WRITING, TRANSLATING, AND DISMEMBERING: FALLON, WINTERSON, AND WITTIG’S REPRESENTATIONS OF THE LESBIAN BODY

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ABSTRACT

Through an analysis of Jeanette Winterson’s *Written on the Body*, Mary Fallon's *Working Hot*, and Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*, we can gain an understanding of the connection between language and desire, and how it relates to sexuality, female desire, and lesbian representation. In these texts, bodies have been explored, critiqued, and dismembered by language. The deconstruction and reconstruction of lesbian bodies, the re-appropriation of social and cultural paradigms, and the re-working of language and narrative are tools that enable Fallon, Winterson, and Wittig to create a lesbian space that disrupts and subverts conventional ideologies. The writers use different literary strategies to construct lesbian desire, and if we consider how these strategies work together and complicate each other, the role that language plays in lesbian representation becomes clearer.
When she lifted the soup spoon to her lips how I longed to be that innocent piece of stainless steel. I would gladly have traded the blood in my body for half a pint of vegetable stock. Let me be diced carrot, vermicelli, just so that you will take me in your mouth. I envied the French stick. I watched her break and butter each piece, soak it slowly in her bowl, let it float, grow heavy and fat, sink under the deep red weight and then be resurrected to the glorious pleasure of her teeth.

The potatoes, the celery, the tomatoes, all had been under her hands. When I ate my own soup I strained to taste her skin. She had been here, there must be something of her left. I would find her in the oil and onions, detect her through the garlic. I knew that she spat in the frying pan to determine the readiness of the oil. . . I will taste you if only through your cooking.

—Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body*

*I hear your voice hissing in m/y ears, I concentrate on listening to you. I see m/yself stretched out, all m/y entrails are unwound. I open m/y mouth to sing a cantata to the goddess m/y mother. M/y heart fails in this effort. I open m/y mouth, I admit your lips your tongue your palate, I prepare to die by your side adorned monster while you cry incessantly about m/y ears.*

—Monique Wittig, *The Lesbian Body*

I believe men see woman’s body as a hole with a smile on top
I have felt woman’s body as a whole audience
every cell as two hands clapping and a smile between encore encore bravo

—Kathleen Mary Fallon, *Working Hot*

The body has been a popular topic for many feminist theorists and critics. Bodies have been explored, critiqued, and dismembered by language. Jeanette Winterson, Kathleen Mary Fallon, and Monique Wittig all construct representations of the body through texts that disrupt hetero-patriarchal conventions of the erotic, the female body, and the language used to describe it. The manipulation of language and narrative structure facilitates the representation of lesbian desire. The act of ‘dismembering the body’ is a tool to address and raise more complex questions about female sexuality, lesbian representation, and gendered bodies. The writers use different strategies to
comment on the politics of gender and sexuality, and, at times, their strategies are not overt. Winterson’s use of an un-gendered narrator in *Written on the Body* does not exclusively label her text as lesbian; however, many critics read it as lesbian. In *The Lesbian Body*, Wittig not only focuses on female bodies and sexual relationships between two women, but with her use of *I* and *m/e*, she disrupts language—a gendered, heterosexual language. Fallon’s *Working Hot*, possibly the most explicit and unconventional of the three texts, manipulates language and form while demystifying sex in all aspects—sex between lesbians, sex workers, and sadomasochists. She uses different performative genres—song, film script, and opera libretto—to disrupt the narrative. Fallon’s work is considered both a lesbian narrative and an example of experimental writing, and the same can be said for Winterson and Wittig’s texts. In fact, the experimental qualities in *Written on the Body* allow for a lesbian reading of the text. It seems, then, lesbian narrative is directly connected to experimental writing strategies, narrative disruption, and innovative use of language. Before we can look closely at each author’s work and raise questions about their similarities and differences, we must first attempt to answer the question: What exactly is a lesbian narrative?

A lesbian narrative must first place female desire at the center of the text. The notion of female desire alone has raised many questions in feminist theory for a number of years. But what exactly is desire? According to psychoanalytic discourse, the symbol most central to desire is the phallus, rendering female desire as subordinate to male desire. In psychoanalytic theory, the belief of ‘woman as myth’ argues that ‘woman’ does not really exist, but acts only as a completion to man. She is what ‘man’ is not, because she lacks what he has. While both the male and female subjects are defined by lack, the
male is completed through his union with the female. And, more importantly, she is desirable only for that reason. These notions of women existing for and through men contribute to the absence of female desire in literature. Since the phallus is considered to be the object of all desire according to Lacan, desire cannot exist without a male counterpart. But female desire does exist beyond conventional notions directly connected to male desire and heterosexuality, and it can be represented through language and narrative. In “The Cartography of Passion: Cixous, Wittig and Winterson,” M. Daphne Kutzer argues how unconventionally eroticizing random, and at times obscure, body parts contributes to the author’s overall objective to resist masculine notions of female sexuality with innovative language and narrative:

Male explorers, warriors, geographers, and kings inscribed the physical world into language, and through inscribing created it . . . to discover something is to make it. The world is undifferentiated until inscribed in and particularized by language. The physical world of course existed for itself, but did not exist for human beings until discovered and mapped by language. . . . Just as men have been the primary explorers and mappers of the physical world, men have also named and defined—discovered, if you will—the country of women. Language is largely phallocentric: the male is the subject, speaker, author; the female is spoken-of. . . . men have named women’s bodies, naming only those parts and functions important to male eroticism and sexuality, while failing to map and name the entire complex structure of female passion and sexuality. (133)

Female sexuality, for the most part, has been ignored in traditional discourse—or, at least, ignored when it is not represented in a way that pleases the male audience. Female
desire and women’s bodies have been described using a masculine language, looked at through a masculine lens, and used to satisfy male desire. Female desire only exists in conjunction with male desire. This notion, of course, is inaccurate; however, in order to accurately represent women’s bodies and sexuality in literature, female desire must be central and unattached from a male counterpart. While most feminist theory has moved away from psychoanalytic approaches, remnants of Lacan’s beliefs still exist in many forms of discourse—including literature. In fact, a number of feminist theorists use both Lacan and Freud’s theoretical models as their starting point in explorations of female and lesbian desire. And that approach is fine, but it can only go so far. We need to move beyond the basics of desire and into more postmodern approaches in analyzing texts and narrative strategies. There are a number of theorists interested in postmodern approaches to female desire and lesbian representation, and they often focus on why these approaches are useful. In “Refiguring Lesbian Desire,” Elizabeth Grosz critiques psychoanalytic approaches because of their reliance on lack:

    Lack only makes sense to the (male) subject insofar as some other (woman) personifies and embodies it for him. Such a model of desire, when explicitly sexualized, reveals the impossibility of understanding lesbian desire. . . . it is no longer adequate to think in terms of psychology, especially given that the dominant psychological models—psychoanalytic ones—are so inadequate for thinking femininity. So, in attempting to go the other way, I want to be able to provide a reading of lesbianism, or at least of lesbian sexuality and desire, in terms of bodies, pleasures, surfaces, intensities, as suggested by Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard and others. (76)
As Grosz proposes, it is difficult, and essentially impossible, to think of female and/or lesbian desire in terms of lack. If we identify desire with an “object whose attainment provides satisfaction,” then how is it possible for lesbian desire to exist at all, or female desire to exist without a male counterpart? As Grosz argues, we must use other theoretical models—models that go beyond the ideas that psychoanalytic discourse focuses on. Lesbian desire does not assign an ‘object’ as the source of pleasure. There is nothing missing. There is no absence. There is no lack.

