It is mainly told from Stefanie’s viewpoint, who has a romantic connection with Irina and a friendship with Lene Andras. The central theme of the novel explores the lesbian love relationship and Stefanie’s yearning for it.

The portrayal of the lesbian love relationship is combined with the search for traces of lesbian women in history and with visions for the future. The look back into the repressed history of women is closely linked to the depiction of Stefanie and Irina’s lesbian relationship in the present. With references to the past and visionary glimpses into the future, Moosdorf places lesbian love in a temporal dimension that points beyond the concrete relationship and contains the beginnings of a lesbian tradition. The author tries to bring out through cues and stories a history of women and lesbian relationships that has been hidden and invisibilised by official histories; in this sense, the figure and the language of Sappho often returns and is fundamental, being often evoked and also appearing in Stefanie’s dreams:

Wir schleppen uns weiter, sehen weit weg am Ende der unterirdischen Steinschlucht ein schwaches Licht glimmen. Erschöpft, aber plötzlich ganz erfüllt von einer brennenden Glückserwartung, kriechen und klettern wir auf das Licht zu, während der furchtbare Alte wie blind an uns vorbeitappt. Der Schein wird heller, wird größer. Frische Luft weht uns entgegen, Meerwind, und dann hören wir die Stimmen, hören warme und liebevolle Stimmen in großen, lang ausklingenden Rhythmen sprechen, eine Sprache, die wir nicht verstehen, aber wir spüren ihre Poesie, ihre Kraft, das reißt uns an den Haaren hoch, wir erkennen in heller Traumklarheit: Es ist Sapphos Sprache. Taumelnd steigen wir herauf aus dem Erdbauch, dem Traum- und Zeitgrab. Die Mädchen kommen gelaufen, umringen uns.

We drag ourselves onwards and see a faint light glowing far away at the end of the underground stone gorge. Exhausted, but suddenly filled with a burning desire for happiness, we crawl and climb towards the light, while the terrible old man gropes blindly past us. The light gets brighter, it gets bigger. Fresh air blows towards us, a sea breeze, and then we hear the voices, hear warm and sweet voices speaking in great, long fading rhythms, a language we don’t understand, but we feel its poetry,

its power, it pulls us up by the hair, we recognise in bright dream clarity: it is Sappho's language. We stagger up from the belly of the earth, the tomb of dreams and time. The girls come running, surround us. (MOOSDORF 1977: 140)

Sappho is fundamental not only as the representation of a lesbian woman but mainly in the search for a language suitable to depict love among women, that needs to be re-discovered and re-used. On the subject of language, it is important to note that throughout the entire novel, the term "lesbian" is used only once, and that too not by a woman describing herself, but by a young man identifying Irina: «sie sei lesbisch – stimmt's?» (you're a lesbian, aren't you?; p. 238). The term "Freundinnen" (Girlfriends), used as the title, serves as a linguistic subtlety that encapsulates a dual meaning and skillfully navigates the intricate landscape of relationships. On the surface, it refers to a relationship between women, emphasising bonds of friendship. However, beneath this seemingly straightforward label, it discreetly carries a lesbian meaning, providing a linguistic refuge for the expression of romantic and intimate relationships between women. There's a clear "game" in the title since the word "Freundin" in German can refer to both a friend (female) and a girlfriend (in a romantic sense). The linguistic duality of "Freundinnen" thus reflects the nuanced complexities inherent in the novel, capturing the multiplicity of relationships that unfold within its pages and may also serve as a kind of concealed *lesbian code* (see MARTI 1992: 166).

Moosdorf's novel serves as a complex exploration of the multifaceted dynamics inherent in female relationships and friendships. Throughout this novel, Moosdorf traverses various stages of life and social environments, unraveling the dynamics that shape romantic bonds between women. The narrative emphasizes the importance of storytelling in nurturing one's imagination and achieving self-legitimization and the aim to create a historical account of women and lesbians who have been marginalized and rendered invisible by dominant historical narratives.

