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## Creating Another Dimension of the Human: Monique Wittig's lesbian revolution

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*Monique Wittig (1935-2003), the lesbian writer and theorist who, since the early 1970s, has revolutionized the way we think about the categories of sex and heterosexuality, is the subject of a major political and editorial revival. Twenty years after her death, her books are being reissued in France, and translations and retranslations are proliferating abroad. Why Wittig today? And why with such striking force?*

There are several reasons to explain the political and editorial effervescence surrounding the work of Monique Wittig: the political phases experienced by certain sections of the LGBTQIA+ movement in various countries are characterized by a critique of the structural dimension of the prevailing heteronormative system, which finds echoes in Wittig's analyses. Then there's the leading role played by eminent queer theorists - *in primis*, Judith Butler - who maintained a relationship of deep, but ambivalent, fascination with Wittig, which had the paradoxical consequence of making her known to a much wider audience, while at the same time amputating her feminist materialist roots. This in turn fuelled the belief, still largely unchallenged today, that Wittig's main merit lay in having been a precursor of the queer approach.

Essential, then, has been the invaluable analytical work carried out for decades by researchers and/or activists such as Louise Turcotte, Namaskar Shaktini, Dominique Bourque and Catherine Ecartot, whose [pioneering study](#) has just been republished in an enriched version by the French feminist publisher iXe. And indispensable is the work of intellectual and activist Suzette Robichon, a political friend of Wittig's and a tireless transmitter of lesbian culture, who, with the kind complicity of the association [Les Ami.es de Monique Wittig](#), has greatly contributed to enabling the theorist's thought to find new forms of theoretical, artistic, activist and editorial incarnation.

Among the many examples are the evening readings at Maison de la poésie of Wittig's play [Le voyage sans fin](#) (*The Constant Journey*) with Nadège Beausson-Diagne and Adèle Haenel on stage, the enthusiastic collective readings of Wittig's works as part of the [Cap pour l'île des vivantes](#), arts event program organized at the Bétonsalon art and research center, and the series of workshops launched by the feminist collective [Les Jaseuses](#). The first part of the international

colloquium "[Monique Wittig, Twenty Years Later](#)", organized jointly by the Department of French at the University of California at Berkeley and the Institut des études genre at the University of Geneva, took place last March, with a closing lecture by Anne F. Garréta. The [second part](#) will take place in Geneva on June 27 and 28, in the presence of Suzette Robichon and Sande Zeig, director, writer and Wittig's companion.

What distinguishes Wittig's theoretical, political and literary project, and makes it an unavoidable pole of intellectual attraction today, is its radical anti-essentialism. It's the radical anti-essentialism that Wittig applies to the most credible of beliefs, because of the strength of its naturalization: the idea that men and women are naturally complementary "natural groups".

For Wittig, on the other hand, men and women are naturalized social groups, antagonistic classes created by power relations, anatomical sex is a mark that crystallizes these social relations (without them, it would have no social relevance), heterosexuality is a political regime that oppresses women, non-heterosexual people and racialized people, and for this it must be destroyed in its double foundation, material and ideological. For Wittig, the heterosexual regime rests, on the one hand, on a system of social relations of inferiorization and alienation of women, non-heterosexual people and racialized people, and, on the other, on a structure of essentialist perception - which Wittig calls the "straight mind" - concealing oppression behind the notion of "difference", thus enabling domination to reproduce itself so easily. With its conglomeration of essentialist categories - "man", "woman", "sex", "race", "white", "black" - the "straight mind" operates like a poison that stinks up our bodies and minds, inscribing the notion of "sexual difference" as a given in our mental and muscular automatisms, in other words, heterosexualizing the bodies and minds of both sex classes. Can we escape such a political regime?

## **Lesbianism as structurally revolutionary positioning**

The essay entitled *The straight mind* (presented in public in 1978 and published in 1980 in the penultimate issue of *Questions féministes*) precisely describes the violence with which the straight mind's categories are inscribed in bodies and minds, making heterosexuality and sex presuppositions that are believed to be inescapable for all society, culture and subjectivity. The article ends, however, with a political overture in the form of a dizzying phrase that has become, for most of the wittigian readership, the formula of her thought: "lesbians are not women". A political earthquake when heard, to be sure, but what is the status of such a statement? To understand it, we need to look at what Wittig means by "women" and "lesbians".

As with other theorists of the materialist feminist movement, in which Wittig explicitly situates her work, women are the entirely social product of a system of oppressive relations, distinct from and opposed to the essentialist notion of "the-woman", which is merely a "myth" elaborated by the straight mind to essentialize the group of women, obscuring the domination they undergo. Because of their relative autonomy from the sex-class of men - they do not live in heterosexual couples - lesbians are seen by Wittig as "fugitives", "runaways" from their sex-class.

A reading of Wittig's texts shows, however, that for her, this disjunction of lesbians from the class of women is only partial and temporary. In the preface to her collection *The Straight Mind*

*and Other Essays*, Wittig explains that lesbians belong to a fraction of the class of women that is not privately appropriated by the class of men, but remains the object of collective heterosexual oppression. In other words, the strength of the heterosexual system is such that lesbians can be treated, in spite of themselves, as women, for example on the job market, in the public space, because they too are subject to sexual and sexist violence by the class of men.

