

Radical inventions

Monique Wittig, 1935–2003

‘But remember. Make an effort to remember. Or, failing that, invent.’
Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*

Monique Wittig, who has died aged 67, was one of the most provocative and innovative of lesbian feminist thinkers of the twentieth century. Wittig was born in Dannemarie, on the Upper Rhine in France on 13 July 1935. After a country childhood, Wittig moved with her family to Paris, where she attended university and worked in publishing. She received her doctorate from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. Wittig met her lifelong partner Sande Zeig in Paris in 1975, while both were becoming involved in the French women’s liberation movement. She moved to the United States in the mid-1970s and held a number of teaching positions in different institutions, including the University of California at Berkeley, New York University, Duke University and Vassar College. At the time of her death she was Professor of French and Women’s Studies at the University of Arizona.

It is impossible, viewing the range of her output from the 1960s up to the final projects she was working on at the time of her death (including a screenplay based on life at the Mexican border), to categorize or delimit Wittig’s work as either principally literary or theoretical; indeed the distinctions between these forms were always problematic to Wittig. Her writings include novels, short stories, plays, theory and criticism, yet in each of these genres her attempt was always to test the generic boundaries, pushing them so hard at times that they shattered, allowing new possibilities of form and representation to emerge. For Wittig, the existing languages of patriarchal culture were the enemy of both women and men, concretizing a system of oppression and ‘slavery’ in which women, and other Others, become both commodity and fetish.

For Wittig the attack on patriarchal language meant being a practitioner as well as a theorist. Her literary experimentation is perhaps best represented by the five works of fiction she produced between 1964 and 1985: *L’Opoponax*, 1964 (published in English in 1966), for which she won the Prix Medicis; *Les Guérillères*, 1969 (translated in 1971); *Le Corps lesbien*, 1973 (in English, 1975); the coauthored *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des Amantes*, 1975 (*Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary*, 1979); and *Virgile, non*, 1985 (*Across the Acheron*, 1987). Literature, for Wittig, was a discourse with political power and potential. ‘Any important literary work’, she wrote, ‘is like the Trojan Horse at the time it is produced.’

Wittig’s second novel, *Les Guérillères*, is one such ‘war machine’. Envisioning a future time of conflict between the sexes, the women of the text wage war on the language and the bodies of men. This physical assault in the novel is mirrored in the text’s assaults on linguistic and literary traditions. Opening with the suggestive imagining of a space beyond patriarchal culture, the text begins with the words ‘Golden Spaces Lacunae’, pre-empting the textual gaps and lacunae that structure the innovative, experimental form of the novel. Throughout the novel remains typographically and structurally rebellious; some pages contain only capitalized paragraphs and others present large gaps between paragraphs to signal breaks in action and sense. At points the text of *Les Guérillères* is punctuated by pages printed only with a large black circle. This circle, the text tells us, evokes ‘the vulval

ring', welding the body to textual representation and at the same time defying normative (and inherently patriarchal) linguistic forms and regulations of representation.

For Wittig, however, the move to *deconstruct* language must also be supplemented by a move towards *reconstruction*. In one attempt at this project Wittig, along with Zeig, produced the fictional *Lesbian Peoples: Materials for a Dictionary* (1979). Laid out in dictionary form, it takes existing words and recasts their meaning and intonation. Wittig and Zeig demonstrate the role of language in the construction of social 'reality' by reinscribing words to create a world of solely female habitation in which history and myth are rebuilt and refocused. In this 'new' language, women are situated at the heart of an alternative culture.

The subtleties and complexities of Wittig's literary experiments with language and form are often lost in the movements of translation from (gendered) French to (ungendered) English. In *Les Guérillères*, Wittig uses 'elles dissent' when imagining her warrior race. Though this is translated into English as 'the women say...', Wittig's intention here is to undermine the traditional parameters of the universal subject position – that is to say, the male subject position. In *Le Corps lesbien*, the speaking subject of the text is inscribed as *J/e*. Wittig's aim here is to do violent damage to the subject position accorded to the figure of the lover in the Western tradition of love poetry; such a position has traditionally been ascribed to the male lover. How does a female lover inscribe both her desire for a female love object and her identity as a female lover of women? Writing the preface to the text Wittig stakes her claim for this position, assertively taking it up and registering difference at the same time in her splitting *je* into *j/e* since the former 'conceals the sexual difference of the verbal persons'. By contrast *j/e* 'poses the ideological and historical question of feminine subjects'.

The battle over language was, for Wittig, necessarily violent, since the dominant languages of culture exerted their own violent control over subjectivity. It was a battle that required theorization as well as explication and the radical potential of Wittig's theoretical formulations is perhaps evidenced most fully in the way in which her ideas provided pivotal starting points for the emergence of queer theory. In her then ground-breaking book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler undertakes a full examination of Wittig's pronouncements on language, lesbian identity and the oppression of women. Butler, though ultimately critical of Wittig's evocation of the lesbian as a coherent, unitary identity, nevertheless uses an exploration of the body of Wittig's work to develop her own theoretical mapping of the relationship between societal 'realities', cultural fields and the 'fictions' of gender identity. In particular, Butler explores Wittig's interrogation of the category of 'sex':

Sex is taken as an 'immediate given,' 'a sensible given,' 'physical features,' belonging to a natural order. But what we believe to be a physical and direct perception is only a sophisticated and mythic construction, an 'imaginary formation,' which reinterprets physical features (in themselves as neutral as others but marked by a social system), through the network of relationships in which they are perceived.