„Wenn ich es nicht kann, solltest wenigstens du... Ich bin ganz wirr, wie verfitzt in mich selbst. Es gibt für uns auch keine Spielregeln, an die man sich halten kann!“

„Spielregeln?“

„Wie für Hans und Grete. Die haben es leichter. Bücher, Zeitschriften, Filme, Theaterstücke - alles ist voll von ihren Geschichten. Sämtliche Möglichkeiten, in allen nur erdenklichen Variationen, werden ihnen vorexerziert“.

„«Auch die wirklichen?»“

„Du spottest, aber es ist doch wahr. Grete und Grete, Hans und Hans - die müssen

sich, ihr Leben und ihre Liebe selber erfinden, oft gegen alle Welt“.

«If I can't do it, at least you should... I'm all confused, like I'm crazy about myself. There are no rules for us to play by either!»

«Rules of the game?»

«Like for Hans and Grete. They have it easier. Books, magazines, films, plays – everything is full of their stories. All the possibilities, in every conceivable variation, are demonstrated to them.»

«Even the real ones?»

«You're mocking, but it's true. Grete and Grete, Hans and Hans – they have to invent themselves, their lives and their love, often against the whole world».

Heteronormative relationships serve as the cornerstone of societal structures, overshadowing the experiences of women who love each other. In a world where their narratives are frequently marginalized or overlooked, these women find themselves tasked with the challenge of crafting their own models and dynamics of love and connection. They must navigate the complexities of their relationships without established representations or societal validation, ultimately forging their own paths.

The recurring allusions to Sappho (cf.: 161, 163 *et al.*) function in the text as supportive mechanisms, serving as agents that validate the lesbian love developing between the characters. They enable the individuals to love and express desire, they give them the strength to search for their own discourse, as reflected in the passage:

Mein Denken an Irina, meine Liebe, gewinnt eine Dimension, in die ich mich früher nicht gewagt hätte, die ich vielleicht gar nicht sah

My thoughts about Irina, my love, take on a dimension that I wouldn't have dared to enter before, that I perhaps didn't even see. (MOOSDORF 1977: 161)

As noted by researcher Madeleine Marti (1991), a significant theme of the novel is the concept of an “experience of the double” that emerges from the narrative. The poignant realization captures Stefanie's experience: «I feel like I've never looked into her eyes before. I have certainly never seen them shine so still and steady. They rest on me. There is a vibrant, perfect harmony between us⁹» (MOOSDORF 1977: 210-211). The relationship between

⁹ «Mir ist, ich hätte noch nie hineingeschaut in ihre Augen. Ganz gewiss habe ich sie noch nie so still und stet leuchten sehen. Sie ruhen auf mir. Zwischen uns ist eine schwingende, vollkommene Übereinstimmung»

Stefanie's experience of self-duplication and her romantic involvement becomes more apparent later, particularly in an unsent letter addressed to Irina. This notion of self-doubling seems to serve as a metaphor for women's relationships (MARTI 1991: 160). However, I would argue that, rather than illustrating the concept of "Verdoppelung des Ichs" (*ibidem*), the novel focuses more on the transformative experience of being seen and the ability to genuinely see one another for the first time, free from pretense. It conveys a profound sense of freedom to look at each other with honesty and authenticity – a reciprocal act of seeing and being seen, as testified by some words that Irina says towards Stefanie:

„Wenn du mich nur ansiehst“ sagt Irina. „Auch das ist mir klar. Sie braucht meinen Blick, unter dem sie sich verwandeln, vermummen, entkleiden und entlarven, Masken ausprobieren und wiederum ablegen und unversehens sie selbst sein kann, nackt, ohne Tarnung“

«If you just look at me», says Irina. «I realise that too. She needs my gaze, under which she can transform, disguise, undress and expose herself, try on masks and then take them off again and suddenly be herself, naked, without camouflage». (MOOSDORF 1977: 57)

