

Namascar Shaktini, Ed., On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, Political and Literary Essays. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005. ix + 230 pp. Photos, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-252-02984-4; \$20.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-252-07231-6 [Book review]

Review by: [Cybelle McFadden Wilkens](#)

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Abstract:

Through her activism, writing, and theoretical work, Monique Wittig has both contributed great works to the French literary canon and significantly shaped lesbian and feminist theory. Although her first book, *L'opoponax*, won the Prix Médicis in 1964 and drew critical attention from Marguerite Duras, Wittig pursued her intellectual career in the United States, where she lived for the last twenty years of her life, teaching Women's Studies and French courses at the University of Arizona. Wittig's lesbian and feminist theory developed in *The Straight Mind* (1992) has influenced theories of sex and gender, especially in American academic circles.

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*****Note: Full text of article below**

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Namascar Shaktini, Ed., *On Monique Wittig: Theoretical, Political and Literary Essays*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2005. ix + 230 pp. Photos, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-252-02984-4; \$20.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-252-07231-6.

Review by Cybelle McFadden Wilkens, Macalester College.

Through her activism, writing, and theoretical work, Monique Wittig has both contributed great works to the French literary canon and significantly shaped lesbian and feminist theory. Although her first book, *L'opoponax*, won the Prix Médicis in 1964 and drew critical attention from Marguerite Duras, Wittig pursued her intellectual career in the United States, where she lived for the last twenty years of her life, teaching Women's Studies and French courses at the University of Arizona. Wittig's lesbian and feminist theory developed in *The Straight Mind* (1992) has influenced theories of sex and gender, especially in American academic circles.

Namascar Shaktini's volume situates Wittig as a lesbian writer and theorist and clarifies Wittig's theoretical stance of political lesbianism. The essays provide historical background to the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* (MLF), the falling out of *Questions féministes*, and Wittig's role in both. The collection also maps out the trajectory of reception of Wittig's work from *L'opoponax* (1964) in France to *The Straight Mind* (1992) in the United States, and back to France with *La pensée straight* (2001). Shaktini frames the book with her own preface and introduction and then leads with Wittig's early work in translation, her manifesto "For a Movement of Women's Liberation," and later essays by Wittig on *Les guérillères* and *Le corps lesbien*. The majority of the book consists of critical essays divided into three sections: Critical Approaches, Theoretical Applications, and a New Generation of Readers.

Shaktini's book is significant for Wittig studies, since the collection groups some of the most important Wittig scholars together and assesses Wittig's work as a corpus. Shaktini mentions that Wittig had contributed the essay, "Some Remarks on *The Lesbian Body*," to the collection before her death. It is Wittig's death in 2003, however, that gives greater impetus to take stock of Wittig's work, which has often been misunderstood and misrepresented.

After Shaktini's translation of Wittig's feminist manifesto, "For a Women's Liberation Movement" in part one, the next section, "Essays by Monique Wittig," continues to foreground Wittig's own voice in her translated essay, "Some Remarks on *Les guérillères*," and "Some Remarks on *The Lesbian Body*." In the first essay, Wittig acknowledges the challenge of writing as a critic of one's work, since the author is intimately tied to the process of writing the text and not just the reception of it afterwards. Wittig clarifies that the ordering of the three movements in *Les guérillères* is not in chronological order in terms of the story: "The war is already made in this second part. However it has yet to come in the text" (p. 41). She explains that "[the second part] prepares the reader for the war that has already taken place chronologically but not textually and it describes the modification of the naïve conceptions of the guérillères such as they were just after the war" (p. 42), a point that has sometimes been overlooked by critics. Wittig iterates the importance of *elles* as a linguistic marker that "could situate the reader in a space beyond the categories of sex for the duration of the book" (p. 41). Her own reading of her texts adds an alternative critical voice to those that follow in the collection.

In the fourth chapter, "Some Remarks on *The Lesbian Body*," Wittig describes the writing of the text that captures the violence of passion as facing a double blank. The first being the one that all writers

face, the blank page, and the second “was the nonexistence of such a book till then” (p. 44). To write a book completely devoted to a lesbian theme, to the naming of lesbian passion, Wittig has to invent a new vocabulary with very few literary models.

In the section “Critical Approaches,” Teresa de Lauretis, Diane Griffin Crowder, and Linda M. G. Zerilli identify, address, and contest misreadings and misunderstandings of Wittig’s work by previous critics, especially Judith Butler. De Lauretis’ essay “When Lesbians Were Not Women” (chapter 5) differentiates Wittig’s lesbian theory from feminist theory and explains the importance of the lesbian subject as a conceptual figure for Wittig. De Lauretis also traces early critiques of *The Lesbian Body* from many feminist and lesbian circles directed against the violence in the text. She argues that they failed to see the lesbian subject as “an eccentric subject constituted in a process of struggle and interpretation; of translation, detranslation, and retranslation...; a rewriting of self in relation to a new understanding of society, of history, of culture” (p. 55). According to de Lauretis, Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) is responsible for both having “brought Wittig to the attention of nonlesbian and nonfeminist readers” (p. 57) and circulating misunderstandings of her theory. She takes Butler to task for grouping Wittig alongside French feminists such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, as well as naming Wittig’s radical lesbian theory as “separatist prescriptivism” (p. 57).

