

One thousand women writers

by Julie Wheelwright
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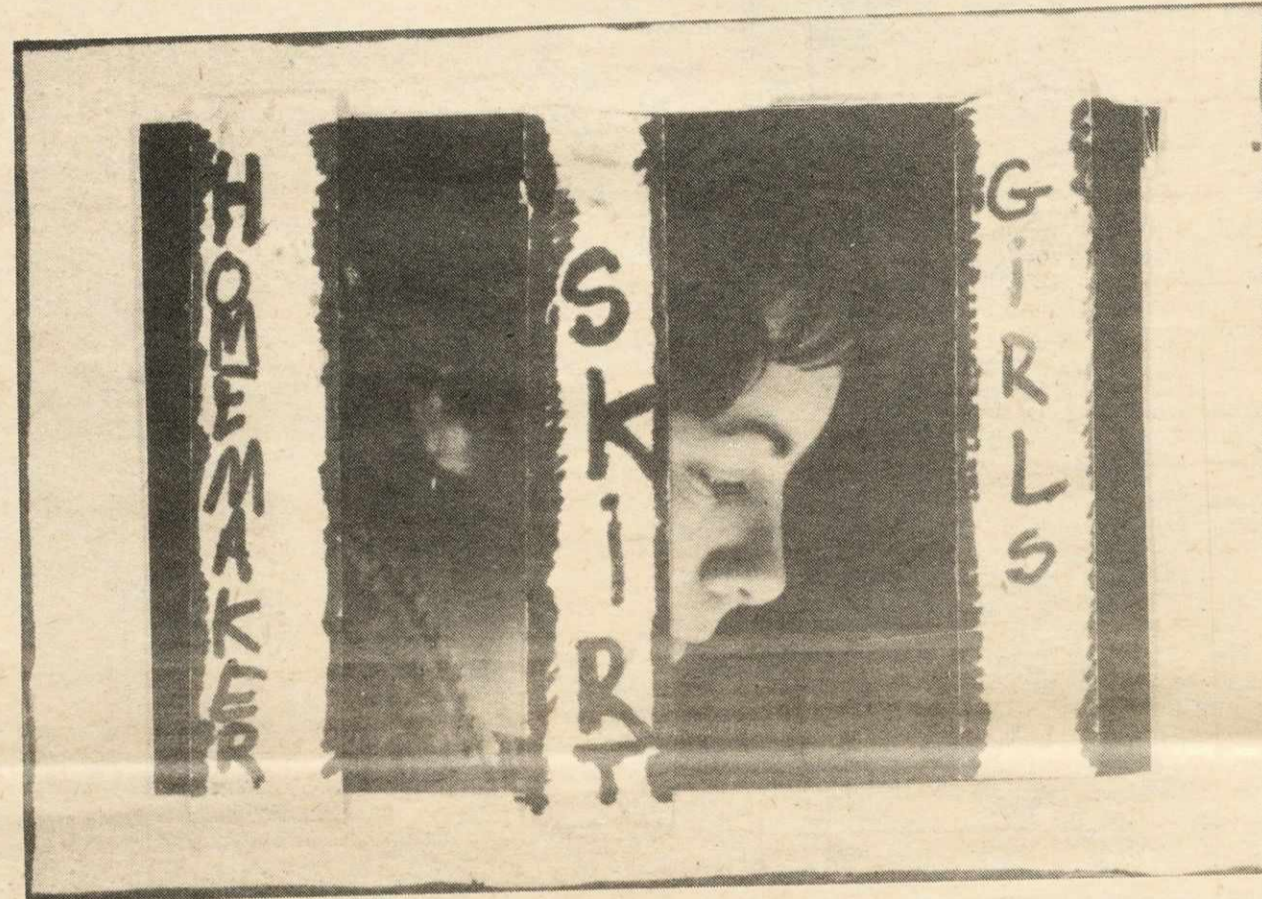
IT WAS THE OPENING NIGHT AND AN awe-filled tension and excitement penetrated the delegates. It was a world premier. It was a gathering of almost one thousand women writers in Canada—within the University of British Columbia's cloistered walls.

And although the translation equipment was temporarily not functioning and one of the opening speakers was a no-show, the momentum of the event was not lost.

A hush fell over the old auditorium. Three of the conference organizers mounted the stage amid frantic applause and opened the first volley in what was to become a weekend of sound and voice. There were no apologies that the first women and words conference, July 1-3, was a women-only event.