This idea of the mirroring each other surely connects to the buried histories of lesbian women (MARTI 1991: 162). While men frequently objectify women, viewing them as mere objects to fulfill their power desires or confining them to patriarchal stereotypes, women instead can have the potential to support one another, co-create their identities, and explore them collaboratively. Through her narratives, the author sheds light on the lives of women dealing with a variety of life situations. In these story Moosdorf skilfully captures the ebb and flow of relationships, revealing moments of mutual understanding and unwavering support, as well as the inevitable conflicts and trials that shape these relationships. At the heart of the novel's thematic tapestry are profound explorations of solidarity, caring, the ongoing journey of self-discovery, the complexities of love and the ongoing search for identity. Johanna Moosdorf tries to challenge societal norms and expectations, weaving a narrative that is both thought-provoking and emotionally resonant.

Moosdorf meticulously uncovers historical traces that shed light on lesbian existence or hint at a female mode of existence not constrained by patriarchal norms. The retrospective exploration of women's suppressed history intricately weaves into the portrayal of Stefanie and Irina's

contemporary relationship. Through nuanced references to the past and visionary glimpses into the future, Moosdorf situates lesbian love in a contemporary framework that extends beyond the specific relationship, harbouring the seeds of a burgeoning lesbian tradition. This bold undertaking emerges as a distinctive and noteworthy contribution within the literary landscape of the 70s. (MARTI 1992: 168).

Die Freundinnen invites readers on a contemplative journey into relationships among women, but also reflects on a way to «make our collective loving experience a tool for political transformation¹⁰» (Vasallo 2018: 32). Lesbian relationships are here also a symbol of the attempt to challenge the patriarchal relationships and thus the patriarchal society, creating relationships based on mutual support, reciprocal care, equity. Beyond mere storytelling, Moosdorf's work serves as a reflective exploration, prompting readers to ponder the profound significance of relationships in the varied and evolving contexts of women's lives.

CHALLENGING NORMS THROUGH WRITING.

«Dear sisters! First question: Do men have to exist? Answer: No.»¹¹ (REINIG 1976: 54). In *Entmannung: Die Geschichte Ottos und seiner vier Frauen* (Emasculation: The Story of Otto and His Four Wives), published in 1976, Christa Reinig often refers to the urgent necessity of creating a society where men do not exist, or at the very least, where they hold no power and women assume control on their own lives. Reinig writes by transgressing the established boundaries of the pleasing, the acceptable, and the politically correct, confronting us instead with the unexpected, the unfamiliar, and the unpopular. She defiantly calls into question that which we have comfortably come to take for granted. Perhaps, she muses, women should do precisely what “they” (men) tell “us” (women) not to.

By challenging the notion of gentleness as an inherent quality linked to femininity, Reinig underscores the importance of acknowledging the internalized violence within women and its potential manifestations, portraying women as often fiercely resistant to male dominance. Reinig uses a simple, direct, paratactic language, designed to provoke and rebel against subordination. Her characters are resolute, more active than reflective.

¹⁰ «hacer de nuestra experiencia amorosa colectiva una herramienta de transformación política»

¹¹ «Liebe Schwestern! Erste Frage: Muß es Männer geben? Antwort: Nein.»

The four protagonists of the novel are portrayed as they explore forms of communal relationships they had never experienced before. In the novel, Doris, Menni, Thea, and Xenia manage to overcome the class and social status barriers that divide them, discovering new relational experiences – these women escape the confinement of the basic patriarchal paradigm that dictates they must hate each other to enable male domination. Their only obstacle is represented by a man: Otto Kyra (see BAMMER 1986: 111), «der Mann, der Nicht-Uterus» (REINIG 1976: 44), whose story testify that – even if he’s the center of the novel – the concept of «“demanning” refers less to physical castration of men than to psychological renunciation of the masculinity mania in women» (VENSKE 1986: 99). The title “Entmannung”, obviously carries a symbolic weight, suggesting a thematic exploration of the concept of castration. While not necessarily literal, this term serves as a metaphor for the potential stripping away of power or autonomy, particularly within the intricate framework of gender relations. Reinig’s choice of such a provocative title sets the tone for a work that aims to challenge and question societal structures.

