

a polished, pre-designed product and began improvising freely from the intense creativity generated within the festival itself. They called out to the sound mixer Nancy Poole: "Hey Nancy, could you give me a little more on the guitar" or whatever. And they grinned – beamed – with total self-abandon.

"Aren't we havin' a good time?" Moon Joyce asked as she skipped onto the stage to do her stint as volunteer mistress of ceremonies. She went over to the gleaming black piano and tentatively reached out to stroke it. "You know what? I've

never been this close to a grand piano before," she said mischievously. As she introduced Nancy White, who'd just returned from a concert in Nicaragua, Connie Kaldor, herself just returned from a concert in Scotland, couldn't resist whispering a joke into her ear. As Nancy convulsed with laughter, Connie repeated the joke to the audience. "What do you wear to the revolution? Oppressed pants."

As Heather Bishop was introduced by Winnipeg alderperson Leslie Hughes during the closing concert, her face shone

and her smile couldn't have been broader. "I don't know that I've ever felt this proud before," she said. After a slight pause to allow the whistles and cheers of fellow feeling to die away, she continued in her normal, low-key, gentle way: "So here we are, and what we're doing is changing the world."

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*Heather Menzies is the author of three books: The Railroad's Not Enough: Canada Now (1978); Women and the Chip (1981); and Computers on the Job (1982).*

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# CHRONIQUE:

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# WORDS

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## WOMEN AND WORDS/ LES FEMMES ET LES MOTS

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Ellen Creighton

*(Man) has monopolized nearly all profitable employments, and from those (woman) is permitted to follow, she receives but a scanty remuneration. He closes against her all avenues to wealth and distinction which he considers most honourable to himself . . . He has denied her the facilities for obtaining a thorough education . . . He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life.*

(quoted in Tillie Olsen, *Silences*)

One hundred and thirty-six years have elapsed since these words were issued in the Declaration of the first women's rights convention in the world. In what was billed as another historical event, "Women and Words/Les femmes et les mots," more than 750 women gathered almost two years ago in the University of British Columbia's stately "Old Auditorium" to reflect upon how far we have come. The four-day, bilingual conference was organized by the West Coast Women and Words Society. It was a cross-country, multicultural conference formed as a "conspiracy united in a purpose" – to create a network of support for women of all backgrounds, in all facets of writing and communication. The recent publica-

tion of *Women & Words: The Anthology/Les femmes et les mots: une anthologie*,<sup>1</sup> selected from material collected by an anthology committee formed while the conference was being organized, struck me as an appropriate occasion for offering some retrospective comments on the 1983 conference.

The all-women event was bound to elicit charges of "preaching to the converted," both by its gender exclusiveness and by the restriction of female-only press members to arranged interviews. Happily a last-minute change of heart permitted the press access to all the proceedings.

As befits a conference concerned with language and communication, seminars and workshops involved the gamut of issues from criticism and the literary tradition, through feminist publications, ethnicity and women's writing, entrance into publishing, funding searches, translation, networking, lesbian writing, the subversiveness of feminist art, and many related topics. To round out the programme, short theatre pieces were presented, and poetry readings, held in the evenings, were open to the general public.

Some of the seminars were formal and pedagogic, while others were casual. All were informative, entertaining and provided a good introduction to many of the major female literary figures in Canada:

Margaret Atwood, Louky Bersianik, Nicole Brossard, Marian Engel, Joy Kogawa, Dorothy Livesay, Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska, Jane Rule, Phyllis Webb and (the list went on and on). The visibility of lesser-known writers such as Betsy Warland, poet and conference organizer, and Erin Mouré, will no doubt have increased their followings.

Throughout the conference, indisputable truths about the state of the female presence in the literary world rose up like a chant inciting more questions and more affirmative action. Women described the lack of female representation in the world of letters, the lack of women editors, publishers, and journalists. P.E.I. publisher Libby Oughton quoted publishing statistics which substantiate this contention: while women make up 52% of the population, only 18-20% of books published are written by women. Oughton claimed that if women spend 700 million dollars on books, they should be more fully represented. She and her colleagues are redressing this situation by publishing fiction and poetry exclusively by women.