Ultimately it is Wittig's delineation of the constructedness of the category of 'sex' that provides the theoretical leverage necessary to prise open normative cultural constructions of the sexed body and allows Butler to develop her own influential notions of the performativity of gender identity.

Wittig, both as theorist and practitioner, was keen to identify, delineate and then overturn those cultural constructions and dominant ideologies which have become sedimented into 'truths'. In this respect, as in her extension of de Beauvoir, Wittig's impulse was always to push thinking and understanding of those structures of oppression which are 'hidden' within dominant culture. In 'The Straight Mind' (1980), Wittig identifies the dominant cultural ideologies which structure the societal oppressions of women, lesbians and gay men:

I can only underline the oppressive character that the straight mind is clothed in its tendency to immediately universalize its production of concepts into general laws which claim to hold true for all societies, all epochs, all individuals. Thus one speaks of *the* exchange of women, *the* difference between the sexes, *the* symbolic order, *the* Unconscious, Desire, *Jouissance*, Culture, History, giving an absolute meaning to these concepts when they are only categories founded upon heterosexuality, or thought which produces the difference between the sexes, as a political and philosophical dogma.

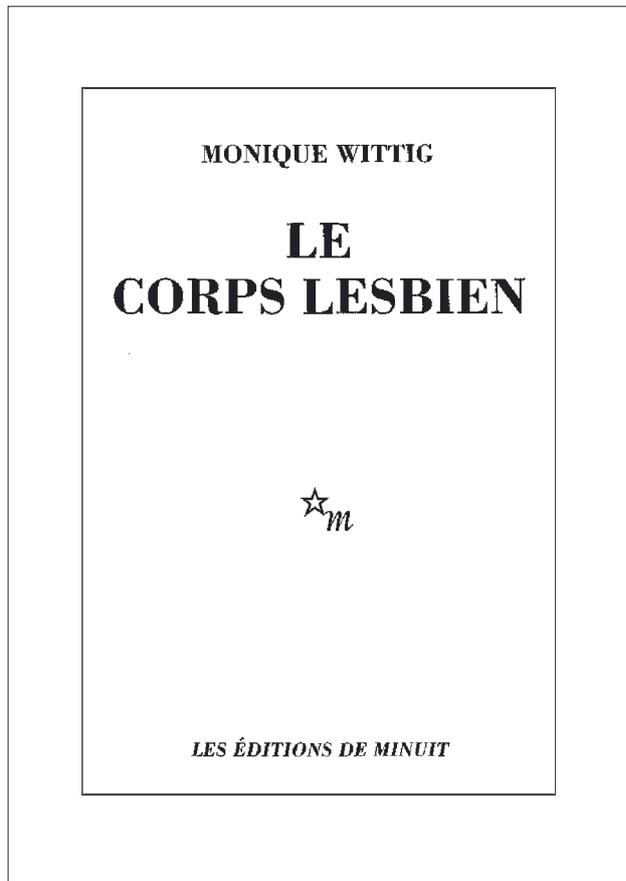
Wittig was not alone in her delineation of the forms and functions of what she calls the 'disciplines, theories, and current ideas' that constitute 'the straight mind.' In the same year as Wittig's essay, the American lesbian poet and theorist Adrienne Rich formulated her notion of 'compulsory heterosexuality' which maps the societal compunction for women to assume a heterosexual identity. For Rich, some solution exists in the promulgation of the notion of the lesbian continuum, the full acknowledgement of the deep emotional and relational bonds that exist between women in a range of behaviours from female friendship, through the experience of (biological and non-biological) mothering to sexual intimacy

between women. Wittig's 'solution', by contrast, is both theoretically and symbolically radical: 'If we, as lesbians and gay men, continue to speak of ourselves as women and as men, we are instrumental in maintaining heterosexuality.' The categories 'men' and 'women' bind both into the constraints of 'the heterosexual contract'. In particular 'women' make sense, assume identity, only within the binary relation to men. Moreover, this is a system in which 'women' assume value only inasmuch as they exist as commodities which can be exchanged between men. The essay concludes with the (then) equivalent of theoretical dynamite in the assertion: 'it would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, live with women, for "woman" has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems. Lesbians are not women.'

Inevitably, as both queer theory and gender theory have developed, Wittig's evocation of the figure of the lesbian has been criticized for its assertion of lesbian identity as a cohesive and identifiable subject position, but Wittig's radical formulation of the lesbian as a figure who is constructed and constructs 'herself' outside of dominant patriarchal culture undoubtedly anticipates the kinds of refusals

of identificatory practices and the promulgation of notions of disidentification which have become central in queer theory and practice.

Most importantly, perhaps, Wittig's theoretical moves in 'The Straight Mind' and other essays link back to her experimental literary endeavours, and the constructions of other landscapes and languages which centralize the lesbian as another category altogether. Here Wittig accords 'social practice' as much transformative potential as, if not more than, theory. For Wittig, theory was never separate from practice; nor did it take precedence over it. The most important enterprise for Wittig was to overthrow and then (re-)invent, in whatever cultural forms came to hand. In this respect she was a truly radical innovator and thinker.



Joanne Winning