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### Écrivaines canadiennes des années 1970 Women Writing in 1970s Canada

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[See table of contents](#)

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# Introduction:

## Écrivaines canadiennes des années 1970 — Women Writing in 1970s Canada

CHRISTL VERDUYN, ANDREA CABAJSKY, ANDREA BEVERLEY,  
AND KIRSTY BELL

I N HER *MEMOIRS OF A BOOK MOLESTING CHILDHOOD and Other Essays*, Adele Wiseman recalled how “the feminist movement had not yet come into being” (88) when she began to write along with a host of other women across Canada including Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Marian Engel, Margaret Atwood, Helen Weinzwieg, Joyce Marshall, Rachel Wyatt, Sylvia Fraser, Mavis Gallant, Betty Lambert, Jane Rule, and Audrey Thomas (87). “As fiction writers, witnesses, expressers, instruments of our culture, we took the creative leap,” Wiseman declared. Writing two decades later, Margaret Atwood urged readers to “Jump to 1970” (*Burgess Shale* 14), a time of important cultural moments in the country such as the creation of the Writers’ Union of Canada and the activities of The All-Star Eclectic Typewriter Revue, a fundraising evening in aid of the fledgling Writers’ Union. The 1970s saw many other important cultural developments, such as the founding of Women’s Press, *La Nouvelle barre du jour*, *Les Éditions du Remue-ménage*, *Le Théâtre des Cuisines*, and *Fireweed*, among other feminist initiatives. Women writers of the 1970s in Canada “saw the world with special vision,” national newspaper critic William French commented in 1976, one that “coincided with the nationalist revival of the late 1960s” (1, 3). By the 1970s, Sylvia Bashevkin noted,

a flood of nationalist books and organizations — many of which linked concerns about culture with demands for limits on foreign investment — began to emerge, and . . . nationalist opinion, according to mass-level surveys, peaked. Not surprisingly, this process coincided with the emergence of other new social movements in Canada, including student, environmental, peace and feminist activism. (9, 11)

Women writers were at the forefront of these developments in English Canada and Quebec. Cette période est fondatrice pour le mouvement féministe, pour l'écriture des femmes, ainsi que pour la littérature et la critique littéraire au Canada. Ce numéro spécial de *SCL/ÉLC* propose un retour critique et une reconsidération de la production littéraire des femmes au Canada, au Québec, et en Acadie pendant les années 1970. Counter to Nick Mount's claim that the "Canlit" boom ended in 1974 after "Margaret Laurence ran out of novels" (7), the essays presented here show that Canadian literature flourished in the hands of women writing across the country from the end of the 1960s through to the early 1980s — and beyond.

With one or two exceptions, the essays in this issue originated as papers presented at the conference Resurfacing/Refaire surface that took place in Sackville and Moncton, New Brunswick, 26-28 April 2018. The conference was a project that co-editor Christl Verduyn had envisioned for several years. Her students, she noted, had heard of some women writers of previous generations of Canadian literature but were generally not very familiar with their work. To be sure, a number of works by women had received ongoing attention — such as Anne Hébert's 1970 novel *Kamouraska*, or Margaret Atwood's 1972 novel *Surfacing*, to which the conference title alluded. But other writers who were part of the 1970s vanguard of literary feminism had not — writers "beyond the sacred groves of downtown Toronto," in Paul Barrett's words — a "salon des refusés" that included women writers such as Marian Engel, Gabrielle Roy, Ethel Wilson, Elizabeth Smart, Margaret Avison, and Jane Rule (Barrett). Thinking also of the need to critically re-visit French language writers such as Nicole Brossard, Antonine Maillet, France Théoret, or Marie-Claire Blais, Verduyn invited Mount Allison colleagues Kirsty Bell (French) and Andrea Beverley (Canadian Studies and English) and Université de Moncton colleague Andrea Cabajsky (Études anglaises) to join her in organizing a collaborative two-campus conference. L'objectif était de porter une nouvelle attention critique à la littérature canadienne, en anglais et en français, des années 1970, et ce en revisitant le travail des femmes écrivaines à partir de plusieurs perspectives: le féminisme et activisme de la deuxième vague; les littératures canadienne, québécoise, acadienne, et autochtone à travers le Canada; l'industrie littéraire et les événements littéraires de l'époque; les maisons d'édition, revues, et magazines féministes ; les

festivals et colloques tels que la Calgary Conference on the Canadian Novel en 1978 ou l'International Flat Earth Society des années 1970. Other topics included the recovery of writing by Indigenous and other racialized women; the challenges of researching women writers of the 1970s, such as out-of-print texts; and at the same time the rewards of archival finds and other saved and salvaged materials, all of it ready to be recovered or recontextualized by today's scholarly community looking back to a decade that has been bracketed by the "radical '60s" and the "postmodern '80s."