Grosz relies mostly on the works of Deleuze and Guattari, because they “refuse to understand desire in negative terms, because they refuse to structure it with reference to a singular signifier—i.e., the phallus—and because they allow desire to be understood not just as a feeling or affect but also as doing and making” (75). Desire is not produced; it is not the result of some previous act. Desire is the actual production—the body’s actions, movements, and intensities. More importantly, desire is not confined to the realm of physical intimacy, and the “bedroom is no more the privileged site of sexuality than any other space; sexuality and desire are part of the intensity and passion of life itself” (Grosz 77). Fallon, Winterson, and Wittig’s texts open up discussions about female desire and its connection to bodies and language. Grosz provides a valuable set of ideas for reading texts through a postmodern lens. She is not the only theorist interested in this approach, but her ideas work well with Fallon, Winterson, and Wittig’s texts. Her argument suggests that we need to move beyond psychoanalytic theory and into a more postmodern approach in defining desire and in thinking about female/lesbian desire:

Sexuality and desire, then, are not fantasies, wishes, hopes, aspirations (although no doubt these are some of their components), but they are energies, excitations,
impulses, actions, movements, practices, moments, pulses of feeling. The sites most intensely invested always occur at a conjunction, an interruption, a point of machinic connection; they are always surface effects between one thing and another—between a hand and a breast, a tongue and a cunt, a mouth and food, a nose and a rose. In order to understand this notion, we have to abandon our habitual understanding of entities as the integrated totalities of parts, and instead we must focus on the elements, the parts, outside their integration or organization; we must look beyond the organism to the organs comprising it. . . . In other words, they have come to have a life of their own, functioning according to their own rhythms, intensities, pulsations, and movements. Their value is always provisional and temporary, ephemeral and fleeting; they may fire the organism, infiltrate other zones and surfaces with their intensity, but they are unsustainable—they have no memory. They are not a recorded or a recording activity. (78)

Sexuality and desire, described in these terms, are devoid of a specific and single ‘object’ of desire. There is no one source of pleasure—no lack to make up for. The symbol most central to desire is not masculine. More importantly, there is not a central symbol at all. The point where two surfaces meet is source of the erotic—whatever the surfaces may be.

I often use the terms ‘female desire’ and ‘lesbian desire’ interchangeably. At times, female sexuality is the starting point and lesbian representation is the end point—the final result. What is the difference between female desire and lesbian representation? Is a sexual encounter between two women absolutely necessary for a representation
‘lesbian’ desire? Teresea de Lauretis argues that metaphors help create the reality, and/or possibility, of lesbian desire:

It is a theoretical construct and a metaphor, a concept and a conceit, as are ‘female desire,’ ‘female spectatorship,’ or ‘motherhood,’ and, like them, has both discursive and material implications; but it is less the realm of what is than in the realm of what if, less a factual description than a passionate fiction. It is not about who could or should be called a lesbian, but imagining the existence of lesbians in spite of all that conspires to obliterate, deny, or make it unimaginable. (191)

Therefore, in order for a text to qualify as a lesbian narrative, it must provide the necessary room for lesbian representation and render female desire visible. In order to create this ‘lesbian’ space, the text must comment on the politics of gender, sexuality, and desire. In Heterosexual Plots and Lesbian Narratives, Marilyn Farwell explains how literature “relies on a system of narrative meaning informed by the same gender and sexual ideology, an ideology that discourages, subverts, and buries lesbian concerns” (4). Literature often reinforces cultural ideologies because they are socially scripted and considered reality. A true lesbian narrative that portrays female desire outside of a male realm must do more than have a central lesbian character; it must also critique the cultural heterosexism that places lesbianism outside the cultural norm. With or without clear gender distinctions, “it is not that the lesbian body refuses to be constrained within the gender system; rather it exceeds that system by being what the system constructs as the ultimate threat: a female body, a woman’s sexuality, independent of the male” (Farwell 161). With or without a central lesbian character, a text that places female sexuality and the female body at the center of its narrative (as long as the two are
represented as independent of the male), would most likely be considered a lesbian text. But what if it is unclear whether a body is ‘female’ or what gender a character performs?

In Wittig’s *The Lesbian Body* and Fallon’s *Working Hot*, there is no question as to whether the characters are lesbian (or female for that matter). They use gendered pronouns, sexually explicit language, and descriptions of the body that clearly sex them as female. In *Written on the Body*, Winterson resists the use of gendered pronouns for the narrator and manages to successfully portray erotic encounters without gendering the narrator’s body. Can a text fall into the category of lesbian narrative if the central relationship involves a woman and a man? We cannot logically classify a heterosexual relationship as ‘lesbian.’ If a character’s gender is left unnamed, we, as readers, are forced to figure out what that means. The space, then, is left open for a number of readings.

In order for a text to classify as a lesbian narrative, it is not absolutely vital that it *directly* address lesbian concerns or blatantly identify a character as lesbian. It is not necessary, for example, to *label* characters in *Written on the Body* as lesbian. Farwell describes Louise, the narrator’s beloved in *Written on the Body*, as an image of female excess and of the grotesque lesbian body. Farwell argues that the lesbian subject gains agency “through the ungendered, twentieth-century narrator’s multiple revisions of the romance story,” and goes on to explain the challenges the reader is faced with:

The challenge, then, for reading this literature is to identify the similarity in the diversity. The discursively constructed lesbian subject enters diverse narrative structures—realistic or experimental, romantic or heroic—and interrogates the gender positioning of the narrative elements. It undermines gender opposition and
hierarchy and also male bonding, structural elements which combine to form the ideology of Western narrative. (22).

Winterson’s resistance to gendering one of two central characters in the text is often explored and critiqued by critics. Although her novel does not provide a literal reference to lesbian desire as Wittig and Fallon’s do, it can be categorized as a lesbian narrative. Cath Stowers, in her essay “The Erupting Lesbian Body: Reading *Written on the Body* as a Lesbian Text,” argues that the narrator is, in fact, a woman. Stowers calls attention to Wittig’s argument in *The Straight Mind*, explaining that Winterson has similar intentions in her treatment of the narrator’s unsexed identity: “[Wittig] aligns the sign ‘lesbian’ with neither masculinity nor femininity, but rather uses it to highlight the duplicity of division between the two and to problematise heterosexual definitions of sex and gender” (91). Therefore, readers can assume the narrator is female because she rejects masculine, heterosexual paradigms; however, the “absence of any declaration of gender is not suggesting that gender has no power, but rather that gender dichotomies can be upset. . . . it is possible to perform a masculine persona without necessarily accepting it” (Stowers 92). Winterson’s narrator, then, performs masculine and feminine personas throughout the narrative—reminiscent of Judith Butler’s theory that gender is performative and learned through a series of repetitive acts.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler questions the ‘realness’ of gender categories and explains that what we perceive as ‘real’ gender may not exist and what we consider to be “real, what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality” (xxiii). The narrator in *Written on the Body* is a clear example of this phenomenon. While many readers may assume the narrator is a woman, in a number
of passages it is difficult not to question a feminine categorization. Page after page, the narrator takes on masculine and feminine roles while never exposing a definite, static sex. The lack of distinct feminine and masculine traits relates, in part, to Butler’s refusal to accept fixed gender categories. In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” she explains how gender is actually a performance and is constructed through specific acts repeated through time and made into “social reality” (401-417). Masculinity and femininity are learned through time as the normalized acts are constantly repeated and made into what we perceive as reality. According to this postmodern approach, there would be no such thing as a lesbian because the term ‘lesbian’ is a product of society. In her essay, “Wittig’s Material Practice: Universalizing a Minority Point of View,” Butler explains her definition of ‘lesbian’:

If we thought we understood that lesbians were women who more or less conduct their sexual lives with other women, we have misunderstood what it is to be a lesbian. For Wittig, ‘woman’—and even sometimes the plural ‘women’—is a category that belongs to the ‘social contract,’ which is ‘heterosexuality.’ This means that the category has been devised and implemented to keep the presumptive status of heterosexuality in its place at the foundation of culture. The category must be assaulted and nullified, rendered obsolete, if we are to understand what it means to be a lesbian. (523)

‘Woman’ is a term defined by culture; therefore, it is a representation of heteronormative thought and practice and is not representative of any sexuality beyond that. A lesbian narrative, therefore, must disrupt heteronormative assumptions and beliefs about sexuality. Without clear definitions of gender or sexuality, there would be no reason to
label women as lesbians, because there would be no label of heterosexuality in the first place. If this is true, then how do Wittig and Fallon successfully subvert gender dichotomies and deconstruct hetero-patriarchal notions of female sexuality by labeling their characters as lesbians?

The sexually explicit and erotic nature of the texts is impossible to overlook; however, since Wittig and Fallon identify their characters as female, they are able to describe bodies and sexual acts with extremely overt and sexualized language. With that in mind, all three of the writers call attention to parts of the body that are not normally eroticized—and in Winterson’s case—parts that do not exclusively belong to women. Noses, ears, arteries, and valves are only a few of the body parts that are described within the texts. While a description of a ligament embedded in a sexual context may seem unusual, there is no doubt the image is sexualized. Fallon, Winterson, and Wittig uncover this hidden, feminine realm, and they prove that “women have sexual organs everywhere, that there is no single erotic center to a woman’s body, just as there is no single center to women’s texts” (Kutzer 134). Bodies are written, translated, and discovered by language. And Fallon, Winterson, and Wittig show us how.
I. TOUCHING, SEEING, TASTING, AND DISMEMEMBERING

Women’s bodies continuously have been the subject of voyeurism and male fantasy. Bodies have been objectified, sexualized, and commodified in all areas of discourse. Women are often reduced to parts of their bodies—their torsos, breasts, legs, and mouths have been used to sell fragrance, alcohol, clothing, and food. The female body has been the primary embodiment of pleasure for men; however, Fallon, Winterson, and Wittig construct representations of the female body that do not function as objects of male desire. In their texts, female desire is central, and the body, in all aspects, becomes a significant part of lesbian representation. All three writers concentrate on various parts of the body and describe perception based on the human senses—characters feel, taste, smell, hear, and observe their lovers’ bodies:

M / y clitoris m / y labia are touched by your hands. Through m / y vagina and m / y uterus you insert yourself breaking the membrane up to m / y intestines. Round your neck you place m / y duodenum pale-pink well-veined with blue. You unwind m / y yellow small intestine. So doing you speak of the odour of m / y damp organs, you speak of their consistence, you speak of their movements, you speak of their temperature. At this point you attempt to wrench out m / y kidneys. They resist you. You touch my green gallbladder. I have a deathly chill, I moan, I fall into an abyss, m / y head is awhirl, m / y heart is in m / y mouth, it feels as if m / y blood is all congealed in m / y arteries. . . You speak the colour of m / y organs. I cannot see them. (Wittig 38)
This passage from *The Lesbian Body* is an example of the eroticization of body parts that
does not speak to heteronormative notions of sexuality and desire. The speaker is female,
the lover is female, and the sexualization of arteries, blood, and organs is unconventional
in every aspect. It is vital that a lesbian text *resists* the tendency to name only the “parts
and functions” of the female body that are “important to male eroticism and sexuality . . .
failling to map and name the entire complex structure of female passion and sexuality”
(Kutzer 133). Wittig, Winterson, and Fallon’s descriptions of the body comment on
female sexuality in complex ways. Attention to specific parts and functions of the body is
used to portray desire and love for the beloved. Ironically, at times, sexual violence and
metaphoric dismemberment of body parts also comment on female desire.

Obsession with specific body parts disconnected from the image of the whole
body is a source of comfort for the narrator in Winterson’s text. In *Written on the Body*,
the narrator explains, “I became obsessed with anatomy. If I could not put Louise out of
my mind I would drown myself in her . . . I would go on knowing her, more intimately
than the skin, hair and voice that I craved. I would have her plasma, her spleen, her
synovial fluid. I would recognize her even when her body had long since fallen away”
(111). The narrator wants to know Louise beyond the physical features visible on the
surface. It is one thing to know the number of wrinkles she has, but it is another to count
her blood cells and know the fluid that runs through her organs. The narrator goes on to
study and interpret Louise’s mouth:

The lining of your mouth I know through tongue and spit. Its ridges, valleys, the
corrugated roof, the fortress of teeth. The glossy smoothness of the inside of your
upper lip is interrupted by a rough swirl where you were hurt once. The tissues of
the mouth and anus heal faster than any others but they leave signs for those who
care to look. I care to look. There’s a story trapped inside your mouth. (117)

Bodies can tell stories if the lover is willing to study and translate them. Louise’s lover is
willing, and we can see the exploration and translation of Louise’s body throughout the
text. Why focus on the mouth, teeth, gallbladder, and heart? All three writers do, but what
exactly is their purpose?

Aside from Wittig and Fallon’s references to strictly female body parts, why do
the writers call attention to parts of the body that belong to both sexes? How does
eroticizing a ligament or artery lend to a lesbian reading? According to Butler, this tactic
is an attempt to universalize the subject of the text. If bodies are described in
‘ungendered’ ways, and sex is described only mentioning those ‘shared’ body parts, then
the outcome is an image of the body that is universal: “To universalize, then, means first
of all to render categories of sex obsolete in language. . . . to pluralize the feminine and
the lesbian, to render existing categories of sex obsolete, to set up the plural feminine as
an absolute subject, to produce a shock for the reader, any reader, and to conduct an
assault of some kind” (Butler 520-521). In order to render categories of sex obsolete, the
writers must disrupt what is normally associated with the concepts of ‘feminine’ and
‘lesbian.’ Fallon, Winterson, and Wittig do shock readers with their explicit and
unconventional descriptions of the female subject. The attention to human bodily
functions, especially the five senses, assists in a universal interpretation—we all hear,
smell, taste, see, and feel:

The return to bodily figures is not accidental; seeing, breathing, making love,
moving, fighting, crying are the bodily modalities through which this emergent
universalization makes itself known. This, what happens between two women, is also called ‘seeing’; this, what happens between lesbians, is also called ‘making love,’ and we cannot understand seeing or making love without such bodily figures. There is no ontology of moving and fighting and crying that exists apart from its social articulations. It is equally true that when certain subjects move, fight, cry, see, and breathe, they are doing what the human does and so exemplifying the human in its shared features, its universality. (Butler 528)

Although, in two of the texts, the characters are labeled female, any person, regardless of their gender, can relate in some way. Men and women, female and male, homosexual or heterosexual can relate to basic human functions—crying, breathing, seeing, and ‘making love.’ This, according to Butler, is the first step in ‘assaulting’ basic definitions of the ‘feminine’ and ‘lesbian.’ If aspects of the feminine/lesbian are described in a way that exceeds conventional definitions of the feminine, and at the same time, mirror human functions belonging to no specific gender, then the text has proved a point.