*That women are not heard from often enough is symptomatic of the phallogocentricity of our modern Western languages, languages which are barometers of patriarchal cultures. "Men and women pretend to speak the same language," said B.C. poet Sharon Thesen, yet "male subjectivity is the operating*

theatre of the male and female consciousness." While all modern Western languages spring from patriarchies, French as compared to English is more overtly sexist. The grammatical structure of the French language enforces male dominance, as Quebec writers Louky Bersianik and Louise Cotnoir made abundantly evident through word play. Cotnoir presented woman's identity as analogous to the mute 'e' (signalling the female gender) in French, "une existence morte" – a dead existence, a silent one. French-speaking feminist critics and writers therefore begin approaching the word through a greater linguistic awareness of sexism than their English-speaking counterparts.

One's mother tongue, however, did not affect the conclusion that *all* women must find a language suitable to our reality, a language of our own. The central question of the female writer becomes "how do I write?" what is the language indigenous to my reality? Sharon Thesen quoted Adrienne Rich to illustrate this dilemma: "How do I write if there are no words except my self?" In the past women were silent because culture and language excluded female experience and expression. Now women acknowledge that silence can also be positive – when used deliberately rather than out of feelings of insecurity and impotence. Two of the most frequently recommended works throughout the conference were Louky Bersianik's *L'Eugélonne* (1976), considered by some participants an 'ovular' work in the search for a truly female language, and Tillie Olsen's *Silences* (1978), which explores how social circumstance (sex, colour, class) and the climate of the times have contributed to literary silences of both women and men.

Women of minority groups spoke about their silences as the result of discrimination by the ruling majority – white middle-class society – and the lack of self-confidence imposed on them by this majority. These sentiments mirror the male-versus-female arena of our patriarchal society as evinced through its phallogentric language. Black feminist-activist Makeda Silvera castigated the feminist world for not challenging racism and classism. She claimed that a "cultural censorship" built upon patriarchy, capitalism, racism and imperialism effectively silences women of colour; the feminist arena itself is a world of internal contradiction where the white majority discriminates against other races.

In contrast to Silvera's diatribe, native poet Beth Cuthand proudly illustrated her personal growth from self-perception as victim to subject, by reading two of her poems which had been written many years apart. Cuthand now believes that Indians are a "people of power and leadership capabilities" and she calls for "the exploration of the female in her dignity as subject." While affirming the positive direction in her development, however, she claimed that few native women have been published in mainstream presses because they do not have "the confidence to enter the other world."

Women need role models in order to foster their confidence and self-development, in order to break the silence. Yet in tracing the history of literature and literary criticism we discover, as freelance writer Carolyn Hlus pointed out, that we do not even know *who* the significant women writers were. In addition, we must ask how many truly found a female voice?

"Women and Words" was both a revelation and a disappointment. Technically it was well-organized, well-attended, and generally accessible to all participants. Unfortunately, however, the unity one might expect in a feminist gathering was limited to groups who shared similar ideologies, backgrounds or inclinations. One divisive incident occurred when Linda McKnight, President of McClelland and Stewart, became the target of vituperative remarks from the radical feminist front. She was branded as a supporter of the mainstream, made up of non-feminists, capitalists, and racists.

If feminism is truly the new humanism, as many speakers and participants claimed, perhaps at the next conference (scheduled for 1986) we shall come together in a spirit of unity as women and as people concerned with instituting positive social change, not through anger but through self-enlightenment. Only then will we have the necessary concentrated strength to achieve our aims.

'Madeira Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing Co. Ltd., 1984.

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## ARRIVE

Foot hills  
like the great hairy bellies  
of some prone old men

## SETTLE

Three deer at sunset  
fawna doe  
fawna ray  
fawna me

## STAY

Crows on the mate  
caw caw caw caw  
ouch

*Sandra Dempsey*  
Calgary, Alberta

## Nightengale

I have no faith  
I am uncertain  
you leave for a moment and  
panic  
it is over  
it is done  
locked out again  
left high and  
mighty

My longing beckons  
I need you beyond temptation  
you nurture my spirit and  
comfort  
it is new  
it is now  
freed at last  
found warm and  
lowly

o spread your wings  
that we might fly  
as one  
tonight

*Sandra Dempsey*  
Calgary, Alberta