Facilitating the goal of recovery and re-contextualization, the conference featured special sessions for dialogue, discussion, and exchange across scholarly generations. Keynote roundtable participants<sup>1</sup> who were early scholars of Canadian and Quebec women's writing of the late 1960s through to the early 1980s in Canada reflected and shared first-hand experience, knowledge, insights, and perspectives on the literary and cultural contexts and developments of the era. Participants newer to the field contributed a variety of approaches: workshops and seminars, Pecha Kuchas and creative sessions of dance and literary readings, and academic papers. Together these multifaceted contributions captured not only some of the many different ways women contribute to cultural discourse but also the conference contributors' sense of the importance and value of revisiting women's writing in 1970s Canada, and in reconsidering texts that have fallen to the "CanLit" wayside, such as Marian Engel's non-*Bear* novels, Sylvia Fraser's *Pandora's Box*, Helen Weinzwieg's *Basic Black with Pearls*, or Daphne Marlatt's *Vancouver Poems*. Presentations at the conference also brought attention to works by Monique Bosco, Connie Fife, Huguette Légaré, Carole Massé, Line McMurray, Elisabeth Vonarburg, and Bronwen Wallace.<sup>2</sup> Notably, a number of presentations focused on An Antane Kapesch's *Eukuan nin matshi-manitu innushkueu / Je suis une maudite sauvagesse* (1976). A revised Innu version of this text, accompanied by English translation, is forthcoming from Wilfrid Laurier University Press, offering readers greater access to Antane Kapesch's groundbreaking Indigenous writing. Indeed, work by Indigenous, racialized, and other minoritized writers of this era must continue to resurface in Canadian literary scholarship. Consider, for example, women's writing in Canada's Black communities at the time, such as Anna Minerva Henderson's 1967 poetry collection *Citadel*, Liz Cromwell's 1975 anthology *One Out of Many*, and Dionne

Brand's earliest publications. L'attention critique portée à ce corpus est lacunaire par rapport à son importance dans l'histoire littéraire, mais les travaux récents cherchent à combler ce manque. The possibilities are boundless, beginning with writing by women in Canada's Indigenous communities at the time.

In this issue, Rebekah Ludolph's essay on Maria Campbell's 1973 autobiography *Halfbreed* offers an example of how revisiting a text unveils interpretive community practices and contexts that limit the full import, meaning, and significance of the work. "Within the context of 1970s eugenic practices and their accompanying ideologies," Ludolph writes, "nationally invested readers often engaged in damage-centered reading and editing practices." Taking her cue from Daniel Heath Justice, who argues that Indigenous literatures "are at least as concerned with developing or articulating relationships with, among, and between Indigenous readers as they are with communicating our humanity to colonial society" (xix), Ludolph advocates that today's readers resist prioritizing settler-focused readings of Indigenous texts: "It is especially important for us to do the work of finding engaged and respectful ways of reading Indigenous texts when it comes to the new wave of students sitting in literature classes who come educated about the residential school system but expecting histories of Indigenous trauma rather than visions of resurgence. We need to actively work, in this moment, to strategically privilege non-settler focused readings of the text."

*Halfbreed* is but one example, and a relatively well-known and well-studied one, of works and women writers from marginalized communities across 1970s Canada whose "resurfacing" would elucidate the country's literary and cultural history. Proposer une nouvelle lecture des écrivaines plus conventionnelles ou canoniques élucide aussi de nouvelles problématiques. Reflecting on Margaret Atwood's 1972 novel *Surfacing*, Misao Dean asks:

So why read *Surfacing* at all? Indeed why teach Atwood, and the rest of the canon of 1970s novels that seem to reinforce the whiteness and middle-class-ness of the hegemony that subjects us? And more importantly, why contribute to the incomes of their authors by assigning these books as course readings? . . . Especially when, as literature professors, we are well aware of the effects such novels have on Indigenous students and students of colour, trans or queer students. . . .

