



Lillian Robinson (1941-2006)

Lillian S. Robinson, feminist scholar and activist, died in the Montréal General Hospital at the age of 65. The cause was ovarian cancer. Robinson, Principal (Director) of the Simone de Beauvoir Institute and Professor of Women's Studies at Concordia University at the time, was the author of 6 scholarly books and a novel.

Lillian Sara Robinson was born April 18, 1941 in New York City. Her father Irving Robinson, a Jewish immigrant from Czernowitz, Bukovina, was a foreman in a picture frame factory. Her mother, Fannie Robinson, born of a Russian Jewish immigrant family, was a bookkeeper. Her father died when she was four, and in December 1946 Lillian, her older brother Edward, and her sister Frieda and their mother moved into an apartment in Queens, New York with their mother's twin sister Jennie Postman and her husband Irving Postman. Their daughter, Sydelle, born shortly afterwards, would become Lillian's surrogate sister.

After attending Hunter College High School, Lillian was awarded a scholarship to Brown University, where she received a joint A.B./M.A. degree in 1962. During her years at Brown, Lillian met Martín López-Morillas (known as Martin Morill), with whom she spent several months travelling in Europe, and to whom she would be briefly married.

It was also during her years at Brown that Lillian became engaged in political activism, most notably in civil rights organizing and as a volunteer for historian H. Stuart Hughes's maverick 1962 candidacy for the U.S. Senate from Massachusetts. After receiving an M.A. in Art History from the Institute for Fine Arts at New York University, Lillian enrolled as a graduate student in English at Columbia University. She obtained her Ph.D. in comparative literature in 1974. Her dissertation on the figure of the lady knight in Renaissance literature would ultimately appear as the book *Monstrous Regiment* in 1985.

Lillian's development as an activist was decisively influenced by the civil rights movement. She attended the famous 1963 March on Washington, and hoped to take part in the Mississippi Freedom Summer the following year, but was forced instead by financial pressure (and the influence of her then-fiancé) to take a summer job at the margins of the movement, teaching Black History and English to students at Central State College, a historically Black college in

Ohio. During her years at Columbia, Lillian joined the New Left activist group Students for a Democratic Society, and she took an active part in the student strikes that roiled the university (and much of the world) during spring 1968. She also participated in organizing draft counselling and opposing the Vietnam War.

Starting in the late 1960s, Lillian threw herself into the developing women's movement, and began theorizing the relationship between class and gender politics. Her first essay, which she later claimed "invented the field" of Marxist feminist criticism, was a study of Virginia Woolf, "Who's Afraid of a Room of One's Own?" (Although it was later published, it was originally drafted as a writing sample for a job interview.) In the following years, Lillian wrote a series of essays on literature, work and feminism, some of which appeared in journals such as *College English*, and all of which were collected in her groundbreaking anthology *Sex, Class, and Culture* (1978). She also wrote poetry. Poems by Lillian were collected in a chapbook, "Robinson on the Woman Question" (1975), and appeared in other journals and collections; she enjoyed invitations to read her poems in public.

In fall 1969, Lillian was hired as a lecturer at Massachusetts Institute of Technology to teach women's studies in MIT's humanities program. Three years later, she moved to SUNY Buffalo as an Assistant Professor of Women's Studies in the college's fledgling American Studies program. She remained at Buffalo for five years, and was awarded tenure in her department. (A multidisciplinary study of research methodology that she compiled in collaboration with four SUNY Buffalo colleagues was published as *Feminist Scholarship: Kindling in the Groves of Academe* (1985)). She remained active in left wing movements and feminist politics. In 1970, while at MIT, Lillian met an undergraduate, David Gilden, who became her second husband, and with whom Lillian would remain for twenty years. The couple had one child, Isak Robinson-Gilden (now known as Alex), whom she loved with an unsparing devotion.

In 1980, Lillian made a fateful move. After spending a two-year term in France teaching American Studies as a full Professor at the University of Paris's Institut Charles V, she decided to risk giving up her tenured position at Buffalo and seek another job. However, in a time of recession and an increasingly conservative political climate, she was unable to find a position, and she remained "in the academic wilderness", as she put it, for a decade and a half.