The sentences are short, the images concise and clear, with sharp contours – the softening effect of adjectives and adverbs is largely absent. Reinigs is an aesthetic of uncompromising directness. «On the other hand, if I want to portray something completely new, strange and surprising, I need a language that is understandable. My language must be simple and recognisable¹²» (BAMMER 1986: 109), and as a matter of fact her «choice to come out as a lesbian and to enter the feminist movement was accompanied by the decision to “demasculinize” her own writing: she moves from a neutral or male narrative perspective to a first person, female narrator» (RAHAM 2005: 12).

Christa Reinig reflects brutally and unflinchingly on the condition of individuals socialized as women. In her writings, she mercilessly exposes the challenges, restrictions, and injustices women face in society – her sharp and penetrating words highlight gender inequalities, which can be seen for example at the beginning of the novel, where she describes the perceived role of men in shaping human history and societal order, with the Y chromosome symbolizing their uniqueness and authority.

¹² «Wenn ich dagegen etwas ganz Neues, Fremdes, Überraschendes darstellen will, brauche ich in erster Linie eine Sprache, die verständlich ist. Meine Sprache muss einfach sein, erkenntlich»

[...] einen Begriff, was einen Mann zum Helden macht. Der große Strich, der die Erdgeschichte in zwei Teile teilt. Hinter uns die Sintflut, die Saurierzeit. Und aus der Sintflut steigt das Säugetier, der nackte Affe, das Y-Chromosom, der Hodenträger, der Held. Weiber gibt es jede Sorte, Schmetterlingssammlungen von Weibtypen gibt es. Mann gibts nur einen. Basta. Was wären die Weiber ohne das Y? Ein biologischer Marasmus von hunderttausend Unterarten. Einheit und Ordnung gibt ihnen der Mann. Er hat allerdings einen Fehler. Er kann sich nicht selbsttätig fortpflanzen. Man stelle sich das vor, einen Mann als Uterusträger: Das Y stößt das Geschlecht aus der Leibeshöhle aus. Der Uterus hängt als Beutel vor seinem Bauch. Dann tritt Befruchtung ein. Der Uterus bläht sich zu einem baumelnden Sack auf.

[...] a concept of what makes a man a hero. The great line that divides the history of the earth into two parts. Behind us is the Flood, the dinosaur era. And out of the Flood rises the mammal, the naked ape, the Y-chromosome, the testicle-bearer, the hero. There are all kinds of women, butterfly collections of female types. There is only one man. Basta. What would women be without the Y? A biological marasm of a hundred thousand subspecies. The man gives them unity and order. However, he has an only flaw: he cannot reproduce on his own. Imagine a man as a uterus carrier: the Y expels the sex from the abdominal cavity. The uterus hangs as a sac in front of his abdomen. Then fertilisation occurs. The uterus inflates into a dangling sac. (REINIG 1976: 17)

Reinig's raw style can be seen as an act of defiance, a way to break the silence and question social norms that perpetuate the subordination of women. Her unapologetic reflection serves as a call to awareness and action, urging readers to confront the reality of the female condition. Reinig stands out for her ability to convey the complexity of these issues through writing that avoids rhetoric and compromise. Her incisive voice continues to resonate as a bold and provocative expression, challenging readers to critically examine power dynamics and consider new perspectives on the socialization of women in society.

Reinig employs her characters to craft a harmonious yet disconcerting narrative that delves into these profound questions. Reinig has the characters in the novel perform scenes as in a theatre. She then «often uses intertextual references to challenge traditional readings of narratives that have shaped her culture's restrictive norms about women's sexual and professional choices, while also writing about her own experience as an aging lesbian in a long-term relationship and as a lesbian writer» (RAHAM 2005). In *Entmannung*, we witness a representation of the *Oresteia*.