In reply, Dean finds that *Surfacing* reminds her “of what has not changed — in the representation of the narrator’s encounter with David, in its depiction of silence and refusal as feminist strategies, and its evocation of the shame of complicity that prompts self-scrutiny. These aspects of the novel still resonate.” Equally resonant today are concerns, issues, and topics that preoccupied women writing four decades ago in Canada, from the gender disparity that Dean points towards to an array of subjects that recur in the essays that follow. Parmi ces sujets, trois se distinguent. Le premier est celui des classes sociales, ce qui inclut les questions de privilège, de marginalisation et de pauvreté. Le rôle des archives est également crucial: leur création, leur place dans la recherche, et leurs formes diverses (lettres, carnets, journaux intimes, photographies, rapports, procès-verbaux, manuscrits et notes marginales). Finalement, on constate une grande variété dans le genre de textes analysés, qui emploient des formes romanesque, poétique, autobiographique, anthologique, journalistique, et filmique. These recurring focal points weave throughout the works discussed in the essays in this issue, beginning with Kathleen Garay’s review of the genesis and expansion of Canadian literary archives during the 1960s and 70s and the implications for Canadian literary creators, “especially for women,” Garay states, “with Margaret Laurence pointing the way.” Continuing with Laurence’s work, Isabelle Kirouac-Massicotte revisits the author’s attention to class, an issue of equal concern to Laurence’s friend Marian Engel, as Christl Verduyn documents in her essay. Rebekah Ludolph’s essay on Maria Campbell illustrates the corrective insights of a recontextualized reading of Campbell’s 1973 *Halfbreed*. Louise Forsyth’s essay on the documentary film *Les terribles vivantes/Firewords* recalls the dynamic feminist community of 1970s Quebec when the work of writers such as Nicole Brossard, Louky Bersianik, and Jovette Marchessault was influential in the radical transformation of the status of women in the province. Isabelle LeBlanc met en relief la production des femmes écrivant en français hors Québec, spécifiquement dans la communauté acadienne. Maria Cristina Greco se penche aussi sur un corpus acadien, en analysant une pièce de théâtre d’Antonine Maillet. Women writers and literary characters positioned “outside” in other ways are the subjects of essays by Dominique Hétu on Adele Wiseman’s 1974 *Crackpot*; Aritha van Herk on Helen Weinzwieg’s 1980 *Basic Black with Pearls*; David Eso on Gwendolyn MacEwen’s little known connection to Canada’s Flat

Earth Society, founded in 1970 in Fredericton, New Brunswick; and Margaret Steffler on Sylvia Fraser's *Pandora* (1972). The role of archives and of genre recurs in Jason Wiens's investigation of Daphne Marlatt's 1972 *Vancouver Poems*, Tracy Ware's examination of Alice Munro's thrice-revised short story "The Office"; Marcin Markowicz's exploration of the periodical *Fireweed*, founded in 1978; and Andrea Beverley's essay on the anthology *Women and Words/Les femmes et les mots* based on the 1983 conference. Veronika Schuchter's account of working with the van Herk archive bookends the issue, her personal tone echoing Misao Dean's contemplation of reading *Surfacing* at its outset.

This overview of the essays gathered here is deepened by noticing how class, archives, and genre recur throughout the issue. Authors under consideration, and the scholars commenting on their works, turn time and again to the theme of class, as related to social context and economics. Le statut socio-économique des femmes joue un rôle fondamental dans l'oppression patriarcale et coloniale, et les écrivaines des années 60 et 70 comme Adele Wiseman, Maria Campbell, Margaret Laurence, Alice Munro, Marian Engel, et les revues *L'Acayen* et *Fireweed* le reconnaissent, tantôt de manière oblique, tantôt de manière explicite. En revisitant ces oeuvres sous le prisme de l'esthétique *trash* (Kirouac-Massicotte) ou en tenant compte de personnages dépossédés (Verduyn), plusieurs articles de ce numéro soulignent cet aspect souvent négligé de la littérature. Clearly a topic of the 1960s and 1970s, contributors to this volume examine class using more recent critical and theoretical underpinnings, such as intersectionality, to pose vital questions: De quelles manières les écrits de l'époque montrent-ils les répercussions de la pauvreté, notamment pour les femmes acadiennes (LeBlanc) et les femmes autochtones (Ludolph)? How do largely middle-class feminists overcome their socio-economic and racial privileges in order to publish inclusively, as in the example of *Fireweed* (Markowicz)? How do white, female, middle-class readers contend with their privilege when reading and analyzing works, and why continue to read works by white, female, middle-class authors featuring similar narrators, such as Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing* (Dean)? How do issues of gender, class, and race intersect (Ludolph)? Indeed, while theories of intersectionality resonate more with today's critics than they would have with writers and critics of the '60s and '70s, over half of the articles in this special issue nonetheless uncover myriad ways in which women writers of the

time addressed issues of gender, class, and race to criticize patriarchal and colonial oppressions, as well as the myth of Canada as a welcoming place (Hétu, Steffler, Massicotte, Markowicz, Verduyn). These multiple examples demonstrate that the story of women's writing is also the story of social class, with its contingent issues of gender, economics, and race.

