

# Notes on the Women and Words Conference

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What a treat *Women and Words* was as a conference! Coming back to routine, kids, weeds and heat waves, I'm still riding high from it, excited about getting back to writing after such corroboration. The high point of the conference for me was the presence of Quebecois, writers I'd never met nor heard nor, I'm ashamed to admit, read. What a grand exchange—and given that impetus, by the third day I was speaking/understanding French again. The dominant metaphor of the conference was that of translation, comme femmes nous sommes toutes traductrices.

La conférence était très importante pour faire la liaison entre les écrivaines québécoises et les femmes qui écrivent en anglais. Avant, j'ai cru que c'était très difficile pour une Anglaise d'entrer dans le monde littéraire québécois. La barrière,

je pensais, était la question de souveraineté. Mais quand j'ai rencontré les écrivaines françaises à la conférence, j'ai trouvé que la condition féminine était plus importante que la condition politique. La communauté est plus possible depuis le parti québécois. J'ai trouvé que nos intérêts étaient communs; ceux de la langue, de recréer la langue des femmes pour exprimer notre condition, notre sensibilité. Et pour ça, il faut changer la langue, notre idée de la langue, comme ont fait les écrivaines québécoises. Comme poétesse du son, j'aime bien m'exprimer en sons qui transcendent le langage ordinaire.

La langue de femmes a été celle du silence. Elle se trouve dans un monde masculin et parle un langage masculin. Les écrivaines québécoises sont éloquentes à recréer ce langage. Elles ont fait beaucoup de travail important, et c'est mer-

veilleux de faire la connaissance de leurs oeuvres.

Toutes les femmes sont traductrices parce qu'il le faut pour exister, survivre. C'est la condition féminine. Cette conférence était si importante et excitante parce qu'elle a rendu possibles les relations personnelles entre les écrivaines du Canada. Un discours a été commencé qui doit continuer, parce qu'il peut changer notre écriture.

I was particularly grateful to the many competent translators present, some of whom were excellent writers and critics in their own right. Through their panels on feminist criticism, the writing of the Quebecois became accessible and of immediate importance to everyone present. All our books come from the stance of a woman writing, necessarily, in consciousness and often in theme. A new kind of review that includes that stance and looks at the language informing the writing becomes paramount.

On all levels, the conference was given over to an open discussion of language and how language affects women's writing, of how we can recreate in language our experience by letting the writing itself lead the writer. Panels looked at criticism, images of women in the media, alternative publishing and theatre, and many more different aspects of society as they applied to women writing. How to take effective action was the keynote, as witnessed in the lively discussions in every workshop and panel I attended.

The friendly atmosphere of the conference must be attributed to the care and generosity of the organizers. Betsy Warland seemed marvelous at empowering volunteers, enlisting their total support, so that the conference became, as it was intended, everyone's who participated. I'd wondered at first why men were not allowed, but was grateful as it turned out, for the experience of attending an all-woman conference, attending and listening without the usual defence of wit or wariness that I have come to find necessary at conferences in order to combat the oppressive

sense of hierarchy and behind the scenes politicking. Here women spoke to each other in a spirit of equality and a willingness to share, to shed old patterns of thought.

It seems necessary to find forms and structure to reflect that exchange, not only in language itself but in format. That probably means more workshops than panels. By having four or five experts, be they male or female, each expound for ten minutes and there was never enough time for all the discussion that ensued from the floor. The panel structure of necessity duplicated the authoritarian mode, setting panelists apart from audience: the patriarchal mode which the panelists themselves were speaking against. Their goodwill, expertise and that of participants speaking from the floor helped to break down the division. But it would have been easier if we had working models of alternative formats: smaller circles that reach consensus within and then present their ideas. If we had done this at the end of each day of the conference, the plenary session would have already had a strong sense of direction before it began. Our energies could have been more effectively directed to implementing suggestions that already had been worked through to clear, practical guidelines.

Next time. As it was, the spinoffs of new confidence in one's direction and ability to articulate what had hitherto been silent or repressed, will carry many of us who attended the conference back to our separate writing tables with a renewed commitment. With such strength behind us, we can no longer consider our writing in isolation. We can trust in our experiments with writing, and dare to write from the less explored spaces of silence. I look forward to the forthcoming transcription of the conference proceedings and to the Women and Words anthology. And I intend to be at the next conference!

## Simultaneous Translation

J'ai essayé et  
 J S A A A  
 J S A A A  
 J S A A

je ne suis pas capable / j'ai pensé tous les fois  
 je ne suis pas capable / j'ai pensé toutes les folles  
 jeune suivra capable jay pensé toutes les folles  
 gêne suivra cap pablum jay pensé toutes les folles  
 gêne sweep pa cap pablum jay pansy toutes les folles  
 june sweep pa cap pablum jay pansy toot les folles  
 june sweep pa cap pablum jay pansy toot lay falls

tant m'échappe mais j'embarque  
 taunt m'échappe mais j'embarque  
 taunt may chap may j'am barque  
 taunt may chap may jam bark

car nous sommes toutes traductrices  
 car nous sommes toutes traductrices  
 car new sommes toutes traductrices  
 car new some toutes traductrices  
 car new some toot traductrices  
 car new sum toot trad duke trees  
 car new sum too trad ostrich

dans un silence qui ne sait pas s'exprimer au langage masculin  
 dance un silence qui ne sait pas s'exprimer au langage masculin  
 dance on sillence qui ne sait pas s'exprimer au langage masculin  
 dance on sill once qui ne sait pas s'exprimer au langage masculin  
 dance on sill once key ne sait pas s'exprimer au langage masculin  
 dance on sill once keen say pas s'exprimer au langage masculin  
 dance on sill once keen say pas s'exprimer au langage mask you lent  
 dance on sill once keen say pa s'exprimer au langage mask you lent  
 dance on sill once keen say pa sez primer au langage mask you lent  
 dance on sill once keen say pa sez primer oh langage mask you lent  
 dance on sill once keen say pa sez primer oh long age mask you lent  
 dance on sill once keen say pa sez preen eh oh long age mask you lent

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