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Canadian Women's Literary Discourse in English, 1982-92

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Abstract

For those of us who take seriously the various and imbricated post-isms that underwrite and overdetermine our critical utterances, the task of writing literary history, even in as narrow a fragment as that demarcated by my title (and imposed by the word-limit of this forum), is both exciting and daunting. Competing claims and imperatives - to be as thorough as possible in coverage (and of what?) or to make strategic choices for the sake of a coherent narrative? to speak in lists or to historicize the scene(s) of writing? - mark my task in such ways as to signal at once the discursive richness and methodological fraughtness of contemporary literary critical gestures, the demands and rewards of an increasing attention to the multiple imbrications of the literary and the social (in their broadest senses). Committing the critical self to text and to limited text, is, for me, enormously difficult, and the difficulty is compounded by the object of this survey - the most explosive, prolific, and diverse decade in the history of women's writing in English in Canada.

Elean Thomas: *The Last Room* (London: Virago, 1991).

Works of Poetry Cited:

Dionne Brand: *No Language Is Neutral* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1990).

Jean Binta Breeze: *Riddym Ravings And Other Poems* (London: Race Today Publications, 1988).

Merle Collins: *Rotten Pomerac* (London: Virago, 1992).

Christine Craig: *Quadrille For Tigers* (Mina Press, 1984).

Mahadai Das: *Bones* (Peepal Tree Press, 1988).

Lorna Goodison: *I Am Becoming My Mother* (London: New Beacon, 1986).

Lorna Goodison: *Heartease* (London: New Beacon, 1988).

Amryl Johnson: *Gorgons* (Coventry: Cofa Press, 1992).

Grace Nichols: *i is a long memoried woman* (London: Karnak House, 1983).

Grace Nichols: *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (London: Virago, 1989).

Marlene Nourbese Philip: *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1989).

Marlene Nourbese Philip: *Looking For Livingstone* (Toronto: Mercury, 1991).

Velma Pollard: *Crown Point and Other Poems* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 1988).

Olive Senior: *Talking of Trees* (Kingston: Calabash, 1985).

DONNA PALMATEER PENNEE

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For those of us who take seriously the various and imbricated post-isms that underwrite and overdetermine our critical utterances, the task of writing literary history, even in as narrow a fragment as that demarcated by my title (and imposed by the word-limit of this forum), is both exciting and daunting. Competing claims and imperatives – to be as thorough as possible in coverage (and of what?) or to make strategic choices for the sake of a coherent narrative? to speak in lists or to historicize the scene(s) of writing? – mark my task in such ways as to signal at once the discursive richness and methodological fraughtness of contemporary literary critical gestures, the demands and rewards of an increasing attention to the multiple imbrications of the literary and the social (in their broadest senses). Committing the critical self to text and to limited text, is, for me, enormously difficult, and the difficulty is compounded by the object of this survey – the most explosive, prolific, and diverse decade in the history of women's writing in English in Canada.

My title signals a recognition that in Canadian literature in general, the distance between what we used to call the primary and secondary works, never very great even in the early history of CanLit, has diminished further in the last decade, not so much because of a belated (and misunderstood?) Barthesian sense of the death of the author (though the rise of the masculinist scriptor, especially in the Canadian West cannot be discounted), but in part because of the (at least) doubled position(ing) of so many of

Canada's women writers as both 'authors' and 'critics' (e.g., Lola Lemire Tostevin, Daphne Marlatt, Aritha van Herk, Janice Kulyk Keefer, Jane Rule, Margaret Atwood, Donna E. Smyth, Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, Makeda Silvera, Smaro Kamboureli, Himani Bannerji, Di Brandt, et al.), but also because of the collective and collaborative nature of the production and reception of women's literary discourse (creative and critical) in Canada. The women and words/*les femmes et les mots* conference (Vancouver, B.C., 1983, published as *in the feminine* [Longspoon, 1985]) and the Imag(in)ing Women conference (U of Alberta, 1990) superbly exemplify the diversity (in linguistic, ethnic, racial, erotic, class, and formal/generic constituents) of women's (uses of) 'literary' words. The beginning of traditional bibliographical compilation and codification of Canadian women's literature in *Gynocritics/gynocritiques*, edited and introduced by Barbara Godard (ECW, 1987), has rapidly been overtaken by the diversity and sheer proliferation of women's literary voices; conferences and journals have become extremely important forums for the production and reception of women's literary discourse.

