

Monique Wittig and the beyond of sex

Twenty years after the death of feminist Monique Wittig, her radical lesbianism continues to inspire. This humanist project attempts to think the end of sexual duality.

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FEMINISM

Twenty years ago, the author and lesbian feminist Monique Wittig (1935-2003), co-founder of the Women's Liberation Movement (MLF) in France, passed away. To pay tribute to her and to explore new avenues of research, a colloquium was held in Geneva at the end of June, after Berkeley (California). According to sociologist Sara Garbagnoli, one of the speakers, Monique Wittig revolutionized twentieth-century political and literary thought: "Thanks to her new concepts, her new words, her new pronouns, Wittig vertiginously shakes up the categories through which we think the world, and opens up spaces for imagining a destruction of existing relations of domination."

Several of the author's texts (such as *L'Oppoponax* and *Les Guérillères*) deconstruct grammatical gender as a mirror and amplifier of sex. Interview with Sara Garbagnoli, sociologist and feminist, independent researcher associated with LEGS/CNRS. Her research focuses on feminist theory, discourse analysis and the sociology of social movements.

For sociologist Sara Garbagnoli, French lesbian writer and theorist Monique Wittig, co-founder of the Women's Liberation Movement in France, revolutionized twentieth-century political and literary thought.

Sara Garbagnoli, who is Monique Wittig?

Sara Garbagnoli: A French lesbian writer and theorist who shook up the political, philosophical and literary fields of the 20th century. At the time of publication of her first novel, *L'Oppoponax*, which won the Prix Médicis in 1964, her talent impressed Marguerite Duras and Nathalie Sarraute; in 1970, she was one of the founders of the MLF (Mouvement de libération des femmes). Throughout her life, Monique Wittig made lesbianism, which she defined as a positioning beyond the category of sex, the key to understanding the workings of the system of

oppression that inferiorizes women and non-straight people, and the tool for overcoming it. This theorist who analyzes reality is also a utopian who imagines the unthinkable end of sexual bicategorization. Wittig is a revolutionary in the fullest sense of the word.

Why is Monique Wittig's thought the subject of such renewed interest twenty years after her death?

There are several reasons to explain the political and editorial effervescence surrounding her work. Firstly, the political analyses developed by certain fractions of the LGBTQIA+ movements are characterized by a critique of the structural dimension of the current heteronormative system, which resonates with Wittig's analyses of heterosexuality as a totalitarian political regime. Then there's the driving role played in the 1990s by eminent queer theorists, who maintained a relationship of deep fascination with Wittig. As a result, Wittig became known to a much wider audience, although her feminist-materialist theoretical and political roots were not always understood.

Essential, too, has been the invaluable work of analysis and transmission carried out for decades by film director and Wittig's companion, Sande Zeig, as well as by lesbian researchers and/or activists such as Louise Turcotte, Suzette Robichon, Catherine Ecartot and Dominique Bourque. What distinguishes Wittig's theoretical, political and literary project, and makes it an inescapable pole of intellectual attraction today, is undoubtedly the radicality of her anti-essentialism, which Wittig applies to the most credible belief of all because of the strength of its naturalization: the idea that men and women are naturally complementary groups.

In your opinion, what are Monique Wittig's most essential contributions to feminist thought?

Wittig revolutionized feminist thought by overturning the way we think about sex. Wittig turned a natural given into a naturalized political category. Putting history and politics - in other words, power relations and struggle - where common sense puts nature, radically and definitively transforms the way we see the world. It allows us to see that there's nothing natural about the oppression suffered by women, non-heterosexuals and racialized people. It also means that, despite its strength and solidity, there's nothing irresistible about domination. For Wittig, men and women are naturalized, antagonistic social groups created by power relations. Anatomical sex is a mark that crystallizes these social relations. Without them, it would have no social relevance).

In *Les Guérillères*, Monique Wittig argues that changing economic relations is not enough: why?

