

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.

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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
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