"It took several weeks of reflection," organizer Betsy Warland said of the decision to close workshop sessions to men. "We feel this

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decision is appropriate," she added, explaining to those who knew too well the significance of the statement, that women are often reticent to speak out on issues in the presence of men.

This statement followed on the heels of attacks from both of Vancouver's daily newspapers about the exclusion of men. In a typical leap of logic a Vancouver Sun editorial whined that the organizers' decision to close the event to men meant "If you are a man you cannot cover a panel discussion entitled 'Inadequate Coverage of Women's News.'"

Province columnist Max Wyman, writing under this stinging insult, even went to the federal government to ask their opinion of this monstrous act.

But the solution was easy enough—both papers sent women reporters.

Meanwhile, the women and words conference provided a rare opportunity for women to exchange ideas, addresses, share experiences and outline for themselves and the world, the obstacles that have continued to silence them.

Louise Cotnoir, a Quebecoise writer and editor speaking at the opening night, said: "Words are illusions; words distort; language is biased and (women) are the ones who suffer this bias. We are the subbasement of language."

"We are fighting against the social order that has defined us by its language," Cotnoir told the audience—all women who have shared that experience.

The opening night set many tones for the weekend. There were no bones about the fact that problems exist for women writers; no one publicly objected to the definition of a women-only event and no political differences ripped open the developing fibres of communication.

Makeda Silvera, a member of Fireweed's editorial collective, unambiguously addressed the question posed to all five of the opening night speakers—how far have we come?

"I could simply answer that question in 30 seconds by saying 'not far enough,'" she said. "As black women we have had to fight, cuss and kick to let our voices be heard."

Silvera described the experiences of black activist feminists in Canada. "Our collective experiences haven't been good. All the blacks are men, all the feminists are white but there are the brave women."

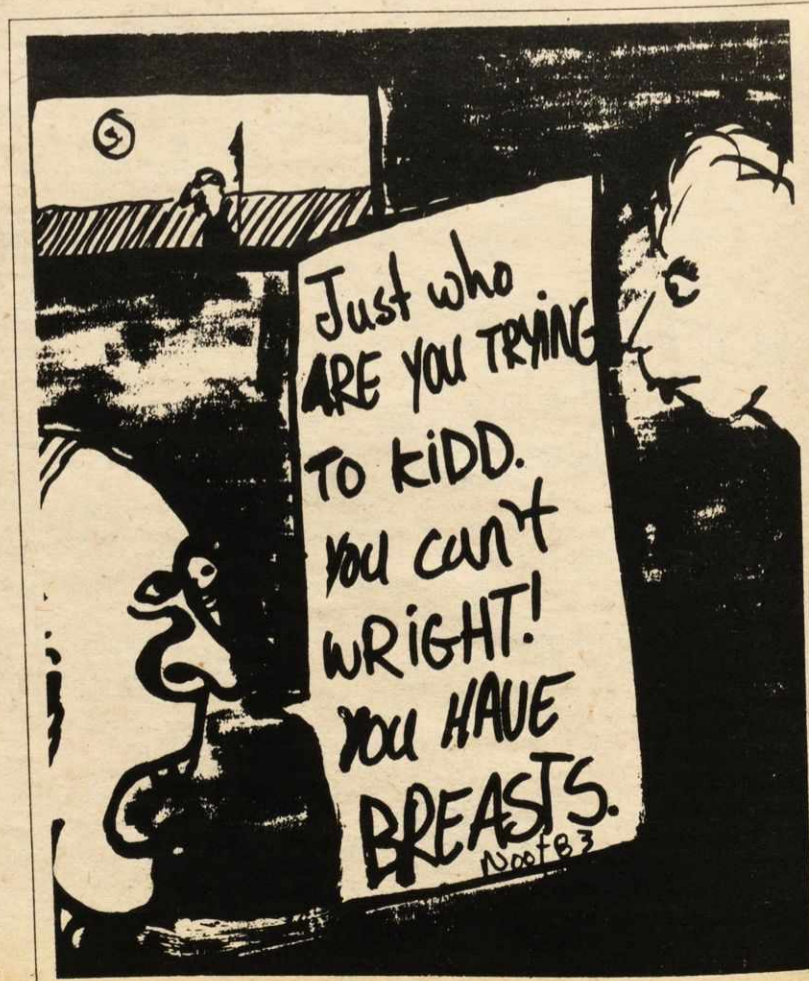
Silvera said when she began to work in the white feminist literary world she "found that door carefully guarded and even shut."