During these years, she alternated between a series of short-term academic positions, including endowed chairs at institutions such as Albright College, the University of Hawaii and Scripps College, as well as unemployment and such non-academic work as court interpreting. She continued to write poetry, worked as an amateur actress, and fed her long delight in popular fiction by writing a mystery novel, which was published in revised form as *Murder Most Puzzling* (1998).

Meanwhile, she compiled and edited a four-volume anthology of criticism, *Modern Women*

Writers (1995). She retained her interest in political organizing and protest, most notably as a Jewish critic of Zionism and of the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and incursion into Lebanon.

During the 1980s, Lillian remained principally based in San Francisco. There she lived in an apartment in St. Francis Square, interracial condominium housing for workers built by the International Longshore Workers Union. At St. Francis Square, Lillian became especially close to the writer and feminist Tillie Olsen, who lived with her husband in the same development. After separating from David Gildea, Lillian left San Francisco and formed a close-knit non-traditional household with a gay male friend, Michael Massing, who helped her raise her son.

Despite her shadowy academic status, Lillian remained a sought-after lecturer and a well-recognized critic whose work appeared regularly in *The Nation* and *The Women's Review of Books*. In academically-published essays such as the 1983 "Treason Our Text", her most-cited work, she distinguished herself as a feminist critic of the literary "canon" of commonly-studied texts, which she argued represented only a limited and elitist point of view. Her essays and reviews on cultural studies and on the 1980s "culture wars" would be collected in the second anthology of her work, *In the Canon's Mouth* (1998).

Following a lecture trip to Thailand in 1993 on behalf of the United States Information Service, Lillian also developed an interest in the question of international sex tourism and the government sponsorship of women's sex work as an economic development tool. She undertook a series of articles and conference papers with a collaborator, Ryan Bishop, and ultimately the two produced a book together, *Night Market: Sexual Cultures and the Thai Economic Miracle* (1998).

In 1995, Lillian ended her long absence from regular academic work when she took up a tenured position as Professor of English at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina. Five years later, she agreed to leave the United States and to accept the position of Principal of the Simone de Beauvoir Institute, the women's studies college at Concordia University. She stated many times that the job was a dream position for her, especially as an authority on Simone de Beauvoir and a longtime devotee of her writings.

Under her tenure the Institute, which had been threatened with abolition before her arrival, attracted significantly higher enrollment and student interest. Although restricted in her research time by administrative responsibilities and various health problems, she continued an active publication schedule. Most notably, while in Montréal she produced her final book, *Wonder Women* (2003) a study of female superheroes. She also began the writing of a massive study of myths surrounding interracial rape. Following the onset of ovarian cancer in 2003, Lillian had a course of surgery and chemotherapy which enabled her to return to work, and she remained active through a brief recurrence in mid-2005. In June 2006, however, she

developed a gastrointestinal disturbance, which soon revealed itself to be a final and fatal recurrence of the cancer.

Lillian thrived in the urban culture and the politically contested terrain of Montréal. On Concordia's campus she became an outspoken voice, both as an advocate for women's issues and in defense of student organizing, especially around the Israel-Palestine issue. Meanwhile, off campus she helped found the Jewish Alliance Against the Occupation. She was a frequent commentator on women's issues in local press and media. During her years in Montréal, Lillian was particularly close to her nephew Greg Robinson, a professor of history at UQÀM, who cared for her during her illnesses and acted as sometime professional advisor and collaborator.

Lillian Robinson was a generous and vital person. Her loquacity was legendary—her friends and family considered themselves lucky if they could get through a telephone conversation with her in 30 minutes. A stimulating teacher and lecturer, she spoke in most cases without notes. She enjoyed making her points with humor, both in her published pieces and in frequent asides and improvisations as she spoke.

With Lillian's blessing and encouragement, Concordia University set up the Lillian Robinson scholars program to bring outstanding feminist scholars to the Simone de Beauvoir Institute. All funds donated to Concordia for this purpose are put in an interest-bearing account that is used solely to support this program.