In all her literary, theoretical and political work, Wittig insists on this idea: the transformation of social and economic relations is necessary, but not sufficient. This is a consequence of her definition of heterosexuality as a totalitarian political regime. On the one hand, this regime is based on a system of social relations of inferiorization and alienation of women, non-heterosexuals and racialized people, but on the other, it also relies on an essentialist structure of perception - what Wittig calls "the straight mind" - whose function is to conceal oppression

behind the notion of "difference", which "legitimizes" inferiorization. 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, our mental and muscular automatisms. For Wittig, destroying these philosophical categories is an essential step in the fight against oppression.

You emphasize both the political dimension of this thought and its literary contribution.

For Wittig, theoretical elaboration and literature are two inseparable sides of the same political project to denaturalize the sexual order. While theorist Wittig invents concepts to understand the workings of heterosexuality, writer Wittig works tirelessly on pronouns and categories to go beyond sexual bi-categorization. In her literary works, Wittig performs a double operation: the desexualization of language, emptying it of the mark of gender, and the deshétérosexualization of the literary canon, its pagan and Christian myths and its classics, from the Divine Comedy to Don Quixote. The elaboration of a literature made by conscious minority subjectivities and the emergence of a "science of oppression" made by the oppressed are the two inseparable pillars of Wittig's epistemological revolution.

How, according to her, do you become a subject when you don't fit in with the majority subjects?

The question of minority subjectivation, i.e. the processes by which oppressed subjectivities can (or cannot) become full subjects, runs through all of Wittig's texts, from the theoretical essays in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* to her reflections on literature in *The Literary Workshop* and all her novels. How can one exist as a subject, despite the social, economic, categorical and linguistic constraints that force minority subjects to correspond to the idea of "other" and "different" precisely constructed by the majority group? Monique Wittig's response is radical: we must "dialecticize the dialectic" - as she puts it in "Homo sum" - i.e., emancipate ourselves from the oppositional dyad "the one"/"the other" - the main vehicle for disseminating the perceptual system that naturalizes the inferiorization of dominated groups. In other words, for Wittig, it's not at all a question of recognizing "the different", "the others", of multiplying different sexes or genders, but of destroying the category of sex, the mark of gender, the heterosexual political regime.

In France, but elsewhere too, the place of lesbian women was hotly debated within the MLF. Why was this? Would you say these difficulties persist to this day?

Like all political movements for emancipation, the feminist movement, in the different contexts in which it has emerged, creates a "us" from which political and epistemological ruptures of the prevailing common sense are produced. But this "us" is historically constructed, the fruit of social and intellectual struggles and, depending on the era, it includes certain subjectivities and excludes others. This "us" is thus always an issue of political struggle within the liberation movements themselves. Some heterosexual feminist activists have seen and still see lesbians as a threat both to the unity of the movement - lesbians would shatter the "we-the-women" - and

to the movement itself: lesbians, who advocate the end of heterosexuality as a system of relations of appropriation of women by men, would be too radical.

What would Monique Wittig say about modern developments around epicene language?

To make a revolution as Wittig sees it, minority groups must patiently and obstinately destroy the countless social, economic, linguistic and categorical relations that make up the oppression that surrounds and suffocates them. For Wittig, language, via the sexual bicategorization it relays, is a primary vector of domination. Language wounds and bruises the bodies and consciences of minority subjects. So it's not the feminization of language or the multiplication of genders that can put an end to the inferiorization that constitutes minority subjectivities as "different", "particular", i.e. as not fully human. For Wittig, the aim of collective struggle is to break down the social relationship constituting men and women as natural groups. To achieve this, she intends to destroy the category of sex, without having a ready-made solution for such a titanic undertaking. In her novels, she constantly invents ways of desexualizing language: the "on" (one) in *L'Opoponax*, the "elles" (they) in *Les Guérillères*, the "j/e" (I) in *Le Corps lesbien* have all been chosen to make language say what it is not made to say, i.e., what lies beyond the category of sex. Vertiginous.