How can a text that universalizes gender and sexuality comment on female/lesbian desire in a positive way? In their texts, Fallon, Winterson, and Wittig dismember parts of the female body—sometimes overtly, so how is that a positive representation of the female body? Women have been reduced to ‘parts’ for a number of years in male discourse—what makes these representations different? Through crying, breathing, making love, and fighting, the lesbian figure “scandalizes the human, the concept of the human, exposing its historicity, its fracture, and its futurity” (Butler 528). In The Lesbian Body, Wittig pulls bodies apart and then puts them back together. But there is a reason that her figures are “intermittently and passionately disaggregated and
reassembled” (528). Wittig, along with Fallon and Winterson, deconstruct images of the
lesbian body in order to reconstruct them. It is, essentially, a process of (re)creation.
Although Butler specifically addresses both the dismemberment and universality of
bodies in Wittig’s fiction, her ideas can easily be applied to Fallon and Winterson’s texts.
Through the figure of the lesbian, the writers show how “concepts touch upon, constrain,
and release bodies in ways that constitute and deconstitute a fundamental sense of bodily
location and temporality, position, relationality, and boundary” (528). The texts act upon
bodies and show us how bodies are created, destroyed, and recreated by culture,
language, and other forms of discourse. The image of the lesbian breaks apart and
exposes ‘human’ qualities. ‘Dismemberment’ deconstructs the way bodies are originally
formed—bodies constructed through culture. As bodies are pulled apart and examined,
they are eventually put together again and essentially reconstructed. This strategy often
resembles actual dismemberment, and dismembered body parts are scattered throughout
all three texts; however, Wittig’s metaphors are more explicit:

The women lead m / e to your scattered fragments, there is an arm, there is a foot,
the neck and head are together, your eyelids are closed, your detachable ears are
somewhere, your eyeballs have rolled in the mud . . . I perceive your pelvis, your
bust is everywhere, several fragments of forearms the thighs and tibiae are
missing. . . . I find your nose a part of your vulva your labia your clitoris, I find
your ears one tibia then the other, I assemble you part by part, I reconstruct you.
(79-80)

Here, the narrator actually searches for pieces of the lover’s body to reassemble “part by
part.” Wittig’s purpose, then, is to suggest that the lesbian must be taken apart and
reconstructed in another way in order for the lesbian to escape the definition assigned by male-dominated discourse. Although dismemberment and attention to individual body parts have underlying meaning, on the surface of the texts, many situations seem explicitly violent.

While it is not unusual for violence to be equated with sex, how does violence between two women lead to a positive representation of female/lesbian desire? Wittig, again, seems to approach violence more overtly than the other writers. There are a number of sexually violent scenes described in *The Lesbian Body*, but one in particular has overt references to actual bondage:

I am the pincers brought to red heat in the fire that tear the flesh, I am the plaited whip that flagellates the skin, I am the electric current that blasts and convulses the muscles, I am the gag that gags the mouth, and I am the bandage that hides the eyes, I am the bonds the tie the hands, I am the mad tormentor galvanized by torture and your cries intoxicate m / e m / y best beloved the more that you restrain them. (16)

The references to bondage and sexual violence are fairly clear but also seem somewhat unusual in a text that places female desire at the center of its narrative. Violence toward the beloved almost never leads to a positive meaning or outcome. Sexual encounters that play out submissive/dominant roles appear to perpetuate the patriarchal power structures still present in our culture. Why, then, do writers concerned with lesbian representation bring the same power structures they wish to destroy into their narratives? How is it disruptive? In “Feminine Masochism and the Politics of Personal Transformation,” Sandra Bartky successfully compares two opposing feminist views on masochistic sexual
behavior; however, we must first make the connection between sexuality and the phrase, ‘the personal is political’:

For the feminist, two things follow upon the discovery that sexuality too belongs to the sphere of the political. The first is that whatever pertains to sexuality—not only actual sexual behavior, but sexual desire and sexual fantasy as well—will have to be understood in relation to a larger system of subordination; the second, that the deformed sexuality of patriarchal culture must be moved from the hidden domain of ‘private life’ into an arena for struggle, where a ‘politically correct’ sexuality of mutual respect will contend with an ‘incorrect’ sexuality of domination and submission. (45)

Bartky, arguing against her previous points, explains why and how this sexual behavior can be considered positive and pro-feminist: “Sadomasochism is liberatory, say its defenders, in that it challenges the sexual norms of the bourgeois family, norms still rooted to a degree in an older, more repressive sexual ethic that saw sexual acts as legitimate only if they were performed in the service of reproduction” (48). Is this belief a stretch? Possibly, for many feminists, yes. For those who find it too difficult to agree that submissive women express sexual freedom, Bartky voices one more significant point: “Sadomasochists reveal to the world, albeit in an exaggerated form, the inner nature of heterosexuality and they are stigmatized by the larger society precisely because they tear the veil from what patriarchal respectability would like to hide” (56). Here, what is socially undesirable is made public and very ‘real.’ The ‘patriarchal respectability’ that Bartky talks about is the same system which defines the personal sphere as a completely separate entity from the political sphere. Institutions in our society govern what is
considered culturally acceptable and perpetuate notions of both normality and idealism—in short, heterosexuality and a view of female desire as subordinate to male desire.

Violence does not only appear in Wittig’s text, although the others may approach the subject in a more subtle way without having characters dismember their lovers. In Working Hot, Toto writes a play for a past lover named Top Value. In it, the two women discuss domination and submission:

Top Value: I like to be dominated I guess
Toto: nonsense don’t use that word it’s wrong you just mean you want to trust someone enough and trust their desire for you sexually that you can relax yourself in their company in bed trust your body to them that’s all nothing to do with domination submission and domination are just cheap take-away fast-food versions that make you despicable to yourself it’s a perversion of women’s phoenix ability
Toto: real masochism the true masochist is the one who keeps coming back to mummydaddy for more who knows she will never be satisfied until the hand that beats her carrasses her who begs the question ‘why did you always hate me’ from the brute she keeps going back to. (86)