Parmi les dix-sept contributions réunies dans ce numéro, les archives et les méthodologies archivistes émergent comme des domaines d'intérêt et comme une façon de jeter une lumière sur des textes et des événements jadis négligés. Un recours aux archives est, depuis longtemps, fondamental pour la critique littéraire féministe au Canada, comme on peut le constater dans des ouvrages collectifs importants tels que *Working in Women's Archives: Researching Women's Private Literature and Archival Documents* de Helen M. Buss et Marlene Kadar, et *Basements and Attics, Closets and Cyberspace: Explorations in Canadian Women's Archives* de Linda M. Morra et Jessica Schagerl. The contextualization provided in Garay's piece reminds us of the labour behind the creation of invaluable archival research sites. Garay provides an overview of the rise of professional curated archives in Canada at the national and institutional levels and investigates the cultural and literary historical significance of William Ready's and McMaster University's acquisition of Margaret Laurence's manuscripts. In her case study, Garay mounts a convincing argument for the centrality of Canadian archives to the development of "CanLit," an emergent discipline that "found its place" in university libraries in the 1960s and 1970s. In her reading of the unpublished correspondence between Ready and Margaret Laurence, Garay demonstrates one of the exciting features of archival work: it allows scholars to discuss texts that have rarely — if ever — been studied. Similarly, when Wiens analyzes a poem that Marlatt removed from her final manuscript of *Vancouver Poems*, and when LeBlanc describes the special issue she unearthed lors d'un dépouillement d'archives de la revue *L'Acayen*, readers learn of archived texts otherwise little known.

In other cases, archival research deepens our understanding of a writer's oeuvre or a specific literary text. Though archives do not tell unmediated stories, they can help us consider the behind-the-scenes work of publication processes, as when Beverley examines documentation of the editorial work preceding the *Women and Words/Les femmes et les mots* anthology or when Wiens recounts Marlatt's additions and excisions in *Vancouver Poems*. Beverley proposes that the bilingual



literary anthology, a project of the West Coast Women and Words Society, sheds valuable light on issues of editorial control, collaboration, selection, and representation in the development of a feminist editorial practice. L'approche archivistique de Wiens renvoie également aux méthodologies féministes: il maintient que la pratique récurive de Marlatt, qui émerge dans *Vancouver Poems*, entretient un rapport étroit avec sa politique féministe et lesbienne ainsi qu'avec une poétique des archives. Dans sa contribution, Eso se penche aussi sur des textes déposés dans des archives afin d'améliorer notre compréhension des processus créateurs et de l'héritage littéraire. He recovers archival documents relating to Gwendolyn MacEwen's tenure as vice-president of the Flat Earth Society. The Society may have been a mock institution, but MacEwen's participation in it remains, for Eso, an emblem of her "mirthful humour" and "ludic charisma." In the issue's final essay, Schuchter brings in a variety of archival materials such as letters and reviews to consider a writer's career and readerly reception, in this case that of Aritha van Herk. She defines a "feminist archival ethics of accountability" which emerges from her research in the Aritha van Herk Fonds at the University of Calgary and from her work on the archival materials of a living woman writer. Ensemble, ces articles constituent un rappel important: le recours aux fonds et aux archives dans les études littéraires permet d'introduire des textes inconnus ou méconnus dans nos échanges académiques. Il enrichit également nos connaissances de l'oeuvre d'une écrivaine, tout en nous instruisant sur leurs cercles littéraires.