Once again, much like in Moosdorf, we encounter an attempt to revisit elements and characters from a literary past to make sense of a present that lacks stable cultural and social references for guidance. Otto Kyra undergoes a transformation throughout the novel, evolving from a successful, authoritative surgeon into an eccentric figure surrounded by women, and ultimately, by the final pages, appearing dressed as and embodying a woman. This shift represents a process of de-masculinization. In the novel's conclusion, a trio takes center stage: Sappho, Valerie Solanas (played by the now de-masculinized Kyra), and Porkyas. Though three female figures dominate the scene, two are portrayed by men. Does this final transformation mark the complete de-masculinization of the male characters, suggesting a form of gender equality? Or does it instead reflect an appropriation of female roles by men, raising questions of whether this is a true reversal or merely a co-opting of femininity? If Venske (1986: 99) asserts that «it becomes clear that the major male character's transformation into a woman, which is to be understood as the male chauvinist's strategy of adapting when faced with the possibility of female dominance, leads only to a softening of his identity», I, on the other hand, believe that the attempt to overturn traditional gender roles has been entirely successful.

It is also interesting to note Christa Reinig's analysis using sharp irony of the consequences of behaving in ways that do not respect social patriarchal norms, an example can be found in a conversation between Thea and Menni:

Thea: „Du hast Zweidrittel der Welt unterschlagen: Irrenhaus, Krankenhaus, Zuchthaus. Das ist der Dreisatz der Weiber-Weltformel. Lehnst du dich auf, kommst du ins Zuchthaus, lehnst du dich nicht auf, drehst du durch und mußt ins Irrenhaus und beneidest die Weiber, die zum Beil gegriffen haben. Unterwirfst du dich mit Lust, kommst du mit deinem kaputtgerammelten Unterleib ins Krankenhaus. Und mit sieben Schläuchen aus dem Bauch beneidest du die Frauen, die im Irrenhaus dahindämmern dürfen, während du dich zu Tode kreischen mußt.“
Menni: „Beil oder Nichtbeil, das ist hier die Frage.“

Thea: «You've misappropriated two-thirds of the world: asylum, hospital, penitentiary. That's the rule of three of the women's world formula. If you rebel, you'll go to the penitentiary, if you don't rebel, you'll go mad and have to go to the asylum and envy the women who have taken up the axe. If desire to submit, you'll be hospitalised with your abdomen ripped apart. And with seven tubes coming out of your belly, you envy the women who are allowed to doze off in an

asylum while you have to scream yourself to death».

Menni: «Axe or no axe, that is the question». (REINIG 1976: 153)

Moreover, the author reflects on the peculiar condition of the lesbian woman: «Und an letztunterster Stelle steht die Lesbe, die Frau, die ihren weiblichen Beruf verfehlt hat, weil sie vom Manne nicht genutzt werden kann. Die absolut unnütze Frau» (And at the bottom of the list is the lesbian, the woman who has missed her feminine calling because she cannot be utilised by men. The absolutely useless woman; REINIG 1986: 144). Useless, because she's not going to give men what they want: sex, reproduction, submission.

Employing poetic expression as her medium, Reinig confronts pressing issues related to power dynamics, oppression, and the enduring struggle for autonomy. Her use of provocative and challenging language serves as a deliberate confrontation of established norms, inviting readers to engage with the complexities of these themes. Reinig's literary endeavours are characterised by a fearless exploration of social taboos, and *Entmannung* is no exception. Her commitment to amplifying marginalised perspectives, coupled with bold artistic expression, distinguishes her work within German literature. *Entmannung* emerges not only as a creative endeavour, but also as a powerful tool for advocacy, reflecting Reinig's deep-seated belief in the capacity of artistic expression to inspire social change. In this way, the collection stands as a testament to the author's lasting impact on the literary landscape and her commitment to fostering broader conversations about societal norms and gender dynamics.

INSCRIBING A BODY

Focusing on French literature in the 1970s, a remarkable facet of narrative experimentation unfolded through the works of writers such as Monique Wittig and her contemporaries. Taken as a whole, the literary scene in 1970s France became a crucible for narrative innovation. The exploration of non-traditional structures, coupled with a commitment to feminist ideals, marked a transformative period that left a lasting mark on French literature and contributed to a wider cultural reassessment of identity, gender and storytelling. Monique Wittig, a prominent figure in the feminist and lesbian literary movements, employed innovative narrative techniques to challenge established norms, considering language as a tool of women's oppression but also a potential means of subversion and rebellion against patriarchy.