Wittig is also aware that lesbians as she defines and imagines them represent only a minority of existing lesbians. There are numerous passages in her essays in which the theorist laments the fact that many lesbians take up the essentialist, biologizing ideology.

This political lucidity does not prevent Wittig from defending her own theory of lesbianism, in which being a lesbian means being "something other than a man or a woman". She makes this clear in her article "One is not Born a Woman" (1980): to be a lesbian is to position oneself existentially, ideologically and politically beyond the category of sex, to think of oneself as "a not-woman and a not-man", conscious of being a social construct and not the expression of a pre-existing nature, for there is no natural order that pre-exists the social order. Insofar as their definition does not rest on an alleged "sexual difference", Wittig's lesbians are, therefore, structurally revolutionary subjectivities that can - and I quote from "Paradigms", a 1979 text - "open up another dimension of the human".

To make a revolution as Wittig sees it, the transformation of social and economic relations is necessary, but not sufficient. We also need a "political transformation of words and categories", because language and the hierarchies it conveys shape our bodies and minds, our automatisms and reflexes. In short, Wittig invites minority subjects to patiently and obstinately destroy the countless social relations that undo the oppression that surrounds and suffocates them. But where can they find the means and the strength to do so? What language, what imaginaries can be used to escape the inferiorization and otherization that constitute minority subjectivities as "different", "other", "particular", that is, as not fully human?

## **Deheterosexualizing bodies and minds**

For Wittig, literature represents the privileged arena for producing the categorical revolution needed to move beyond the heterosexual regime. To this end, Wittig's literary works feature a double operation: the desexualization of the language used, emptying it of the mark of gender, and the deheterosexualization of the literary canon, its pagan and Christian myths and its classics, from *The Divine Comedy* to *Don Quixote*. Wittig's literary work is thus distinguished by a singular experimentation in both form and content. Take Wittig's first three published books, a "pronominal trilogy" by virtue of their formal choices. In *L'Opoponax* (1964), Wittig makes repeated use of the impersonal pronoun "on" (one) to situate the childlike world of the novel's protagonist outside the social division of the sexes. The novel ends with the emergence of a lesbian subjectivity that constitutes itself through self-nomination. "I am the opoponax", declares Catherine Legrand, the book's heroine, taking as the reference for her self-definition a mythical figure that refers to an unprecedented dimension of the human that cannot be read through the prism of sexual bicategorization.

In 1969, Wittig continued her political and literary project of minority re-subjectivation in an equally experimental and disorienting way. As in *L'Opoponax*, the title of the new book, *Les Guérillères*, is a neologism, and the protagonist a pronoun: no longer the indefinite "on", but the feminine plural pronoun "elles", used by Wittig to refer to minority subjectivities after their victory in a war waged against "ils" (the designators, the referents of the different, those whose particular determinations are socially perceived as universal). The new world after the war is precisely that in which the bodies of "elles", of the "other" and "different" as they were in the myths of the straight literary canon, become whole again, in which we no longer speak the gendered language that poisons our tongues, in which we sweep away with one hand all the instituted knowledge that conveys the straight mind, first and foremost psychoanalysis and its categories naturalizing oppression by calling it "difference".

The title of Wittig's third book, *Le Corps Lesbien (The Lesbian Body)*, is yet another neologism that resonated like an earthquake in 1973, the year of its publication. It's a collection of lyrical prose fragments recounting the amorous and sexual encounters of two instances of interlocution designated "j/e" and "tu" ("I" and "you"). The protagonists are two lesbian subjectivities emancipated from the appropriation of women by men and the ideology of "sexual difference" that presents women's bodies as intrinsically sexed (for Wittig, it's the straight world that has manufactured women's bodies as sexed). "J/e" is the pronoun invented by Wittig to designate a lesbian subject who goes beyond the limits imposed by sexual bicategorization, and speaks out to express herself in a world that denies her the right to do so. As in Audre Lorde's essays and poems, lesbian eros reveals a power to imagine, to say and to do, beyond the oppositional schemas that structure the straight perception of the body (hard/soft, erectile/dilatable, impenetrable/penetrable) and its uses thought to be legitimate (in front/behind, up/down).

In lesbian passion as Wittig writes it, the category of sex and the asymmetries it produces are disregarded: lesbian bodies interpenetrate, devour, dismember or even give life to each other in a relationship of absolute reversibility and reciprocity. As Deborah Ardilli points out in [\*Héroïques dans la réalité, épiques dans les livres \(Heroic in Reality, Epic in Book\)\*](#) the precious essay that opens the recent Italian retranslation of *Le Corps lesbien*, in lesbian love and sexuality as Wittig understands and imagines them, there are no categories of "Same" and "Other". The writer emancipates herself from the oppositional dyad "The One"/"The Other", which for her is the main disseminator of the straight mind. Wittig rejects and destroys it. For her, it's not so much a question of multiplying sexes or genders, but of destroying the category of sex, the mark of gender, the heterosexual political regime. This is what Monique Wittig proposes, nothing less, nothing more. Answering this dizzying invitation today means turning minority struggles into political arenas for de-heterosexualizing the world, starting precisely with our bodies and minds. The task is more than arduous, and often has to be started all over again, as the force of the straight mind never ceases to crush us like a steamroller. And yet, Monique Wittig has already imagined and written a victory against the *straight* world. This is also what makes her work today so capable of nourishing the determination of all those who fight to make it happen.

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