A few books can be cited, however, as signs of the interrelatedness of the creative and the critical in women's literary discourse in Canada, for example, *A Mazing Space: Writing Canadian Women Writing*, edited by Shirley Neuman and Smaro Kamboureli (Longspoon/NeWest, 1986), and *Language in Her Eye: Writing and Gender: Views by Canadian Women Writing in English*, edited by Libby Scheier, Sarah Sheard and Eleanor Wachtel (Coach House, 1990), which contains pieces by writers of fiction, poetry, drama, journalism, and literary criticism. The cross-genre and cross-cultural representation in *Language in Her Eye*, the remarkably playful and 'irreverent' reshaping of 'academic' discourse instantiated by/in *A Mazing Space*, and the (often fractious) recognition of multiple constituents of women's subjectivities in an anthology such as *Telling It: Women and Language Across Cultures* (proceedings and commentary from a 1988 Women's Studies conference at Simon Fraser University, edited by Sky Lee, Lee Maracle and Betsy Warland; Press Gang, 1990), together are indicative of prevalent modes and issues of women's literary discourse in Canada. Journals such as *Room of One's Own*, *Tessera*, *Atlantis*, *Fireweed* (all devoted solely to women's writing), and *Toronto South Asian Review* and *Fuse* (devoted to transcultural discourse in Canada, and keenly aware of the intersections of gender, colonialism, and other constituents of reading and writing), are significant participants in women's literary discourse in Canada in the last decade.

Several of the above examples are not only indicative of the persistent crossings of traditional genre boundaries in Canadian women's writing, they also contain both anglo- and francophone texts; but bilingualism often occurs *within* texts as well, a register of how french feminist theorizing (Continental and québécoise) often informs contemporary (anglo)feminist writing. Examples might include Lola Lemire Tostevin's poetry which foregrounds and enacts the linguistic and bodied construction of women (e.g., *Color of Her Speech* [Coach House, 1982], *Gynotext* [Underwhich, 1983], and *Double Standards* [Longspoon, 1985]); Daphne Marlatt's collection of free verse/journal fragments *Touch to My Tongue* (Longspoon, 1984) which signals her break with the (mostly male) west coast phenomenologists, a break adumbrated in the matrilineal journal/autography/poetry of *How Hug a Stone* (Turnstone, 1983) and made clear once and for all in her much awaited ('poetic'/ fragmented) novel, *Ana Historic* (Coach House, 1988); here, the excavation of private family history parallels the excavation of a more public colonial history, and enables the discovery of a lesbian identity amidst the past and present obstacles to finding/establishing a women's continuum. The frequent bilingual intertexture of Canadian women's writing also registers how women's position in patriarchy figures as analogous to Quebec's position within Canada (as in, for example, Anne [McLean] Diamond's prose poem, *A Nun's Diary* [Vehicule, 1984; 1989] and short stories in *Snakebite* [Cormorant, 1989], or Gail Scott's experimental/poetic novel *Heroine* [Coach House, 1987] and her essays *Spaces Like Stairs*

[Women's Press, 1989], or Carole Corbeil's more accessible novel of middle class family relations, *Voice-Over* [Stoddart, 1992]).

The analogy between women in patriarchy and Canada's position vis-à-vis empire (whether it is the high cultural empire of England or the capitalist culture of American imperialism) is not as much of an issue as it was in women's writing in the 1970s (in the work of Margaret Atwood, Margaret Laurence, and Marian Engel, for example), although Atwood's novels *The Handmaid's Tale* (McClelland & Stewart, 1985) and *Cat's Eye* (1988) (more obviously the former) continue to thematize parallels between gender and colonial issues, as does Susan Swan's novel *The Biggest Modern Woman of the World* (Lester Orpen & Dennys, 1983) in which the story of the commercial (and gendered) exploitation of the historical giantess, Anna Swan, also tells a story of exploitative American-Canadian and familial relations. Donna E. Smyth's novel *Subversive Elements* (Women's Press, 1986), a fusion of environmentalist manifesto and handbook, earthmother primer, scholarly treatise, autobiography, regional history, and fictional romance, makes explicit the links between the exploitation of women and natural resources, and the marginalization of women's concerns in politics and history, of the maritime provinces in Canada, and of Canada in the American technomilitary complex. Kristjana Gunnars' novel (a series of highly lyrical autobiographical and metafictional meditations) *The Prowler* (Red Deer College, 1989), also concerns exploitative political relations as they surface in her family's history and in the history of successive imperialisms of and forced migrations into Iceland. Similarly, though the protagonist of Sarah Murphy's novel *The Measure of Miranda* (NeWest, 1987), if such experimentally dense prose can be said to contain anything so conventional as a protagonist, is Canadian, she is preoccupied with the political horrors of Central America, and through them becomes increasingly conscious of gender(ed) horrors within the politics of family, professional, and national life.

Such texts as these, though they by no means represent the mainstream in publication or in criticism, are indicative of an increasingly complex creative and critical literary engagement with women's (and nations') multiple subjectivities. A formerly unidirectional awareness of gender and colonialism has been exploded in part by an interrogation of degrees of complicity in various forms of colonization of others, but in greater part by the proliferation of the voices of indigenous women (for example, Jeanette Armstrong, Beth Brant, Lee Maracle, Joan Crate, Beth Cuthand, J. B. Joe, Anne Cameron, Beatrice Culleton, and many others), and the voices of lesbians, women of colour and of immigrant or nonanglo backgrounds (for example, Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Himani Bannerji, Ayanna Black, Gay Allison, Betsy Warland, Sky Lee, Joy Kogawa, Yeshim Ternar, and many, many others) in whose work the intersections and imbrications of class, ethnicity, race, erotic preference, nation(s), and language(s) defy univocality and categorization of women's experience in general and of Canadian women's experience in particular. Very local, very specific but also very international women's concerns have come to characterize a significant portion of (anglo)literary discourse in Canada in the last decade. The work of Dionne Brand, for example (in her poetry, *Primitive Offensive* [Williams-Wallace, 1982], *Winter Epigrams and Epigrams to Ernesto Cardenal in Defense of Claudia* [1983], *Chronicles of a Hostile Sun* [1984], and *No Language is Neutral* [Coach House, 1990], her short stories, collected in *Sans Souci* [Williams-Wallace, 1988], and her criticism and film documentary work on racism and women's political activism), ranges from personal excavations of her birthplace (Trinidad) and lesbian identity to larger excavations of race and racism (whether in the context of the history of slavery or a train trip from Toronto to Montreal), to elegies on persecution wherever women commit themselves to political activism and discursive change (whether in a suburb in Toronto or in government offices and jails in Grenada).