Here, Toto makes an overt distinction between female submission to another woman compared to female submission to a male. Submission, in this way, raises a few interesting questions. In “Bodily Mut(ili)ation: Enscribing Lesbian Desire,” Penelope Engelbrecht explains that “the lesbian masochist chooses her momentary, even fictive mistress: amusingly ambivalent, this feminization of ‘master.’ The lesbian sadist is, like her, a lesbian Subject and her equal” (5). Toto, regardless of what she does with Top
Value during sex, considers her nothing other than her equal. In *Written on the Body*, the narrator often expresses love for Louise through violent, though metaphoric, descriptions. Louise leaves marks on the narrator’s body through biting, tattooing, branding, and tapping. Louise’s lover explains, “Who taught you to write in blood on my back? Who taught you to use your hands as branding irons? You have scored your name into my shoulders, referenced me with your mark. The pads of your fingers have become printing blocks, you tap a message on to my skin, tap meaning into my body” (89). Later in Winterson’s novel, the narrator continues to describe the marks left behind by Louise: “Sometimes it’s me you bite, leaving shallow wounds in my shoulders . . . I wear the wounds as a badge of honour. The moulds of your teeth are easy to see under my shirt but the L that tattoos me on the inside is not visible to the naked eye” (118). Although there is no mention of dismemberment, the narrator speaks of the wounds that Louise causes and then leaves behind. Lesbianization is not only a battle; it is also a “seduction, an erotic gamble, a forceful persuasion. It misappropriates against misappropriation, using the tools of love in war and the tools of war in love” (Cope 80). Wittig clearly pays attention to images of seduction, force, and eroticism in her text, and the same can be said about Fallon and Winterson’s work. The characters in *Working Hot* and *Written on the Body* also use “the tools of love in war and the tools of war in love,” because the relationships represent a blurring of desire and violence. In the texts, bodies often become the source of pain and pleasure while, at times, morphing into other material objects that cause both pain and pleasure for the lovers.

Metaphors are used to describe the bodies in Fallon, Winterson, and Wittig’s texts, and quite often, the metaphors involve some type of bodily change or morphing.
The lesbian body almost instinctively becomes something else. Bodies take on new colors, shape, and form. Whatever they morph into may not be clearly stated within the texts, but each narrator brings attention to their lovers’ bodies changing right in front of their eyes—changing from their touch. Winterson’s narrator explains that Louise is “an ordinary miracle, [her] body changing under my hands” (124). Blood vessels swell and pores expand—“the physiological effects of lust are easy to read” (124). In Working Hot, Fallon provides the most specific example of this as a woman’s body turns into flowers, silver wires, and other instruments:

   Stroking my whole body all night long until your fingers became fine sprays of white flowers until they became silver wires electrifying my epidermis until they became delicate instruments of torture and the night wore on for too many hours and I loved you irritably as dawn reprieved us we are two live-wire women wound and sprung together we are neither of us afraid of the metamorphoses transmogrification the meltings the juices squelching in the body out of the body—a split fruit of a woman we are neither of us afraid to sink our teeth into the peach it’s not love or sex it’s just that we are collaborating every night on a book called The Pleasures of the Flesh Made Simple. (87)

Violence, once again, is mentioned as a source of pleasure for the women; however, there is more significant attention to the morphological ability of the body. Fingers undergo a type of metamorphosis and become flowers, wires, and instruments of torture. Bodily fluids become juices—the bodies become fruit. Another example of this idea, perhaps slightly more overt, is one of many present in The Lesbian Body: “I plug m / yself into you, instantly your composition changes, you assume a new shape appearance colour, a
passer-by returning from her walk would not recognize you. You move your mass away from the point I touch when my fingers brush against you. . . . At a given moment you change direction” (45). Once one woman ‘plugs herself into’ the other, the lover’s body changes into another shape and color. Her composition is altered from her union with a woman’s body. Grosz explains the connection between lesbian metamorphosis and Deleuzian theoretical models:

One ‘thing’ transmutes into another, becomes something else through its connections with something or someone outside. . . . This is precisely what the Deleuzian notion of ‘becoming’ entails: entry into an arrangement, an assemblage of other fragments, other things, becoming bound up in some other production, forming part of a machine, becoming a component in a series of flows and breaks, of varying speeds and intensities. (80)

She goes on to explain that “becoming lesbian” is not only a question of whether woman identifies herself as lesbian, but, instead, “what kinds of lesbian connections, what kinds of lesbian-machine, we invest our time, energy, and bodies in, what kind of sexuality we invest ourselves in, with what other kinds of bodies, with what bodies of our own, and with what effects?” (81). The connection to other bodies—other female bodies—defines what it means to ‘become’ lesbian. Fallon, Wittig, and Winterson show us the connections, bodies, and effects. As readers, we see what it means to become lesbian. We see how bodies morph into other things. And we see how lesbian bodies are deconstructed and reconstructed in the process of becoming.

Although the passage is directly in response to The Lesbian Body, Butler’s introductory remarks at an award ceremony for Wittig address many concerns involving
the lesbian body’s relationship to violence, desire, and reconstruction. In it, she discusses
the destructive qualities and violence present in Wittig’s work. The writing that takes
place in and through destruction—the destruction associated with ‘being’ a lesbian—is a
point of political and erotic consequence:

[P]olitically, it makes no sense to adopt a point of view that one might be
accepted into the happy pluralism of identity categories, one category among
others, when the articulate presence of the lesbian is a scandal, a threat, and that it
does, by its insistent presence, force a remapping of what we mean by
community, desire, language, bodies, sex and being. Erotically, I understood
something as well . . . in love-making, lesbians must and do take each other apart,
and remake one another in the course of this erotic dismemberment. A body
whose gender is marked feminine, crafted within the heterosexual matrix that
works through abstraction, reduction, and the regulation of shame and desire,
knows the difficulty of remaking required to make an offer of oneself to another,
to make a claim upon an other, to submit to a passionate reinscription of the body.

(531)

In order for the lesbian body to exist for, and through, itself, it must be torn away from
the culture that first constructed it. The lesbian must disconnect from the heterosexual
sphere and figure out a way to define the term ‘lesbian’ that represents her lived
experiences, not the experiences and definitions imposed on her. So then, why does
Wittig tear her characters apart in an attempt to portray lesbian eroticism? Why are limbs
ripped from torsos? Why are eyes pulled from their sockets? For what reasons do Fallon
and Winterson use violence to represent lesbian desire? These violent acts associated
with lesbian eroticism symbolize a “cultural death that must be lived through in order to survive as something else, in order for sexuality to be both the threat of destruction to a dominant and constraining heterosexuality as well as the unanticipated future of the body” (Butler 531). Lesbian survival—the existence of lesbian desire and representation of the lesbian body—relies on a system of cultural meaning. Bodies must be destroyed, and their culturally inscribed surfaces must be stripped of meaning before they can write and define themselves.

Through metaphors, acts of violence, and attention to specific body parts, Fallon, Winterson, and Wittig describe the “erotic struggle to become a body that might love and be loved” (Butler 531). While they each approach this struggle differently, they recognize that language, and its relationship to bodies and pleasures, is a vital part of the struggle. Wittig, as Butler points out, not only provided us with the language for the struggle, she also made us realize that the “struggle is in language, that it is inseparable from the struggle of bodies, and that the task of writing one’s way into the future is no luxury, but the very name of sexual and cultural survival (531). Bodies are written and rewritten through language. The lesbian body, as it attempts to disrupt conventional notions of the female body and redefine what it really means to be a ‘lesbian,’ is pulled apart—piece by piece, limb by limb. As Butler argues, it is a struggle. But it has to be. Heterosexuality is ingrained so deep into our culture, into our discourse, and into our language, that it is impossible to deconstruct any of it without an ‘erotic struggle.’ Bodies and texts are fragmented in the process—they have to be. And, more importantly, we need language to achieve it.
II. BODY LANGUAGE: INSCRIBING AND TRANSLATING THE BODY

If we don’t invent a language, if we don’t find our body’s language, it will have too few gestures to accompany our story.

