

REPORT ON WEST WORD VI

August 1990

West Coast Women and Words' summer school/writing retreat for women (West Word VI) took place from 29th July to 11th August 1990. For the first time, the school was held at the Canadian International College on Dollarton Highway in North Vancouver.

The classes were divided into 3 genres with a total of 22 students attending. Eight students were in the Poetry class with Claire Harris; eight in Fiction with Sandy Frances Duncan and six in Creative Documentary with Heather Menzies. Classes were held from 9am to noon on weekdays and in addition, each student received at least one hour of private time with her instructor for in depth critique and support of her writing. With the exception of the organized events described below, the rest of the time was set aside for private writing time for students.

The students were welcomed with a wine and cheese reception which was followed by a banquet, beautifully catered by the College and attended by students, staff, instructors and board members. A brief welcome by one of the board and a presentation by another board member and former West Word student were given.

There were three public readings held in conjunction with West Word VI: a reading by Claire Harris, sponsored by the Congress of Black Women, was held at the Native Education Centre the evening before the summer school started; all three West Word instructors read their work one evening at the College; and former West Word instructors Beth Brant and Dionne Brand were guest readers later in the week. All the readings were well attended and very enthusiastically received.

A panel discussion entitled SUBTLE FORMS OF RACISM IN WRITING was held as part of West Word's commitment to including the issue of racism as an integral part of the summer school program. The panelists were Beth Brant, Dionne Brand, Terrie Hamazaki and Sunera Thobani with Claire Harris moderating. The structure of the event received some criticism. Intense feelings were expressed by the panelists and during the ensuing discussion. People went away with much food for thought and self-examination, so much so that a follow up gathering was subsequently organized by the students to further discuss the issue on an informal basis.

The students organized two evenings of their own readings which were held during the second week of the school. The readers delivery and the quality of their work were very impressive and covered a broad range and diversity of perspective. The evenings proved to be exciting and very inspirational.

An afternoon participatory workshop called WARMING UP was led by Patricia Ludwick, who had led a similar workshop last year.

Posters and flyers were created to publicize public events and were widely distributed. The events generated much publicity, including two newspaper articles and several radio spots, culminating in a Co-op radio interview with Claire Harris and a CBC interview with Sandy Duncan. As has been the case in previous years, the women who attended West Word VI were diverse both in age (ranging from early 20's to early 70's) and writing experience. Some had previously been published and others were only beginning to call themselves writers. The largest number of students were from Vancouver (9) and elsewhere in BC (5) but students also travelled from Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, Ontario and Quebec to attend the school.

An invaluable service was offered by the mother and daughter team of Martha and Angela Royea in the form of counselling and bodywork. As emotional issues surfaced for many of the students as a result of the content of their writing, Martha and Angela were kept very busy and their work was much appreciated.

As a result of an extremely successful scholarship donation fund drive, all thirteen students who requested it were provided with a full half-fee subsidy. We are very grateful for the generosity of the scholarship fund donors. Other sources of funding for West Word VI included the Canada Council which provided a portion of one instructor's fee, her travel expenses and honoraria for the guest readers and C.E.I.C. whose Unemployment Insurance Top-Up Program permitted the hiring of three staff and provided some operating money. Proceeds from a B.C. Lotteries fundraising event covered the other instructor's fees and some site expenses and The Leon and Thea Koerner Foundation provided funds to cover the panel discussion.

Finally, a few comments from the students themselves:

- "I was extremely impressed and quite overwhelmed by the course... and feel it has changed my life in many ways"

- "I had imagined a fairly loose situation and instead was given strong guidance. I honestly hadn't imagined so much work - adjusting was hard! But this was necessary and invaluable - the tools I am going away with are more than I ever expected."

- "Thank you all for giving me a precious gift that could never be duplicated, replaced or worn out. If only we could do this every year. How about having a West Word Seniors so that we can continue what we've started?"

"I've appreciated the opportunity to participate in this workshop. It's been a truly evolutionary experience in my life. I can't say this strongly enough."

- "I now feel I have the confidence and the right to call myself a writer"

The West Word VI staff were Ann Daskal (Publicity and Public Relations), Meg Edwards (Site Co-ordinator) and Mary Sherlock (Project Co-ordinator). We would like to thank Margo Dunn, Cynthia Flood, Dorothy Kidd and Angela Royea for reading and evaluating the original student submissions and to Women and Words volunteer office co-ordinator, Gloria Greenfield for her continual support and guidance throughout the project.