But not all women's writing in Canada in the past decade is feminist or otherwise activist (*Language in Her Eye*, for example, represents both highly theorized/politicized

statements and complaints that 'theory' and theoretically-inflected feminism function as censors). And not all women write (or continue to write – witness Audrey Thomas's most recent collection of short stories, *The Wild Blue Yonder* [Penguin, 1991]) in linguistically self-conscious and genre-transgressive forms. Apart from Alice Munro and Atwood's work (her most recent title of ten in the last decade is *Good Bones* [Coach House, 1992]), much of the bestselling fiction, of such accomplished stylists and prolific writers as Carol Shields, Jane Urquhart, Constance Beresford-Howe, Janice Kulyk Keefer, and Janette Turner Hospital, is written, by and large, in a recognizable tradition of realism and unified subjectivity (which isn't to say that it will or must be consumed as such). Similarly, regional (and again, for the most part realist) fiction continues to constitute an important vein of (anglo)Canadian writing (e.g., Sandra Birdsell, Gertrude Story, Rosemary Nixon, Lois Braun, Pat Krause, Bonnie Burnard, Edna Alford, and Sharon Butala of the various western provinces). The short story remains by far one of our most prolific and accomplished forms: Rosemary Sullivan has edited two anthologies for Oxford University Press (*Stories and More Stories by Canadian Women* [1984, 1987], but other indicative surveys include *Imagining Women* (Women's Press, 1988) and *Frictions* (Second Story Press, 1989); and several new writers whose work is as quirky in content as it is superbly crafted, have collections of their own (for example, Terry Griggs, Barbara Gowdy, Eliza Clark, Cynthia Flood, and Diane Schoemperlen). Likewise, the lyric and imagist impulses in poetry remain strong, though often pulled by a narrative impulse into prose lyric as well (e.g., Anne Michaels, Mary di Michele, Janice Kulyk Keefer, Roo Borson, Diana Hartog, Jan Horner, Patricia Young, and many others, and, the best of an earlier generation of women poets, P. K. Page and Phyllis Webb).

And finally, not all women's writing situates itself in relation to or is interested in other women's writing: the documentary and long poem traditions in Canadian writing continue to draw the interests of, for example, Sharon Thesen, Paulette Jiles, and Judith Fitzgerald (this poetry is strongly influenced by the formalist concerns of such poets as George Bowering, Robert Kroetsch, and Stephen Scobie), just as Aritha van Herk's fiction and criticism (see especially her 'cryptofrictions,' *In Visible Ink* [NeWest, 1991]), however feminist-inflected, has become increasingly 'cerebral' (which isn't to say that we can't have cerebral and bodied writing, for we do – witness the poetry of Bronwen Wallace, Erin Mouré and Lorna Crozier, for example, or van Herk's own novels).

As varied and polyglossic as the decade has been, it has also been a period of great loss, with the deaths of Marian Engel (1984), Margaret Laurence (1987), Gwendolyn MacEwan (1987), Bronwen Wallace (1989), and Adele Wiseman (1992), but a volume of Wallace's poems has been published posthumously (*Keep That Candle Burning Bright and Other Poems*, Coach House, 1991), and a collection of Engel's short stories (*Tattooed Woman*, Penguin, 1985). We have also been treated to the publication of previously unreleased material from earlier generations of women writers. Sheila Watson, for example, finally published her 1930s manuscript *Deep Hollow Creek* (McClelland & Stewart, 1992), the novel which preceded *The Double Hook* but seemed able to surface only after the feminist excavation of a specifically gendered and colonial history, suppressed for so long by a virile modernism. Likewise, Elizabeth Smart's stories, letters, drawings, poems, and autobiographical fragments have been published, as have 'new' stories of L. M. Montgomery, reissued stories of Sara Jeannette Duncan, new and collected poetry by Margaret Avison and Dorothy Livesay, and collected essays from Adele Wiseman and Miriam Waddington. And the critical anthology, *Re(Dis)covering Our Foremothers: Nineteenth-Century Canadian Women Writers*, edited by Lorraine McMullen (U of Ottawa, 1990), both resurrects once- or little-known writers and resituates the known. Women from myriad pasts (not just those of anglo ancestry) have come into speech in myriad ways in this most recent and rich decade in women's literary discourse in English in Canada.