—Luce Irigaray, This Sex Which is Not One

Bodies are produced and inscribed by language. The textual bodies in all three of the texts are translated—translated by the narrator and translated by the reader. There are a number of direct references in the narratives that comment on language, translation, and reading the body, but at the same time, Fallon, Wittig, and Winterson use narrative and linguistic strategies that are not part of the dialogue between the characters. Wittig’s split pronouns, Winterson’s ungendered narrator, and Fallon’s blend of genres are examples of the authors’ resistance to following conventional lexicon, grammar, and narrative strategies.

For years, feminist theorists have discussed the need for a ‘woman’s’ language—a language grounded in the body and produced by the body. In “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Helene Cixous explains, “By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her . . . Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write yourself. Your body must be heard” (350). The body has a language, and women must use it to evoke change. Women can find pleasure in both language and in sexuality; however, they must invent their own. Luce Irigaray also discusses the importance of finding a language that allows women to tell their own stories and desires. In Irigaray’s “When Our Lips Speak Together,” from This Sex Which is Not One, she explains the significance of a female-centered language:

If we keep on speaking the same language together, we’re going to reproduce the same history. Begin the same old stories all over again. . . . If we keep on
speaking sameness, if we speak to each other as men have been doing for
centuries, as we have been taught to speak, we’ll miss each other, fail ourselves.
Words will pass through our bodies, above our heads. They’ll vanish, and we’ll be
lost. Far off, up high. Absent from ourselves: we’ll be spoken machines.
Enveloped in proper skins, but not our own. Withdrawn into proper names,
vviolated by them. Not yours, not mine. (205)

Women must produce their own counter-language. Irigaray argues that the rejection of
conventional language constructs a new ‘feminine’ language that can represent female
desire. Irigaray comments on the patriarchal system that restricts lesbian desire and
enforces its rules onto women, proving that lesbian pleasure is “trapped in their system,
where a virgin is one as yet unmarked by them, for them. One who is not yet made
woman by and for them. Not yet imprinted with their sex, their language. Not yet
penetrated, possessed by them” (211). Irigaray also links her discussion of language to
lesbian eroticism; she comments on the connection women have with each other by her
reference to lips—lips of the mouth and of the vagina: “By our lips we are women”
(210). Again, in order to disrupt conventional notions of sexuality, lesbians must
deconstruct the system that holds it together. If language is inseparable from the struggle
of the body, then interrogation of conventional language is necessary. According to
Cixous and Irigaray, female desire and language are linked. Language is connected to the
body, and as we know, the portrayal and significance of the body is a crucial component
of lesbian representation and desire. Fallon, Wittig, and Winterson combine innovative
use of language and narrative with postmodern concepts of the body. And the result?
Bodies that speak and are heard.
Wittig’s use of split pronouns is probably the most obvious and innovative use of language out of the three texts. In *The Lesbian Body*, Wittig addresses the problems associated with personal pronouns in her author’s note:

The fascination for writing the never previously written and the fascination for the unattained body proceed from the same desire. The desire to bring the real body violently to life in the words of the book (everything that is written exists), the desire to do violence by writing to the language which *I* [j/e] can enter only by force. ‘I’ [Je] as a generic feminine subject can only enter by force into a language which is foreign to it . . . . ‘I’ [Je] obliterates the fact that *elle or elles* are submerged in *il or ils*, i.e., that all the feminine persons are complementary to the masculine persons. . . . The ‘I’ [Je] who writes is alien to her own writing at every word because this ‘I’ [Je] uses a language alien to her; this ‘I’ [Je] experiences what is alien to her since this ‘I’ [Je] cannot be ‘un écrivain’. . . . *Je* is the symbol of the lived, rending experience which is in m/y writing, of this cutting in two which throughout literature is the exercise of a language which does not constitute m/e as subject. (10)

The female subject cannot write, understand or experience *her* life by using a language that does not understand her female experience. The writer, *un écrivain*, is always masculine. By splitting personal pronouns, Wittig does not create a feminine subject, because the construction of a female pronoun would only sustain the belief that gender is static. Instead, she constructs a neutral ‘I’ that disrupts masculine language and allows room for the lesbian subject/female writer. Wittig’s approach makes sense in relation to her belief that a lesbian is not a woman or a man but a social construct. Wittig argues
against some feminists’ beliefs that biological differences do play a small part in gender, because it assumes that the basis and beginning of society are grounded in heterosexual. Lesbians suggest that gender is not natural because they do not fit into a specific category; they must be something else, “a not-woman, a not-man, a product of society, not a product of nature” (Wittig 312). Women and men are classes; they are “political and economic categories not eternal ones,” and the only way to destroy these political categories is by suppressing men as a class. After the class ‘men’ no longer exists, then ‘women’ as a class will cease to exist, because “there are no slaves without masters” (Wittig 313). Since the notion of heterosexuality contributes so much to our definition of gender and the oppression of women in relation to men, the destruction of the two classes cannot be achieved unless we destroy heterosexuality as a social system. Lesbian desire cannot be represented without destroying that system. The split pronouns in The Lesbian Body disrupt linguistic order and the social system. Of course, undoing the narrative and/or linguistic system is a violent struggle. Interrogation and disruption of conventional language is, in part, a battle. In “Plastic Actions: Linguistic Strategies and Le Corps lesbien,” Karin Cope describes Wittig’s strategy as the “lesbianization of language”—a “practice of the detournement of the presumptions and language of heterosexuality used as a strategic weapon in the battle for the liberation of ‘women’ from the oppressions and omissions of dyadic logic” (76). Therefore, attention to language, in this way, is an attempt to annihilate patriarchal language and reasoning and replace it with a system that renders lesbianism and the female body separate from masculine discourse. Even if readers do not understand the purpose or meaning behind Wittig’s split pronouns, they still appear ‘different.’ In many aspects, The Lesbian Body
forces a different kind of reading, because we are not familiar with the language or narrative style. Fallon and Winterson also present an erotic struggle, and, they too, use innovative strategies to disrupt narrative boundaries.

The first, and most obvious, strategy in *Written on the Body* is the lack of a gendered narrator. Not only does this resonate with Butler’s notion of universality and the insignificance of naming genders, but it demands a choice from the reader. Since Winterson is, in fact, a lesbian and often places lesbian characters at the center of her texts, it makes more sense to assume the narrator is a woman, but essentially, it is up to the reader to decide. Louise’s lover can be a woman or a man, or if the question of gender is insignificant in all aspects to the reader, then the narrator can remain ‘genderless.’ It is difficult, however, for any person to actively read Winterson’s text without assigning a gender to the narrator. Again, this forces a different kind of reading. Conventionally, we do not have to decide if a character is female or male, because we are told in some way or another, either from a name or gendered pronouns. In “Teledildonics: Virtual Lesbianism the Fiction of Jeanette Winterson,” Lisa Moore argues that refusing to categorize the narrator as any specific gender aids in a lesbian interpretation:

Winterson’s narrator is not an androgynous figure, the imprecise claim of some reviewers; neither is the narrator sometimes a man and sometimes a woman. Rather, this is a figure (or perhaps a narrative space or category) that appropriates the experiences and investments of variously gendered and sexualized beings in a structural enactment of Winterson’s particular Virtual Reality. This is a figure constructed of disparate body parts, desires, identities and histories, put together in a postmodern pastiche that nonetheless allows for the grand romantic obsession
of lesbian romance fiction in the best identitarian tradition of lesbian cultural politics. (110)

Winterson manipulates a space where the narrator’s performance critiques conventional definitions of gender and sexuality. If, as Wittig believes, a lesbian is not a man or a woman, then Winterson’s ungendered narrator may reflect similar beliefs.