She challenged the audience—"(Women of color) wonder if you women understand your power and your privilege as whites. Many times you say our work in unublishable. We demand that you stop imposing your standards on our work."

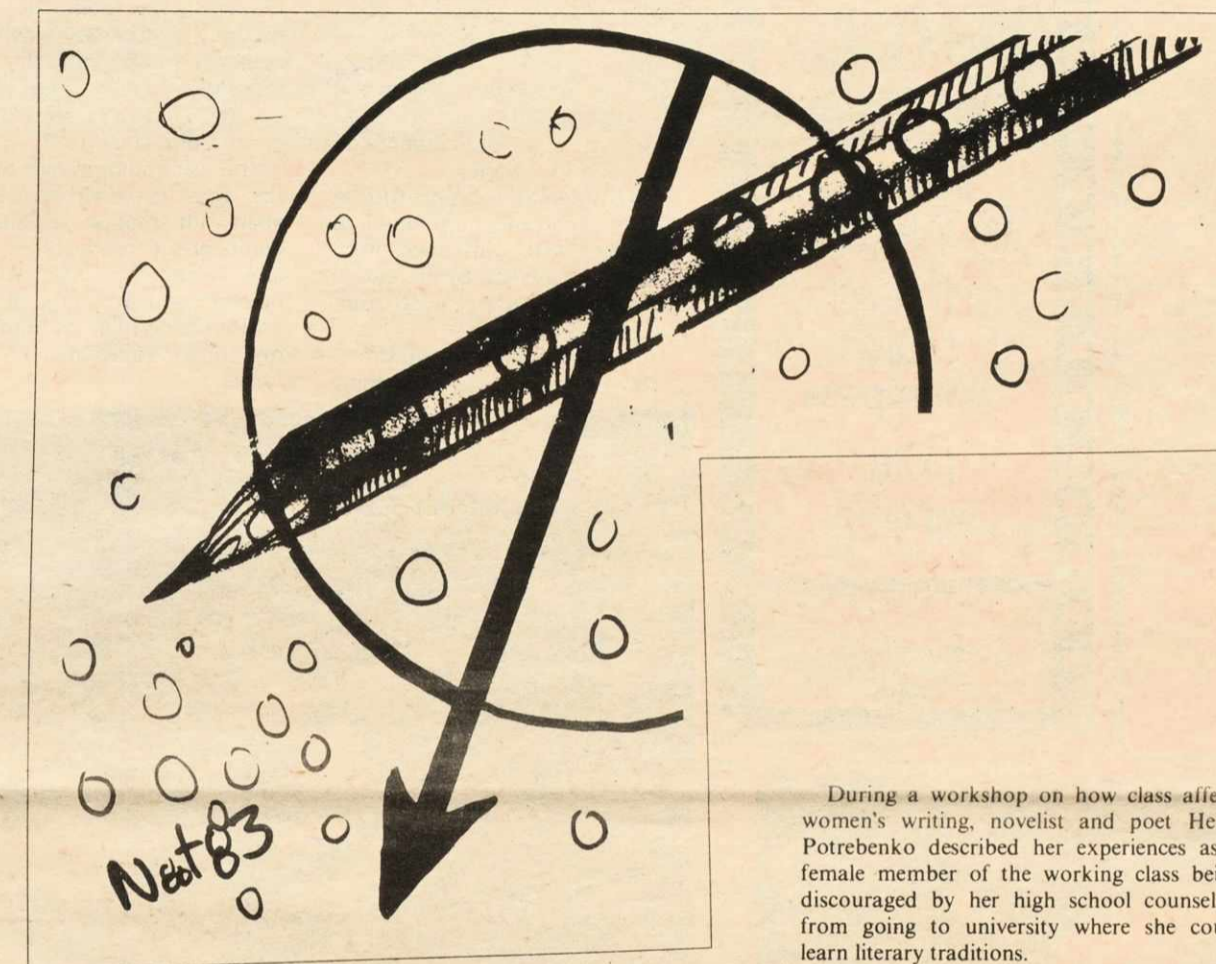
The collective tension in the audience mounted. "We wonder if it's now politically correct to talk about racism." There were audible gasps. "We feel that if we don't deal with these internal struggles we haven't changed very much. If there is one oppressed woman in the world, none of us are free."

But Silvera was received with thundering applause and at the final plenary, Yvonne Black, a Toronto writer, thanked the conference organizers for including sessions dealing with women of color. "It was not an afterthought," she said.

