



# Monique Wittig, Literature as a Trojan Horse

The French writer and theorist died suddenly twenty years ago at the age of 67, shortly after obtaining a position at the University of Arizona in Tucson. The author of *The Opoconax* and *The Lesbian Body* was a major figure in the French feminist movement after May '68, and moved to the United States in 1976. Known in America for her theoretical works such as *The Straight Mind*, and in France for her novels, Monique Wittig is now being rediscovered in activist and academic circles on both sides of the Atlantic.

[By Sophie Joubert/  
March 8, 2023](#)

In April 1979, Monique Wittig gave a lecture at Barnard College in New York City entitled “The Straight Mind.” Using the concepts of language and psychoanalysis as a starting point, she demonstrated the existence of a “heterosexual society” and challenged the categories of man and woman, considered at the time to be immutable. The text, influenced by Marxism, ends with an astonishing sentence: “Lesbians are not women.” By this, Monique Wittig meant that lesbians break with and withdraw themselves from the heterosexual social contract. “The Straight Mind” was published in France in 1981 in *Questions féministes*, a journal founded by Simone de Beauvoir. It created a split within the French feminist movement and Monique Wittig was rejected for being too radical. “She felt very isolated, which she was,” says historian and writer [Laure Murat](#). “Today, she is seen as a messiah, because we are currently in the midst of this differentiation. In what was a very materialistic work, she highlighted the political dimension of the heterosexual contract, which resonates enormously with #MeToo. But at the time, this challenge was interpreted as pitting lesbians against heterosexuals, which was not admissible for Simone de Beauvoir and some others.”

Before she left for the United States in the mid-1970s, Monique Wittig met Sande Zeig, a feminist filmmaker and mime. They became life-long partners and together wrote *Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary* in 1976. Hurt by the lack of lesbian representation within the French Women’s Liberation Movement, despite having written its manifesto, she also moved to America to escape economic insecurity and her inability to find a position at a French university. “She had written a master’s thesis under the guidance of [literary theorist] Gérard Genette, but she did not have a doctorate, and so was barred from teaching at university,” says Emilie Notéris, the author of the recently published book *Wittig*. Having cut ties with France, only returning in the summer to spend a month with writer Nathalie Sarraute, Monique Wittig slowly faded from the French feminist and literary landscape.

## Escaping the Dependency of Women

“Her time in France, when she focused on literature, is often compared with her time in America, when she developed theories,” says Emilie Notéris. “But she refused to choose between the two. She believed that literature was the politically strategic medium in which to promote her manifesto. It was her main objective.” Born in Alsace in 1935, Monique Wittig grew up in a provincial setting and voiced her desire for emancipation from a young age. “I remember that I consciously decided, at the age of 12, to escape the dependency of women. I would never lead the life of a woman serving a man, without my own life,” she said in an extensive interview with Josy Thibaut for the magazine *ProChoix*, published after her death. After studying literature at the Sorbonne, she published *The Opoponax*, her first novel, in 1964. It won the Prix Médicis and was translated into some 20 languages. Lauded by writers from the Nouveau Roman movement and by Marguerite Duras for its literary qualities, this story about the rural childhood of two young lesbians had a political angle that slipped entirely under the radar. “When I wrote *The Opoponax*, I hoped that it would be like a Trojan horse, by using new narrative forms and by thinking about political writing,” she told Josy Thibault. “I couldn’t separate form and content, even though that was the rule at the time. I didn’t see a difference between them. Armed with both, I thought I could leap into the enemy camp and change a few things. And [...] childhood was the theme that enabled me to spur my horse, although it wasn’t received as a Trojan horse, or even as a feminist horse!”

This was followed by *Les Guérillères* (1969), a utopian lesbian novel translated into English and published in the U.S. in 1971, and *The Lesbian Body* (1973), which offers a raw, unflinching reality of female homosexuality. “The heart of the matter was really the idea that language constructs and forms the world,” says Laure Murat. “She worked a lot on pronouns, such as referring to the protagonist as ‘you’ throughout *The Opoponax*, exclusively using the [untranslatable] third-person plural feminine pronoun *elles* (‘they’) in *The Guérillères*, and splitting *j/e* (‘I’) in *The Lesbian Body*” [the translator chose to italicize *I* throughout the book, and instead split *m/y* and *m/e*].

In the United States, Monique Wittig is viewed as a theorist. She rarely referred to U.S. feminists, with the exception of Betty Friedan, the author of *The Feminine Mystique*, yet she resonated with activists and academics alike. “In America, she found a form of community where people were not scared of saying ‘lesbian,’” says Laure Murat. In her adoptive home, “she was immersed in conditions that encouraged her thinking, although she came from a Marxist background, which American feminists generally did not. That was what made her different.” While Monique Wittig’s life and work may seem, on the surface, perfectly divided between France and America, between literature and theory, the reality is far more complex. While exiled in the United States, she wrote *The Constant Journey* (1985), a feminist, lesbian adaptation of *Don Quixote*, along with *Virgile, non* (1985), set in a utopian San Francisco, and *Paris-la-politique et autres histoires* (1999), which looked back at her years as an activist. However, it was her collection of articles, *The Straight Mind*, featuring the text from the seminal 1979 lecture, which saw her invited into American universities.

## A Revival in France and the United States

Monique Wittig's life was tragically cut short while in the middle of several writing projects, and she is now celebrated and studied on both sides of the Atlantic. Yale University launched a Wittig Collection in 2015, featuring 30 boxes of archive material including *La Mécanique*, an unpublished manuscript from the 1960s, and letters between the author and other writers, publishers, and translators such as Simone de Beauvoir, Marguerite Duras, June Jordan, Jérôme Lindon, Christiane Rochefort, and Joanna Russ. "This collection gives us access to what Monique Wittig, as a materialist, called 'the literary construction site,' the title of her master's thesis under Gérard Genette focused on the works of Nathalie Sarraute. The 'construction site' is a workshop or an arena, with words as the raw materials for acting upon the real," says researcher Morgane Cadieu, who is currently co-editing a special issue of the *Yale French Studies* journal with Annabelle Kim. "I particularly enjoy reading documents about the classes that Monique Wittig taught at the University of Arizona [...]. We can read these like miniature user manuals for interpreting her own work, whether literature, theory, or activism."

In France, Monique Wittig is regularly quoted by the new generation of feminists, from writer Virginie Despentes to actress Adèle Haenel, who gave a live reading of *The Constant Journey* in Paris last year. Her name was reworked by graphic designer Roxanne Maillet and printed on T-shirts imitating a famous sports brand's logo. Meanwhile, Les Editions de Minuit, her longstanding publisher, has just republished *The Lesbian Body* 50 years after it was first released, and an international conference on the author will be held at Berkeley on March 17-18 and in Geneva in June. If the slogan #Wittig2023 currently cropping up across social media on the twentieth anniversary of her death is anything to go by, 2023 is set to be Monique Wittig's year!

**Article published in the March 2023 issue of *France-Amérique*.**