Besides the narrator’s questionable gender, or lack of gender, what else in the text contributes to a different reading? Winterson reverses the culture’s definition of natural and unnatural by using postmodern techniques including intertextuality, fragmentation and attention to storytelling. The narrator tells us Louise’s story, but at times, it is difficult to draw the line between the ‘true’ past and what the narrator is simply thinking or desiring. Since the narrator is haunted by memories of Louise, s/he even questions what to believe: “I had scrupulously avoided our old haunts—that’s the advice in grief books—until today . . . I never thought to be Cassandra plagued by dreams. I am plagued . . . I no longer know what to trust or what is right” (179). The line between fact and fiction is often unclear for the readers and the narrator. In each section, the narrator tells her story but pays no attention to time. At times, s/he jumps ahead to the future, provides detailed descriptions of the past, and then discusses situations that may or may not have actually occurred. The narrator admits, “Now here I am making up my own memories of good times. When we were together the weather was better, the days were longer. Even the rain was warm. That’s right, isn’t it?” (161). Is it? If the narrator questions the accuracy of memories, then how can we trust everything s/he reveals? A friend explains to the narrator, “The trouble with you . . . is that you want to live in a novel” (160). And, technically, she does.
Direct references to literary devices and language do not go by unnoticed. The narrator often calls attention to the body’s language. Louise’s touch is described as morse code as she “taps meaning into [the narrator’s] body” (89). Translation is a theme that surfaces in many of the narrator’s own words about Louise: “Written on the body is a secret code only visible in certain lights; the accumulations of a lifetime gather there. . . . I like to keep my body rolled up away from prying eyes. Never unfold too much, tell the whole story. I didn’t know that Louise would have reading hands. She has translated me into her own book” (89). Here, bodies seem to be written by their histories—histories that should not be revealed to just anyone. The narrator does not want to be read by “prying eyes,” and while s/he does tell us a story, we must assume it is not complete. The novel’s closing paragraph, ironically, provides no sense of closure:

This is where the story starts, in this threadbare room. The walls are exploding. The windows have turned into telescopes. Moon and stars are magnified in this room. The sun hangs over the mantelpiece. I stretch out my hand and reach the corners of the world. The world is bundled up in this room. Beyond the door, where the river is, where the roads are, we shall be. We can take the world with us when we go and sling the sun under your arm. Hurry now, it’s getting late. I don’t know if this is a happy ending but here we are let loose in open fields. (190)

We are left with this passage, and the only information it provides is that the real ‘story’ begins there. But where is ‘there’—the place where walls explode and moon and stars are magnified? In “Postmodern Concepts of the Body in Jeanette Winterson’s Written on the Body,” Antje Lindenmeyer explains that the “distinction between ‘body’ and ‘text’ becomes blurred, lovemaking turns into a hermeneutic act of reading and translating the
beloved’s body” (55). Bodies become texts, lovemaking becomes an act of reading, and
in order for the narrator to fully understand and know Louise, her body must be
translated. The narrator understands the power of words and the influence that language
has over the body as s/he explains, “Now that I have lost you I cannot allow you to
develop, you must be a photograph not a poem. You must be rid of life as I am rid of life”
(119). A photograph is a merely an image, but a poem, because of its language,
represents lived bodies—bodies that have stories to tell. Without language, then, bodies
are only flat and meaningless images. Language, however, brings life to bodies. Louise’s
absence is painful for the narrator, but, at the same time, s/he brings Louise back into the
picture. Essentially, Louise never leaves the narrator’s mind. Her body lives there
through the narrator’s thoughts, memories, and descriptions of her body. Reality and
fiction are blurred. Does Louise still exist? Is she only a memory? Lindenmeyer
addresses these concerns and explains, “The body is discursively produced through
language by introducing a narrator whose words bring the body of the beloved woman
into existence and who constantly attempts to recreate her absent body through evocative
descriptions. However, the narrator does not simply repeat society’s discourse of the
body, but draws on scientific and poetic imagery in order to form a highly individual
representation” (50). Readers begin to know Louise through the narrator’s medical, yet
metaphorical, descriptions of every muscle, every organ, and every crevice of her body.
Louise returns to the narrator’s side, but only through intimate descriptions of her body—
the “body where [her] name is written” (Winterson 178).

In the most sexually explicit of the three texts, Working Hot combines a mixture
of genres, narrative breaks, and erotic language. The result is a text that is written in the
language of sex, the language of bodies, and the language of lesbian desire. Fallon’s work is completely void of conventional narrative strategies, and her overt sexual descriptions are everything but traditional. In “Diving for the Red Pearl: Surfacing and Setting the Centre in *Working Hot*,” Melissa Boyde and Amanda Lawson explain how the narrative is disrupted by different performative episodes including genres of song, film script, and opera libretto:

In its performative aspect, *Working Hot* gestures towards a representation which is not easily assimilable within realist concepts of mimesis. It makes the sexuality ‘constituted as secrecy’ visible, but within endlessly varied performances. . . . The breath of experimentation, the complex, uncompromising eroticism of the language and the novel’s lesbian textuality and intertextuality place it in a . . . context of lesbian experimental writing. (122-123)

Not only is lesbian sex rendered visible, but it is represented through a number of different performances. From start to finish, the narrative is continuously fragmented and interrupted by interjections of different performative genres. Toto, the main character, loves sex, and she makes that clear as she interrupts the narrative with her sexual thoughts and experiences. She voices her desire for her lover, Freda, in letters, songs, telegrams, poems, film scripts, and “drunken soliloquies while engaging in acts of sexual perversity. At once speech act and carnal act, Toto’s talk functions doubly as voicings and as mouthings-tounguings, as sexual slur(p)s, teasing the reader’s lascivious ear if not the ear of her designated lover” (Chisholm 20). In “The ‘Cunning Lingua’ of Desire: Bodies-Language and Perverse Performativity,” Dianne Chisholm explains that Toto’s “sex-speech acts” are so excessive that “instead of narrative flow the reader experiences
what might be called discursive rupture or ‘narrative interruptus’”—instead of explaining
the ruptures in semiotic terms, she describes them as “‘cunning lingua’ . . . simulated,
exacerbated cunnilingus” (20). ‘Cunning lingua’ is Fallon’s attempt to disrupt narrative
and linguistic boundaries through techniques focusing on the language of sex and bodies:

lingalonga over lingua

you leave me reader working on the body of my new

lover Trixi oh sorry what was it again Lexi yes Lexi Con

holding her spine in the palm of my hand

ah and ohyes the body of language (Fallon 32).

There are no boundaries for the characters in Working Hot, because neither linguistic nor
sexual boundaries exist in the ‘body of language.’ The characters often equate language
with sex. Toto always seduces lovers with her play on words, and she is aware of the
connection between language and the erotic: “the orgasm the point of intersection the
point where all erotica erotic language etc attain that apex of vibrating life” (54).

Language merges with sexual desire to produce orgasm. For Fallon, the two are
inseparable.

