

The Ottawa Conference: A Setback for Feminism

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Photo by Anne Marie Demers

Maria Luisa Mendoza · Elena Urrutia

La conférence d'Ottawa a été intéressante mais le choix des déléguées latino-américaines s'est avéré partiel et partial.

Par conséquent les problèmes du féminisme dans les trois littératures ont été faussés.

On the last days of the Inter-American Writers' Conference one could not help reflecting that the intentions of its organizers (or maybe their cross-purposes) must have been naïve at best or muddled at worst.

Yet from the outset one would have been justified in expecting an enriching and even provocative encounter since women writers, critics, and readers from the three Americas had chosen to meet in this quiet capital of ours, to speak about women and literature. The generous support of the various organizations that make these cultural gatherings possible was fully visible, the habitual array of interpreters, booths, microphones, government-sponsored receptions all as obvious as our privileges, as women who in the course of their lives have had the time to write, the energy to teach, and the pleasure of sharing these experiences with one another. The reporters were dutifully present, scribbling away at notes as if each word, foreign or native, were a precious gem not to be lost. The famous literary figures, Atwood, Livesay, Lalonde, Campos, Brossard, Mendoza, Gagnon were gracefully doing what was expected of them: mingling with all present and responding with humour, or maybe even interest, to the judicious comments one had to make about their works.

Each of the three groups (English, French, and Spanish) would hold its own sessions morning and early afternoon and all would congregate in the latter part of the day for a panel discussion formed of women writers. Thus the first part of our sessions was centred on criticism (women in literature and/or literature by women), the second focused on writers debating their ideas about writing.

But in the course of the latter, something appeared to go awry. It was the disquieting but pervasive feeling that half or more of the women present on these panels did not have a clue to what had brought them there. More particularly, the majority of the Latin-American writers seemed to regard the

terms woman writer or feminist as a dirty word. Writers they were indeed. But why should they feel separate from the mainstream/malestream? One detected a sense of mortification on their faces. Esther de Izaguirre (Argentina) set the record straight by specifying that she did not believe in either a feminine tradition or a feminist one. She was a humanist writer who identified with a universalist tradition that knew no boundaries (of class? taste? prejudice?). At another time another writer from the same continent reminded us of the differences between the animus and the anima (God bless Jung's universal soul) and of the way women are inclined to dream and men to think. And one was wondering if this was a Viennese Congress of Psychiatrists circa 1912. Uneasiness and embarrassment were clearly detectable among the English-Canadian writers present. In fact, it was rather puzzling to watch and see how people like Dorothy Livesay were going to react to this. On the whole they seemed too polite to disagree openly. And in fact even the most assertive of them, such as Margaret Atwood and Carol Bolt, were hesitant to single out feminism as either a new critical method or a new literary tradition. The Québécoises were the quickest and the firmest to establish their position. If there were no such tradition then their role was to carve it out of the future. The sooner the better. Madeleine Gagnon, Denise Boucher, Nicole Brossard and Louky Bersianik seemed convinced that the way to do this was to refuse the power relations that force women out of history and into innumerable types of oppression. For them feminism was not be questioned but to be acted out, in their writing, in their reading, in their job, in their relations with other people.

What struck one at the end of such a session was the absence of any dialogue between the members of the panel or even between the panel and the audience. It was like watching three layers of rocks and minerals which have been contact-proofed from each other and will remain this way until an earthquake decides to the contrary. One could argue that the bringing together of women from three continents is going to pose inevitable communication problems. The organizers had thought of alleviating such a difficulty by asking all writers the same questions (on a previously mailed questionnaire) and have them answer these on the panel. However, questions such as 'Why do you write?' or 'What are you trying to communicate?' were too naïve a basis and ill-designed to provide any critical focus. In fact the answers did not accentuate differences (this in itself would have been enlightening) but opened up the hostilities between the participants.

There was no communication because there was no language for it. Had the English- and French-speakers been by themselves they would probably have managed a dialogue and in the course of their discussion reached a core of ideas which would have given them strength — in different ways and for varied reasons. But the Latin-American writers who had been selected did not allow such a process to happen because they had decided they were, by nature, opposed to it.

Very few¹ were those who either believed in social change or advocated a new set of economic and cultural relationships within their own societies. The majority of them were the faithful reflection of a status quo. And at the time when South America is torn by repressive régimes and social strife it was somewhat disturbing to listen to an exquisitely dressed Argentinian writer assuring us that there were no political prisoners in Latin-American jails, only delinquents.² Beyond the discomfort, there was in many of us a burning feeling of shame for playing host to the envoys or maybe the spokespersons of the Pinochet and Videla régimes. There must be something very warped about our values if we, teachers, feminists, critics, and writers cannot advance the cause of social justice for women and must listen to those who make a mockery of it.

I would advise the future planners of an Inter-American Writers' Conference to redefine their goals (at that price we cannot afford not to) and to make sure that the women invited have an investment in social change. The participation of Cuban writers who actually live in Cuba (not a single one was present in Ottawa³) of women's presses and publishers — particularly in Canada — are essential prerequisites for a dialogue. But more important than anything else is the presence of women who have made a commitment to change, not only in their private lives but also in the political and economic spheres.



Monique Bosco Margaret Atwood

- 1 There were some notable exceptions from Venezuela and Mexico.
- 2 Did she need to be sent the report of the UN Commission on political prisoners in Chile or to be given a tour of Chilean, Argentinian and Brazilian detention centres to be convinced of the contrary?
- 3 A number of women writers from Latin America who do not happen to stand for the status quo could have been invited. I would like to mention a few names for the Spanish-speaking organizers: Elena Poniatowska (Mexico), Maria Esther Giglio (Uruguay), Martha Harnecker (Chile), Haydee Santamaria (Cuba) and Domitila, the indomitable peasant woman who documented a miners' strike in *Si me permiten hablar* (Bolivia).



DATE:	SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 4, 1978
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