Diane Griffin Crowder, in “Universalizing Materialist Lesbianism,” also critiques Butler’s insistence, as well as that of Diana Fuss, on Wittig’s alleged lesbian essentialism. Crowder acknowledges that another vein of “critics tend to downplay the importance of lesbianism in Wittig’s work” (p. 70) and that “both groups of critics have fundamentally misapprehended Wittig’s conception of the social group ‘lesbians’” (p. 70).

Linda M. G. Zerilli, a political scientist, brings a new perspective to Wittig’s work in her chapter, “A New Grammar of Difference: Monique Wittig’s Poetic Revolution” (chapter 7). She wants “to approach Wittig’s texts afresh,... as texts that concern political practices of freedom and human association, collective attempts to begin spontaneously a new series in time” (p. 91). Zerilli confirms de Lauretis and Crowder’s assertions of Butler’s misreading of Wittig as a humanist, which has led many American feminists to focus erroneously on identity as a key problematic of Wittig’s work. Zerilli argues, however, that freedom is what is at stake in Wittig’s literary and theoretical projects.

Erika Ostrovsky, known for *A Constant Journey* (1991), the first book in English on Wittig, adds a new reading of Wittig’s texts in “Transformation of Gender and Genre Paradigms in the Fiction of Monique Wittig” (chapter eight). Ostrovsky revises her previous stance on Wittig’s work and argues that: “A rereading now...suggests that rather than the overthrow or annihilation of existing literary canons in order to allow new growth to occur, her major accomplishment consists of an action far more subtle yet also more demanding. Transformation, transmutation, and transfiguration all indicate various degrees of change and an ascending order of magnitude” (p. 115). Rereading Wittig’s fiction in this light aims to plumb the depths of her writing.

In chapter nine, “Quixote’s Journey: How to Change the World and Degenderize the Stage,” Jeannelle Laillou Savona offers the first analysis of the stage production of Wittig’s only published play, *Le voyage sans fin* (*The Constant Journey*), which starts the section “Theoretical Applications.” Savona reads *Le voyage sans fin* as the first lesbian play to be performed on the French stage, even though the word “lesbian” is not evoked and homosexual desire is not explicit. Wittig wrote the play in 1979, it was first performed in the United States at the Haybarn Theater at Goddard College, and then again in Paris in 1985. Savona cites the play’s experimental form (including the disjunction of recorded dialogue and staged action and voices of characters who remain invisible) and feminist content as reasons why it was poorly received at the time and has often been overlooked since. In “The Critical Mind and *The Lesbian*

Body" (chapter ten), Shaktini reviews and discusses recent readings of *The Lesbian Body*, the Wittig text that has produced the most ambivalence. Shaktini also considers this work in light of Wittig's own perspective on the application of linguist Emile Benveniste's analysis of the pronouns *je* and *tu*.

The last section of the collection, "A New Generation of Readers," gathers translated essays by Dominique Bourque, Catherine Rognon Ecarnot, and Marie-Hélène Bourcier. Bourque offers a new theoretical perspective in her chapter "Dialogic Subversion in Monique Wittig's fiction," drawing heavily on Mikhail Bakhtin. She argues that "Wittig's novels belong to the lineage of dialogic works that subvert the dominant discourse structuring social life" (p. 177). The originality of her work is twofold, since she first inscribes subjects in language through pronouns and then inscribes their relationships through narration.

Both Ecarnot and Bourcier represent recent sustained work on Wittig: Ecarnot published *L'écriture de Monique Wittig à la couleur de Sappho* in 2002 and Bourcier co-edited *Parce que les lesbiennes ne sont pas des femmes: Autour de l'œuvre politique, théorique et littéraire de Monique Wittig* (2002), and was also the coordinator for *La pensée straight*. In her chapter "Politics and Poetics of Travesty in Monique Wittig's Fiction," Ecarnot notes that Wittig shifts the question of travesty from the body to the literary field. She argues that "through the travesty of the secular discourse, repeated but transformed by the lesbian viewpoint, the minority subject succeeds in circumventing a language that reduces it to silence" (p. 185). Bourcier's chapter "Wittig la Politique" differs from the preceding critical articles, since it is a fictive interview between herself and Manastabal, one of Wittig's characters from *Virgile, non*. Bourcier reviews Wittig's key theoretical concepts while underscoring the thorny question of translation. In regard to the translation of *The Straight Mind* into French in 2001, she asks: "But what does it mean to translate a French author into French twenty years later, when the political context of her work has radically changed?" (p. 188). Yet, the importance of translation goes deeper, since a lesbian text is always already in a different language. There is no original text to be found, Manastabal tells Bourcier, since *The Straight Mind* is already foreign to straight language, both English and French.