It is crucial, however, to consider the role that mouths and tongues play in the
text. Pleasure, especially for Toto, is directly connected to both language and the mouth:

“pleasure pleasure pleasure singing down through my open mouth onto yours and into
yours and your jerked head and your shut eyes your left arm outstretched going down on
you is all joy all exploration the eroticism of trust (even respect) saying ‘you you you’
with my tongue” (54). Since lingua refers to the tongue, or a part resembling one,
Fallon’s use of language is a tool in lesbian representation, because as a “perverse
perform-ativity, cunning lingua reflects and elaborates the gestures of cunnilingus . . . the tongue in speech imitates the tongue in cunnilingus; the play on words is not just tongue-in-cheek, but tongue in mouth, tongue in cunt, tongue on clit, setting the participles in eroticizing motion” (Chisholm 22). In *Working Hot*, language and sex are forms of seduction and pleasure for the characters. Chisholm acknowledges the intersections between language, eroticism, and the mouth/tongue, and argues that Fallon’s technique is a form of ‘lingual,’ rather than ‘linguistic’ performativity: “Lingual performativity engages the body of speech, the organ of speech-making which ‘talks’ in ways/in words which speak most directly to that other organ at the core of woman’s sexual body. Tonguing language so as to s(t)imulate cunnilingus, cunning lingua performs the sex that it speaks” (23). The characters in *Working Hot* know how to ‘speak’ sex: they use it, they enjoy it, and they do it well.

While each writer approaches the integration of bodies and language differently, they all manage to create texts that require readers to think beyond the language they are familiar with, raise questions about the relationship between the body and the words that are used to describe it, and invite a different type of reading. Through Winterson’s ungendered narrator in *Written on the Body*, we realize that it is possible to construct representations of the body and portray lesbian desire without actually naming gender. Fallon’s lack of distinction between speaking sex and performing sex in *Working Hot* forces us to think about sex in terms of language and proves there is pleasure in words. Wittig, perhaps, maps out the beginning of the erotic struggle in *The Lesbian Body*. Her split pronouns suggest that language is the first step in redefining what it means to be lesbian. She creates a space where female desire can exist as a separate entity from male
desire. Fallon, Winterson, and Wittig ‘write the body,’ and more importantly, they invent the languages and narrative strategies that allow them to do so.
CONCLUSION: (UN)GENDERING THE LESBIAN BODY

The deconstruction and reconstruction of lesbian bodies, the re-appropriation of social and cultural paradigms, and the re-working of language and narrative are tools that enable Fallon, Winterson, and Wittig to create a lesbian space that disrupts and subverts ideologies constructed through heterosexual hegemony. Bodies are destroyed in an attempt to reconstruct and redefine them, suggesting that violence and lesbian representation are inseparable. The lesbian body is inscribed with the language and values of the dominant heterosexual culture; however, the writers prove that bodies can be rewritten, reinscribed, and reconstructed through the disruption of traditional paradigms. In *The Lesbian Body*, Wittig disrupts conventional language with her use of split pronouns, reconstructs bodies after dismembering them, and situates the ‘lesbian’ in a position that is neither female nor male. In *Written on the Body*, Winterson resists gendering her narrator and implies that gender categories are not static. She blurs the line between fact and fiction by making the imagined seem real—Louise returns only through the narrator’s thoughts and descriptions of her. In *Working Hot*, Fallon constructs a language that speaks sex, proves that there is pleasure in words, and creates a space where “words mimic gestures” (Chisholm 26). The writers interrogate narrative structures, manipulate language, and destroy cultural boundaries as they redefine female desire and place it in a realm of its own.

What does it all mean? Why do bodies morph into other objects, why are they ripped apart, and why is the relationship between language and sex necessary to understand any of it? Fluid boundaries between the real and imaginary, the merging of
sex and violence, and the deconstruction and reconstruction of gendered bodies are postmodern concepts. While Fallon, Winterson, and Wittig use postmodern approaches to subvert conventional notions of desire, feminist theorists still question the validity and value of postmodernist views. In “Sexual Identity/Textual Politics: Lesbian {De/Com}positions,” Susan J. Wolfe and Julia Penelope argue against deconstructive discourse, including postmodernism:

For what has in fact resulted from the incorporation of deconstructive discourse, in academic “feminist” discourse at least, is that the word Lesbian has been placed in quotation marks, whether used or mentioned, and the existence of real lesbians has been denied, once again, this time by those theorists and practitioners who would regard Lesbians as mere discourse constructs, the product of textuality, undetermined by sexuality. . . . As Lesbians, we seek to establish a self-determined identity—a sense of self confirmed through connections with others and transmitted through common culture(s)—for Lesbians, one that affirms our material identity, grounded in our sexuality. (5-9)

It is not that lesbians do not exist, but in order to construct a self-determined identity, ‘lesbians’ must destroy the ‘identity’ assigned to them. How else can it be done? If, as Butler believes, sexuality and gender are inscribed on the body through repetitive acts and performances, then how can any type of reversal take place without disruption or interrogation of the system? It is not a matter of destroying the term lesbian, or implying that sexuality is irrelevant. Fallon, Winterson, and Wittig make it clear that sexuality is a significant part of lesbian representation—they do not ignore it. While explaining the notion of ‘becoming’ lesbian and defending the postmodern tendency to deconstruct
gender categories in order to construct a space for lesbian desire, Grosz asks, “What it is that together, in parts and bits and interconnections, we can make that is new, that is exploratory, that opens up further spaces, induces further intensities, speeds up, enervates, and proliferates production (production of the body, production of the world)?” (81). What can we make that is new? How can we reproduce the production of the lesbian body? And through what means is reproduction possible? It seems that Fallon, Winterson, and Wittig have answers to these questions, or maybe they don’t. But what they do is open up further spaces, break down linguistic structures, and place female desire at the center of their narratives. Additionally, they eliminate the “privilege of the human over the animal, the organic over the inorganic, the male over the female, the straight over the ‘bent,’” and make hierarchal relations “level and interactive, rendering them productive and innovative, experimental and provocative” (Grosz 81). Lesbian bodies are not passive bodies; rather, they help produce new ways of looking at desire and sexuality. Contrary to what Wolfe and Penelope believe, “lesbian feminists must ‘sex’ the postmodern”—they must make postmodern concepts their own and use them to construct innovative representations of the lesbian body and female desire (Doan 154).

Looking at Working Hot, The Lesbian Body, and Written on the Body together confirms that there is more than one way to represent lesbian desire. Through their similarities and differences, we gain an understanding of the complexities associated with the disruption of gender categories. The writers use different literary strategies to construct lesbian desire. And when we consider how these strategies work together and complicate each other, we realize there are no concrete answers. There is, however, a similar process. Language has constructive and deconstructive abilities. Therefore, if the
goal is to create something new, we must strip bodies of their meaning in the process of redefining them. Lesbian representation is dependent on the destruction of heterosexuality and the reimagining of the culturally constructed body. The process is, as Butler reminds us, an “erotic struggle,” and this “struggle is in language, that it is inseparable from the struggle of bodies, and that the task of writing one’s way into the future is no luxury, but the very name of sexual and cultural survival” (531). And it is a violent struggle. Bodies are pulled apart. Organs, bones, and ligaments are eroticized as characters explore and translate their lovers’ bodies. Sex becomes language, language becomes sex, and the source of pleasure is redefined.
Works Cited