Wittig, through her works *Opononax* (1964) *Les Guérillères* (1969), and later works like *Le corps lesbien* (1973), pushed the boundaries of traditional narration. Her narratives often defied linear structures, introducing fragmented and nonlinear approaches that mirrored the complexities of identity and gender. Wittig's writings were deeply embedded in the feminist discourse of the time, and her narrative experimentation extended beyond literary techniques. She explored the deconstruction of language and traditional gender roles, offering a unique perspective that resonated with the broader cultural and social shifts occurring in 1970s France.

What is also interesting in Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien*, firstly published in 1973, is first of all what the writer will later state – in a previously unpublished text, included in the 2022 edition as an afterword – reflecting on the work made to find a suitable form and style for his text.

Pour *Le Corps lesbien* j'étais face à la nécessité d'écrire un livre entièrement lesbien dans sa thématique, son vocabulaire et sa texture, un livre lesbien du début à la fin, de la première à la quatrième de couverture. Je me trouvais par conséquent devant une double béance : celle de la page blanche que doivent affronter tous les écrivains lorsqu'ils commencent un livre, et une autre de nature différente : il n'existait aucun livre de ce genre. Jamais je n'ai relevé un défi aussi radical. Pouvais-je tenter cela ? En étais-je seulement capable ? Et quel serait alors ce livre ?

For *Le Corps lesbien*, I was faced with the need to write a book that was entirely lesbian for its theme, vocabulary and texture, a lesbian book from start to finish, from front to back cover. As a result, I found myself faced with a double gap: the blank page that all writers face when they start a book, and another of a different kind: there was no such book. I've never taken on such a radical challenge. Could I attempt it? Was I even capable? And what kind of book would it be? (WITTIG 2022: 187)

Le corps lesbien combines linguistic and formal experimentation with the aim of representing and embodying lesbian desire. The text, which is intertwining realms of lesbianism, feminism, and the societal construction of gender. Recognized as a notable contribution to lesbian feminist literature, the book provides valuable insights into Wittig's perspectives on sexuality, identity, and the influence of language on our comprehension of these fundamental concepts. The point is not only to represent a sexual conflict, but «Rather, the sexual conflict is a linguistic one, and involves the difficulty of articulating female perceptions in a male structured medium» (ROSENFELD

1984: 235).¹³ Wittig takes a similar approach to her literary forerunners – like Djuna Barnes and Nathalie Sarraute – who, in the early decades of the twentieth century, utilized fragmented and non-representational writing to challenge the conventions of the realistic novel. She satirizes the conventional reverence for steadfast characters and meticulously crafted plots (cf. *ibidem*).

One of the most interesting stylistic features of *Le corps lesbien* is the use of split pronouns: open to the world of the senses, the split *j/e* of Wittig changes constantly and has no fixed identity. This continual transformation contributes to a multiplication of feminine subjects, disrupting the syntax and word order in the narrative passages. A notable technique, allowing Wittig to articulate lesbian consciousness without succumbing to the language of the dominant culture, is her refusal to use any male-privileged term. More significantly, she splits all first-person pronouns, possessive adjectives, and reflexive pronouns in two. Wittig argues that terms like *je* reflect a male sense of identity that clashes with a woman's perception of herself in a patriarchal ethos as someone without a self. The character of Wittig's text become monsters, «Wittig deftly deploys the figure of monster, allowing her characters to express their rage and to articulate their own modes of subjectivity» (STOKOE 2018: 307).

The variable and life-giving *j/e* stands in stark opposition to the uniform and self-centered subject, altering not just the typographical appearance of the language but also its intrinsic nature (cf. ROSENFELD 1984).