The seventeen contributions assembled in this issue focus on a variety of different literary genres, which they approach using diverse methods, theoretical frames, and reading practices. A half-dozen essays examine a range of novels that consist both of literary classics from the period and of lesser-known works that merit reconsideration. The former include Dean's opening reflection on Margaret Atwood's *Surfacing*, which she reads "not [as] a contemporary book, but a historical one." Dean rejects the dominant cultural nationalist, or thematic, interpretations of Atwood's novel in favour of proposing a reconstructive reading process that illuminates the linguistic and idiomatic double-movement that underpins *Surfacing* and which scrutinizes issues of sexualized violence and colonialism while reinforcing white middle-class experience. Building on the foundations of existing interdisciplinary scholarship

on *The Diviners* (1974), in turn, Isabelle Kirouac-Massicotte theorizes marginality in Margaret Laurence's novel through the aesthetic of "trash," which renders visible those precarious subjects whom dominant society has left behind. Examinations of lesser-known or underappreciated novels include Christl Verduyn's exploration of class experience in Marian Engel's writing from the 1970s. Verduyn proposes that greater critical attention be paid to "poverty narratives," a category that she defines, through Roxanne Rimstead (2001), as stories by or about the poor that shed light on the experiences of the lower classes and of women. Dominique Hétu pushes beyond traditional comedic or parodic readings of *Crackpot* (1974) in order to argue that Adele Wiseman's novel presents a powerful critique of "the myth of Canada as a welcoming nation" to immigrants and to people "labelled with [a] disability." Aritha van Herk's eloquent reading of *Basic Black with Pearls* (1980) demonstrates the ongoing relevance of Helen Weinzwieg's prescient novel, which "dismantles" our expectations of "woman's story." Lastly, in her compelling analysis of *Pandora* (1972), Margaret Steffler proposes that Sylvia Fraser's female bildungsroman redefines the traditional relationship between language formation and the developing girlhood body as the "foundation and basis of [a] new woman."

Au-delà du roman et des archives, les autres contributions analysent d'autres types de textes qui ont joué un rôle de premier ordre durant la période: l'autobiographie, le film documentaire, la revue littéraire, l'anthologie littéraire, la poésie, le théâtre, et la nouvelle. Ainsi, Louise Forsyth démontre que le documentaire long-métrage, *Les terribles vivantes* (1986), de Louky Bersianik, Jovette Marchessault et Nicole Brossard, demeure significatif aujourd'hui pour souligner à quel point les artistes femmes s'influençaient de manière réciproque pendant cette période importante de la deuxième vague féministe. Working "alone and in the company of one another," Forsyth writes, women artists intervened in public discourse while also striving to remain physically, socially, and intellectually autonomous of mainstream society and patriarchy. Marcin Markowicz's critical analysis of *Fireweed: a feminist quarterly*, founded in 1978 by the Fireweed Collective, fills an important gap in scholarship which has paid little attention overall to feminist periodicals published during and after the women's movement's second wave. In her contribution here, Isabelle LeBlanc approaches a little-known special issue of *L'Acayen* (1972-76), published in May 1975 and containing six-

teen articles written by women, as an important and early intervention on the part of Acadian women into a minority feminist movement that anticipates, while also resembling, third-wave intersectional feminism. In his patient exploration of the dynamic of “return and revision” in “The Office” (1962 and 1968), Tracy Ware argues that the second version of Alice Munro’s short story most fully anticipates the author’s later works. Lastly, Maria Cristina Greco reads *Évangéline Deusse* (1975), the play by Antonine Maillet that revises Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s long poem *Evangeline* (1847), from a feminist perspective.

The generic range that is on display throughout this issue is matched by the equally rich scope of theories, methods, and reading practices that contributors bring to bear on writers and works from the long 1970s. Taken together, the contributions gathered here yield rich new insights into the corpus of cultural works produced by women working in French and in English, from the West Coast to the East, between the mid-to-late 1960s and the early-to-mid-1980s. They demonstrate the extent to which feminist works from this period remain amenable to critical recovery for new generations of readers who approach them from multiple formal, theoretical, critical, cultural, and material perspectives.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Marie Carrière, Louise Forsyth, Kathy Garay, Carole Gerson, Karen Gould, Sherrill Grace, Mary Jean Green, Linda Hutcheon, Smaro Kamboureli, Jane Koustas, Lucie Lequin, Jane Moss, Arun Mukherjee, Joe Pivato, Lori Saint-Martin, Patricia Smart, Conny Steenman Marcusse, and Aritha van Herk.

<sup>2</sup> The conference Call for Papers also identified Jeannette Armstrong, Joan Barfoot, Constance Beresford-Howe, Denise Boucher, Solange Chaput-Rolland, Adrienne Choquette, Joan Clark, Madeleine Gagnon, Diane Giguère, Betty Lambert, Pat Lowther, Louise Maheux-Forcier, Andrée Maillet, Joyce Marshall, Mary di Michele, Libby Oughton, Suzanne Paradis, Libby Scheier, Carol Shields, Donna Smyth, and Audrey Thomas, among other authors of works inviting reconsideration.

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