Discussions of classism in women's writing was another issue that surfaced and challenged those writers who have achieved financial success.



gather to celebrate their words



During a workshop on how class affects women's writing, novelist and poet Helen Potrebenko described her experiences as a female member of the working class being discouraged by her high school counsellor from going to university where she could learn literary traditions.

"I learned about literature through the rejection letters I got from publishers," she said. "One quite bluntly said, 'Ordinary people don't write about ordinary people.'"

Potrebenko charged that she also received the same criticism about her work from the feminist press and she collected 30 rejection letters before her novel *Taxi* was published. "There are the women who share my concerns, but not my attitudes."

One woman asked Potrebenko what working class women read. "Well, on the Hastings Express they read *Harlequin Romances* and how-to-improve-yourself books," she replied.

"The time to write becomes a luxury. Instead of writing I feel I should be in the kitchen killing cockroaches."

Potrebenko, whose work has received scant attention outside B.C., stressed that often working class women read books because they're accessible, not because they're good. And great literature doesn't appear on drug store shelves.

For panelist Carole Itter, a Vancouver writer and a mother living on and off welfare, the time to write becomes a luxury she too can seldom afford.

"The time to write becomes a luxury. Instead of reading and writing I feel I should be in the kitchen killing cockroaches." Even though the tradition of economic deprival is a history of women's experience, Itter said she is "usually astounded by the number of women writers who grew up in upper middle class homes."

And for the first time at the conference many women writers were able to share their

often lonely and always frustrating experiences of dealing with mainstream media.

During a session on images of women in the media, Thelma Charlafou, a broadcaster from Peace River, Alberta, criticized the lack of news about women's issues on northern broadcasting. "The CBC is terrible in the north. Do we really need the opera on the radio? No, what we really need is information about women's issues."

As a broadcaster with "three strikes against me—I'm middle aged, I'm a half-breed and I'm a woman," Thelma speaks for and about the women struggling in an oppressive, isolated atmosphere. She's had letters from women who have said her voice on the radio was the only thing that kept them going during the long, lonely nights on their trap lines.

"We do have a very long way to go in the North. We really need a lot of support."

One of the recurring themes of the conference was a recognition of the problems facing women writers. Women agreed that there is lack of adequate news coverage, that women writers are under-represented, that women are discouraged from writing, and that publishing and book distribution are difficult.

When sessions attempted to deal with solutions, however, they were frustrating and offered very little concrete information. In a

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Saturday afternoon session on strategies for change, Rina Fraticelli stressed the need for affirmative action programs in Canada to overcome the tremendous imbalance in the funds women artists receive from the federal government.

But she also cautioned women that, "We have to keep in mind that affirmative action is an emergency measure." Panelists Sharon Nelson and Nanci Rossow agreed that these programs are necessary.

And yet, delegates were not offered much more.

It became obvious that the conference itself was a vital forum for women to discover each other's work and discuss future strategies. But frustration about developing concrete plans was extreme at the final plenary.

After a flood of heartfelt thanks to the conference organizers and some gentle criticism and suggestions from delegates, the business got underway. Four hours later only a few delegates remained to thrash out the nasty business of deciding on structure.

However, it was agreed that women across the country will be solicited for their ideas about the future of the West Coast Women and Words Society. An annual general meeting will be held in Vancouver in 1983 to discuss these ideas and to establish priorities for the society.

In the meantime, the society is publishing an anthology of work by women at the conference and is preparing an archive of the conference events.

And two years from now, there will be another weekend of sound and voice—another first for women.

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Makeda: I'm really sick of some of these white feminists when they talk about rape. It's always from their perspective—being knocked down somewhere in a dark alley or a park and being raped. They never mention other kinds of rape, other abuse that women of colour and immigrant women experience, like men hassling you on the bus or train at night, calling you names, the day to day social rape... A couple of nights ago I was waiting for the train and this drunk guy, big redneck, came up and started shouting, "Bitch! Bitch!" There was me and two other guys waiting for a train and he's shouting out, "Bitch! Bitch!" I'm really frightened because this guy is really big and I'm wondering what would happen if he came up and attacked me physically. What was I going to do? This white woman walks up on the platform and he starts up again. We kind of look at each other in solidarity and I feel less scared because at least there is another woman. But then, this drunk started calling out, "Nigger! Nigger!" and looking directly at me. That woman, she just looked through me and there wasn't that kind of connection, that solidarity, anymore. It was really frightening. I didn't know what to do. I was angry, I was filled with rage, I wanted to attack the man, I wanted to cry, and suddenly I felt really embarrassed. I don't know why.