Wittig's concept of the lesbian subject is not a unified or monolithic entity, like the patriarchal male subject of dominant discourse. Instead, it exists as a fragmented and incomplete form of subjectivity. As the central subject in Wittig's framework, the lesbian "I" represents a minor subjectivity, distinct from the singular, cohesive subject of mainstream narratives.

¹³ It is worth noting that Sarah Kirsch, Irmtraud Morgner and Christa Wolf, who were commissioned to investigate the condition of women in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) during the same period, adopted a narrative and speculative approach that, from a contemporary political perspective, introduces remarkable complexities. These complexities manifest themselves in her collection entitled *Geschlechtertausch: Drei Geschichten über die Umwandlung der Verhältnisse*. While these novels offer a fascinating exploration of the female condition in the GDR, it's important to acknowledge that they can be perceived as potentially problematic from a contemporary perspective. In particular, there is a lens through which these narratives can be read as containing elements that could be considered somehow transphobic. When engaging with these works, it is crucial to approach them contextualising in the historical time with critical awareness and transfeminist theory and practice. I plan to explore this work in a separate research project.

The universalization of this minority subject challenges traditional power structures by not requiring a singular, unified identity to assert political influence or effectiveness (COPE 1991: 78).

Employing an intricately fragmented structure within the very fabric of the text, the prose passages masterfully unfold, capturing the nuanced and multifaceted ways in which lesbian beings interact and unite, thorough a text that «works through fracturing» (WITTIG 1983: 65). This deliberate structural choice serves as a dynamic canvas, allowing the exploration of diverse dimensions of lesbian experience.

A remarkable aspect of this linguistic journey is found in the double pages of text, deliberately stripped of punctuation and presented in bold capital letters. These pages are a tangible manifestation of the author's quest for a language that transcends conventional boundaries – a language to be discovered, invented and uniquely crafted. Within this typographic experiment, the narrative takes a bold leap, enumerating and exuberantly celebrating every nuance and contour of the female body. But it is within these boldly presented pages that the narrative takes on a distinctive resonance. Here, in a deliberate departure from social norms and taboos, the usually hushed realm of lesbian desire is not only acknowledged but passionately proclaimed.

LES ARÉOLES LES
ECCHYMOSES LES
PLAIES LES PLIS
LES ÉCORCHURES LES
RIDES LES AMPOU-
LES LES GERÇURES
LES CLOQUES LE
HÂLE LES GRAINS DE
BEAUTÉ LES POINTS
NOIRS LES FOLLICU-
LES PILEUX LES VER-
RUES LES EXCROIS-
SANCES LES PAPULES
LE SÉBUM LA PIG-

MENTATION L'ÉPI-
DERME LE DERME
LES NERFS CUTANÉS
LES INNERVATIONS
LES PAPILLES LES RÉ-
SEAUX NERVEUX LES
RACINES LES FAIS-
CEAUX LES BRAN-
CHES LES PLEXUS
LES NERFS MOTEURS
LES SENSIBLES LES
SENSORIAUX LES
CERVICAUX LES
PNEUMOGASTRIQUES

(WITTIG 1973: 29-30)

In its meticulous and careful detailing of each facet, this narrative deliberately challenges societal norms and provides a profound exploration of the intricacies of lesbian desire and experience. By detailing these aspects, the text becomes a bold and deliberate challenge to the status quo, serving as an assertion of the voices and experiences that have long been marginalised and silenced by society.

In essence, this text is not just an experiment in language; it is a courageous celebration of the diverse expressions found within the lesbian body and desire. By deliberately articulating the nuances that society often deems taboo or deliberately silences, the narrative pushes the boundaries of conventional discourse. It becomes a powerful testament to the resilience of these voices, offering a counter-narrative that demands recognition, acknowledgement and celebration in defiance of societal norms. In this way, the text emerges as a bold assertion that amplifies the richness and diversity of lesbian experiences that have historically been rendered invisible or deliberately suppressed.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is imperative to underscore the role of unconventional and experimental approaches in portraying non-traditional families. This imperative goes beyond merely innovating content, urging us to delve into avant-garde forms and languages that authentically capture the intricate and diverse dimensions of familial realities, thereby challenging established norms and narratives. My particular focus in this research has been on texts that explore the complexities of lesbian relationships during the transformative 1970s.¹⁴