This collection both assesses previous criticism of Wittig's work and illustrates the ongoing dialogue about it. As Shaktini observes in her introduction, there is marked disagreement even among the critics in the collection, which gives the volume multiple perspectives on Wittig's work. Crowder, for example, disagrees with parts of Erika Ostrovsky's reading of Wittig, while Ostrovsky has previously named both Shaktini and Crowder as critics who have mistakenly viewed Wittig's fiction primarily as militant feminist writing.^[1]

On Monique Wittig will be very useful for graduate courses on Wittig or advanced undergraduate courses featuring one of Wittig's texts. Instructors will be able to use portions of this collection to give students a sense of Wittig's contributions to the Women's Liberation Movement in France, to contemporary French literature, and to lesbian and feminist theories in the United States, as well as a critical apparatus for understanding and analyzing her fiction. Students will also comprehend the status of critical reception of Wittig's corpus after her death in 2003. The extensive bibliography--divided into different critical genres, including books, parts of books, conferences proceedings, electronic sources, journal articles, magazine articles, and theses and dissertations--is indispensable for current Wittig scholars. As Shaktini's last section, "A New Generation of Readers," suggests, new perspectives on Wittig continue to be added to the current conversations about her work. By teaching Wittig's texts to the next generation of students and scholars, new understanding and critical perspectives will emerge.

The collection itself is significant, since it is the first edited collection published in English since Wittig's death, but suffers from several minor flaws. The ensemble's main weakness is repetition across the articles. If the reader pursues selected articles, this effect will be minimized, but a reading of the

collection cover to cover exposes similar summaries and analyses of Wittig's text from *L'opoponoix*, *Les guérillères*, and *Le corps lesbien*, to *Virgile, non*. Even though the articles are grouped in sections, the articles tend to be similar, generally plotting the trajectory of Wittig's body of work, then offering corrective analyses to change previous misreadings of Wittig's texts. In some cases, more examples from close readings and textual analyses would have more clearly illuminated Wittig's texts. The original date of publication of the first texts in the collection at the beginning of each article would help the reader contextualize Wittig's work. These dates appear in the introduction, but not again next to the title of the article, which make the date references difficult to find.

One remaining point that I would like to address is Shaktini's use in her introductory material of the expression "appropriating the universal" to describe Wittig's project in *Les guérillères* and in her feminist manifesto. While I understand the revolutionary impact of the term "appropriating," especially in Marxist terms, I have argued elsewhere that *Les guérillères* is an allegory, the telling of a story in a figurative language requiring interpretation, which shows women defining themselves as they seek to represent the universal.^[2] For women to lay claim to the universal simply implies taking back what should never have been denied in the first place: the right to be representative of humanity, which is different than appropriation. To appropriate suggests the taking or making use of without authority or right, when in fact *elles* have every right to belong to the universal, to the general, the whole.

This volume marks an important moment in Wittig scholarship, since the authors capture many facets of Wittig's activism as a feminist theorist and author, while foregrounding her lesbian thought and political project. In their attempt to understand why Wittig's lesbian theory has often been misunderstood or ignored, they show how her theoretical essays or works of fiction developed and articulated her project. The vigor of this collection arises from a strong desire to evaluate Wittig's entire body of work at a significant critical moment, one characterized by a sense of openness to her work and its power.

LIST OF ESSAYS

- Namascar Shaktini, "Introduction" and "Chronology"

Part 1: Monique Wittig's Manifesto

- Namascar Shaktini, "Introduction to 'For a Women's Liberation Movement'"
- Monique Wittig, Gille Wittig, Marcia Rothenberg, Margaret Stephenson (Namascar Shaktini), "For a Women's Liberation Movement"

Part 2: Essays by Monique Wittig

- Monique Wittig, "Some Remarks on *Les guérillères*"
- Monique Wittig, "Some Remarks on *The Lesbian Body*"

Part 3: Critical Approaches

- Teresa de Lauretis, "When Lesbians Were Not Women"
- Diane Griffin Crowder, "Universalizing Materialist Lesbianism"
- Linda M. G. Zerilli, "A New Grammar of Difference: Monique Wittig's Poetic Revolution"
- Erika Ostrovsky, "Transformation of Gender and Genre Paradigms in the Fiction of Monique Wittig"

Part 4: Theoretical Applications

- Jeannelle Laillou Savona, "Quixote's Journey: How to Change the World and Degenderize the Stage"
- Namascar Shaktini, "The Critical Mind and *The Lesbian Body*"

Part 5: A New Generation of Readers

- Dominique Bourque, "Dialogic Subversion in Monique Wittig's Fiction"
- Catherine Rognon Ecarot, "Politics and Poetics of Travesty in Monique Wittig's Fiction"
- Marie-Hélène Bourcier, "Wittig la Politique"

NOTES

[1] Erika Ostrovsky, *A Constant Journey: The Fiction of Monique Wittig* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), p. 4 n7.

[2] Cybelle McFadden Wilkens, "Body, Text, and Language: Wittig's Struggle for the Universal in *Les Guérillères*," *Women in French Studies* 12 (2004): 70-84.

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