

Margaret Lowe Benston: 1937-1991

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OBITUARY / NÉCROLOGIE

Margaret Lowe Benston: 1937-1991

Ellen Balka

ON 7 MARCH 1991, Margaret Lowe Benston died, after a courageous two and a half year struggle with cancer. Benston demonstrated her commitment to the labour movement on many fronts. This commitment was reflected in her academic work as well. She was perhaps best known for her 1969 article "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation" [*Monthly Review*, 21(4) 13-27].

Often credited as establishing the parameters for feminist debates in the 1970s, Benston's 1969 article was among the first to utilize Marxist tools in explaining the oppression of women. Benston argued that the contributions of women's unpaid work were essential in reproducing labour power. Her critique of historical materialism was based in its failure to understand that sex provides a fundamental basis for the organization of work and power in capitalist societies. Several of the concepts introduced in Benston's 1969 article, though refined over the years, remain central to our thinking about both women, and capitalist systems today.

At the same time as she published her classic article in *Monthly Review*, Benston, a young chemistry professor at Simon Fraser University, was beginning to show signs of a second career by 1969. Having published numerous articles between 1962 and 1969 in chemistry journals (on topics ranging from diatomic forces to non-orthogonal orbitals), Benston, co-authored a chemistry textbook and a few more chemistry papers prior to co-authoring an article about women and technology, in 1975.¹

Through her work as a theoretical chemist, Benston had worked with and become interested in computers. This led her to a joint appointment between Simon Fraser University's Chemistry and Computer Science departments. After co-

¹M.L. Benston & P.J. Davitt, "Women Invent Society: Early Technology," *Canadian Dimension*, 10, 8 (June, 1975), 69-79.

founding the Women's Studies Program at Simon Fraser University, Benston gave up her appointment with the chemistry department, and began teaching women's studies along with computer science. Not surprisingly, Benston helped shape discussions about women, science and technology as they emerged in the early 1980s.

An exemplar of living one's politics, Benston's scholarship derived its focus from her concerns for social justice. Similarly, her political activism sought to incorporate insights gained from her scholarship. For example, in addition to presenting technical material in an accessible voice in her writing, Benston wrote about women and the social relations of scientific expertise. In working with women's organizations around issues related to computerization, Benston tested her theories in the field, later modifying them to reflect insights gained through participation. Although Benston wrote about the effects of technological change on women for both popular and academic journals, she was always ahead of her time. Indeed the full impact of ideas she helped articulate has yet to be realized. In the years preceding her death, Benston had been working with a sophisticated theoretical analysis of science and technology, through which she was exploring the potential within technology to democratize work. Working with the Vancouver Municipal and Regional Employees Union in the mid-1980s, Benston helped facilitate a process in which workers designed services and projects that would improve service to clients, and at the same time absorb workers who otherwise might have been laid off. More recently, Benston's work focussed on the design processes that surrounded the development of technology, and the development of a participatory design process in which users could articulate social goals, that could be designed into new technological systems. Central to this work was an examination of the role of both scientists and lay people in the processes surrounding the development of technology. Benston sought the creation of a science by the people, for the people. Although an expert at many things, Benston challenged all to question the nature of expertise, and the social status commonly accorded it.

A familiar face and voice to many Vancouver audiences, Benston was a member of the Euphoniously Feminist and Non-Performing Quintet — a musical group that teaches feminist labour and anti-war songs to audiences at picket lines and rallies. In addition, Benston helped start Vancouver Mayworks, a festival celebrating workers' culture. Benston was also a founding member of the Vancouver Women's Caucus, and the Women's Skills Development Society of B.C.

As a professor, Benston was keenly aware of her role, and sought to minimize the power dynamics of supervising students. In the classroom, rather than giving students answers, Benston utilized alternative pedagogies to encourage students to ask questions. She challenged the academy to accept her activism, smoothing the path for the younger generation of academic-activists she has helped train.

Benston's commitment to making the world a better place was infectious. Her quiet efforts have helped place a positive value on the notion that academic work and community work are appropriately linked. Although Margaret Benston will

always be missed, she will be ever present in the commitment to social justice and change she has inspired.

A graduate bursary in women's studies has been set up in honour of Margaret Benston at Simon Fraser University. Tax deductible donations can be sent to the Margaret Lowe Benston Memorial Bursary in Women's Studies, c/o The Development Office, Simon Fraser University, Burnaby, B.C. V5A 1S6.

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