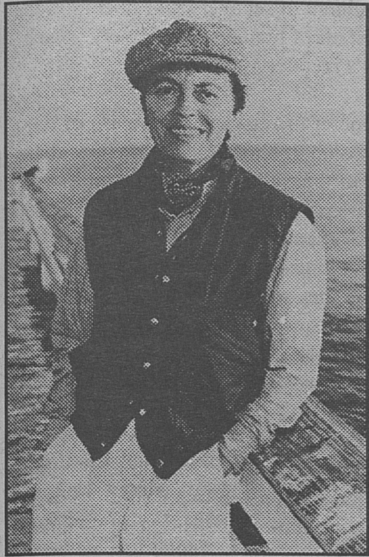


obituary



**Dr. Monique Wittig,
Lesbian Theorist and Writer
July 1935 - January 2003**

Editor's note: We were stunned to hear of the death in January of lesbian-feminist theorist and writer Monique Wittig. She provided the theoretical egg from which lesbian-feminist separatism hatched in the early 1970s, although she herself did not accept the label "separatist." Her innovative and unusual use of language and analysis of how it limits conceptual reality, restricts lives and choices paved the way for many feminist philosophers and authors who followed. Judith Beckett has written a remembrance that evokes both Wittig's style and the meaning her writings held for a generation of lesbians.

She was controversial and provocative. She created a new mythology for the feminist movement. She said the language that we speak is killing us. She said, "lesbians are not women" because the word "woman" is constructed by a heterosexist society. She said that heterosexuality is a political regime that must be overthrown. She called for the complete overthrow of the political regime. She said we must break the last bond with a dead culture. She was not a separatist.

She said a woman in her husband's house is like a dog on a chain. She said that we lesbians are runaway slaves. That we were not always slaves. That we are strong, courageous women. "Remember," she said, "or failing that, invent."

She wrote *Les Guerilleres* in 1969. She said the women danced, they got drunk, they exposed their genitals to the sun. They said the clitoris is "impatient for pleasure." That it's like quicksilver. It expands, spreads, changes shape. They said vulvas have been compared to apricots pomegranates figs roses pinks peonies marguerites. They said we must now stop exalting the vulva.

She said the women fostered disorder in all its forms. They reclaimed the tools of their oppression: distaffs looms shuttles combs stenographers' pads ironing boards knitting needles tweezers stew pans brooms vacuum cleaners. They heaped them up. They burned them. If they would not burn, they blew them up.

They remembered the time they made war. Once again they carried weapons. They carried rocket-

launchers, machine guns and every kind of rifle. They killed and tortured men. They tanned their skins and dried them in the sun. They said it is better to die than to live as slaves.

They refused to speak the language.

She wrote *Le Corps Lesbien* in 1973. She said the personal pronoun is impersonal. She said h/er language is alien to h/er. That h/er language cuts h/er in two. That s/he is not the subject of h/er language.

S/he said s/he is separated from h/er beloved. S/he is forbidden to speak h/er name. S/he looks for h/er. S/he recites h/er body and the body of h/erself. S/he lists kidneys gall bladder uterus bones tissue fat brain liver teeth areolas nerves hair follicles brain defecation snort songs thoughts. S/he reclaims h/er lesbian body. S/he reclaims the body of h/er beloved.

Across the Acheron was published in 1987. The book is a takeoff on *Dante's Inferno*. In it, she, Wittig, is the protagonist. With "Manastabel, her guide," she crosses the Acheron to visit the Hell of the heterosexual women's lives. In Hell they are deprived of sustenance. They are starving. They wear mini skirts and tight smiles; bunny ears and tails; evening gowns cut open to the waist. They wear high heels "so only their toes touch the ground." Some are naked. They have chains around their necks and on their wrists. The women suffer injuries (ruptured organs, broken bones, lameness, broken teeth, twisted muscles, wounds and lacerations). Myriad weapons are used against them (the club, the cudgel, the stake, the axe, the razor, sword, revolver, horsewhip). She says the women try to escape. They are pulled back. They are at constant risk of being killed by the Occupiers.

Limbo is a lesbian bar in San Francisco. "Manastabel, her guide" tells her that only active passion leads to such a place. "Places where you are restored to yourself and escape continual ... scrutiny." They encounter other souls there. They hardly know them. They talk to them a little. They let them pass.

As for Paradise, the angels arrive on motorcycles.

Monique Wittig was born in Alsace, France in July, 1935. The place, the time of her birth, and her gender were essential to her development as the radical lesbian writer and feminist social theorist she became. It was from this perspective that she created *Les Guerilleres*, an epic mythology for the feminist movement that transformed lesbian experience here in the states.

Wittig had already written her first novel, *L'opoponax*, in 1964. Her experimental literary approach, neither prose nor poetry, won her the Prix Medici literary award.

As part of the French women's liberation movement that grew out of the student and workers' revolt of May 1968, she was one of the organizers of the separatist group *Feministes Revolutionnaires*. She and several other women attempted to lay a wreath inscribed "to the unknown wife of a soldier" at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris in 1970.

Disillusioned by schisms in the movement, she withdrew from active involvement in all feminist organizations in 1973. This was the year she wrote *Les Guerilleres*.

In 1976, she moved to the United States permanently. The next year, she collaborated with Simone De Beauvoir and Christine Delphy on the journal *Questions Feminist*. She held appointments in various universities until she accepted the position of Professor of French and Women's Studies at the University of Arizona in 1990.

The Straight Mind (a term she coined) was written in 1980. In it, she identifies the straight mind as an oppressive force that subjectively interprets "all that is" and then universalizes it to all times, cultures and people. She refers to relationships between men and women as "obligatory heterosexuality." In *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (1992), Wittig explores her philosophy of materialist feminism (or mat/fem to the initiated).

In 1985, she and her partner, Sande Zeig, collaborated on the imaginative play *The Constant Journey*, produced in both the U.S. and Paris. Their union also produced the feature film *The Girl* (2001) based on one of Wittig's short stories.

Monique Wittig's books have been translated into a dozen languages including German, Dutch, Finnish, Japanese and Scots Gaelic.

She died unexpectedly of a heart attack on January 3, 2003 in Tucson, Arizona. She was 67 years old.

She is survived by her partner, Sande Zeig; her mother Maria; a sister, Gilberte; and a niece, Dominique Samson.

One night at dinner, I asked my friend who was a radical lesbian separatist in New Hampshire in the 70s if she had read *Les Guerilleres*. She said that as she recalled, most women had never read any of Wittig's books, but they knew her name and that she was a great lesbian-feminist theorist. At this time, when the heterosexist political regime seems poised to destroy us all, Wittig's death gives us the opportunity to revisit her writings and theories. ▼

"Strong and warlike daughter, my well-beloved daughter valiant and tender little dove, my lady you have striven and worked as a valiant daughter you have overcome, you have acted like your mother Cihuacoatl you have fought with valour, you have used the shield and the sword arise my daughter go to that good place which is the house of your mother the sun where all are filled with joy content and happiness."
Les Guerilleres,
The Viking Press, Inc., 1971

Judith Beckett is a nurse, writer, and lesbian-feminist activist who lives in Bradford.

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