In *Die Freundinnen*, Johanna Moosdorf explores the lives of two lesbian women as they seek to construct their own narratives of love, defying the constraints of heteronormativity. In *Entmannung. Die Geschichte*

¹⁴ As a notable point – even if not crucial here –, it's worth highlighting that in Italy during the same period, there was a keen interest in non-traditional families, a theme that found expression also in the realm of filmmaking. A case in point is the serialised documentary *L'amore in Italia*, which was broadcasted by RAI in 1978. Concurrently, following significant legislative changes, including divorce and abortion laws, the director Luigi Comencini conducted an investigation involving individuals of diverse ages, originating from both the South and the North, and representing various social classes. The objective was to portray the everyday and paradoxical facets of love through the lens of the Italian experience. This inquiry comprised thirty-two in-depth interviews, presented in five episodes and initially aired on November 18, 1978, on the primary broadcasting network. <https://www.raiplaysound.it/programmi/lamoreinitalia>

Ottos und seiner vier Frauen, Christa Reinig investigates the potential for relationships between women that challenge conventional gender norms, using these connections to question and disrupt established gender roles. Monique Wittig, in *Le corps lesbien*, pushes this exploration further by creating a linguistic space for experimentation, aiming to articulate a uniquely lesbian language and identity.

Placed in a historical context, these texts emerge as poignant rebellions against the prevailing heteronormative world, aiming at caring kinships and caring communities (THE CARE COLLECTIVE 2020: 33, 45). The exploration of lesbian relationships during this period becomes an act of resistance, a literary and cultural uprising that challenges established norms. What makes these texts particularly compelling for the research is not only the thematic rebellion they embody, but also their conscious commitment to innovation in form and style. Not content with merely subverting content, the writers of this period sought to revolutionise the very language and structure through which narratives were traditionally woven. The “utopia” I refer to in the title of the paper, which I took from Johanna Moosdorf back cover, is the idea that simply escaping heterosexuality, we can create a world of equality, care, interdependence. We know now that this is not enough, because the capitalist society we live in leads us to internalize toxic traits and behaviour typical from the heterosexual thought even in queer relationships and communities. Still, that utopia is something worth keep fighting for.

These texts became not only stories of lesbian love but also experiments in storytelling itself. The intersection of rebellion against social norms and avant-garde exploration of literary form creates a rich tapestry that captures the essence of a transformative period in both social and artistic landscapes. This acknowledgment gains particular significance when contemplating the transformative and seminal era of the 1970s, especially in Europe, where a dynamic wave of experimentation unfolded.

Authors and artists from this period passionately embraced the challenge of crafting narratives that transcended conventional frameworks, venturing into uncharted territories of storytelling. Their creative output manifests a steadfast commitment to pushing the boundaries of artistic expression, especially in depicting the nuanced tapestry of family dynamics. The aim goes beyond the mere description of lesbian relationships, desires, and pleasures; it is primarily to subvert social norms.

This is achieved through the strategic use of language and literary forms to reflect on the power dynamics within romantic relationships – themes that not only persist in non-heterosexual relationships but are also deliberately subverted. In this paper, a deliberate shift has been made towards lesser-known texts (mainly considering the text by the German authors), aiming to underscore the critical interplay of form, style, and experimentation alongside the exploration of themes. As we navigate the ongoing evolution of narrative techniques, the emphasis on form and style becomes increasingly vital, allowing for a more nuanced and authentic portrayal of non-traditional families. This multifaceted exploration prompts us to continually reevaluate and expand our understanding of familial dynamics and representation, forging new paths within the broader context of literature and artistic expression.

This research acts for me as an initial exploration of non-normative families, initiating with an examination of lesbian desire and charting a course that can extend towards contemporary depictions of queer and non-monogamous relationships.

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