

A Feigned Essentialism in Nicole Brossard's Work¹

by Ghislaine Boulanger

In the course of debates on Nicole Brossard's "essentialism," some fundamental problems of interpretation become intensified, as critics tend to argue about the *essential* meanings of her texts, or about her *essential* intentions. But what if the essential is elusive, shifting between opposite theoretical perspectives, between masculine, feminine and/or lesbian positions? According to Nicole Brossard, "the more the essential is unthinkable, that is, thwarted or repressed in non-sense [...], the more complex the necessary strategies" (*Aerial Letter* 92).² The "forbidden" essential may consist of unforeseen beliefs or subversive positions, and the transgressive strategies may be cunning or inconspicuous, like "ambivalence," "tricks" and "feints" (*AL* 91-92). While the feminist author seemingly describes the techniques of others, she is also opening a window on her own motives and devices, on her own *essential feints*. The following essay thus demonstrates that Nicole Brossard's initial recourse to the concept of *écriture féminine*³ was in reality tactical, and that her apparent essentialism, grounded mostly in constructionist principles, was therefore strategically feigned.⁴

1. *Écriture féminine* as strategy⁵

To detect the presence of a strategic essentialism in Nicole Brossard's work, we must look back many years before this manoeuvre was popularized by Gayatri V. Spivak⁶ in the late 1980s, and revisit the 1970s when many Québécois and French women writers first rallied around the concept of *écriture féminine*, which promoted the textual inscription of the body. Although the author of *The Aerial Letter* contributed significantly to the theorization of such

writings, she did so from an ambivalent position, as revealed in a key interview granted in 1976: “I like to employ the expression [*écriture féminine*], but in strategic terms. Because in fact the relationship of a subject to writing is, according to me, identical for a man and a woman. What is important, is the notion of subject. It is a relationship posed by a subject”⁷ (Fisette and van Schendel 11). By grounding a tactical recourse to the feminine in the persistent belief in a universal subject, Nicole Brossard was bridging the gap between two antithetical feminist perspectives, known in France as *différencialiste* and *universaliste*.⁸ Like universalists of her time, she aspired to a common humanity shared by both men and women, and which would transcend oppressive gender differences perceived as social constructions: “Now this has nothing to do with sex but with the condition [f] or [m]. When we no longer make babies together, the future will be the human condition” (*AL* 46-47). Unlike “differentialists,” she did not subscribe entirely to an inherently feminine writing or to a mimetic relation between body and text. For instance, her famous image of the *cortex*, a pun combining body and text (*corps/texte*), amounted to a simple metaphor, since “words,” she conceded, “will never be the body”⁹ (Fisette and van Schendel 8). Taken literally, the *cerebral cortex* represented instead universalist aspirations: “Sign of the moult: brain to the quick. The dialectic founded on difference will have been useful only for that, to take the grey diamond out of the case” (*These Our Mothers* 47). While Brossard’s critical distance from *écriture féminine* allowed her to use the expression tactically, this strategy also demonstrated, on other levels, her political solidarity with differentialists who worked to validate women’s experiences and to increase the visibility of their writings. According to her, *écriture féminine* became symbolically operative when, for example, it compelled recognition from powerful representatives of the literary institution: “We could [...] say that *écriture féminine* is this or that, but what is important is to use the expression, because it

forces others to position themselves according to that expression. If they do not, it is we who will have to explain everything in relation to men's writings"¹⁰ (Bayard and David 36-37). Even if some proponents of *écriture féminine* believed in a feminine essence, this apparent essence was nonetheless used tactically by Nicole Brossard and thus moved into the realm of rhetoric, where it played the role of a peremptory argument.

In the rhetorical tradition, the appeal to essence functions as a specific type of argument classified as a *locus communis*. According to Chaïm Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, the *locus* of essence consists in "the fact of attributing a superior value to individuals who are considered representative of a given essence. It involves a comparison between concrete individuals"¹¹ (126). By emphasizing "a comparison between individuals," this definition brings into light the process of differentiation underlying the process of essentialization. Considering certain men as the essence of humankind, for example, entails the rejection of those who differ from them; or, in Nicole Brossard's words, "the difference is what is left. The result of subtraction" (*These Our Mothers* 38). Conscious of the dangers of this double process, the feminist writer recognizes that, in reality, the dominant essence is only a difference among other differences, but, as in the case of the father figure, this "difference is transformed into *systematic* power. From this point he secures for himself control of the differences" (*These Our Mothers* 34). It is because Brossard perceives the feminine difference as an effect of the double process of essentialization and differentiation that she appeals strategically to *écriture féminine*, and thus confers to the feminine supplement the rhetorical power of a *locus communis* that is likely to disrupt the hierarchy that traditionally marginalizes women.

The art of argumentation is often associated with duplicity, and a pragmatic essentialism can also be regarded as strategic to the extent that it is feigned. Although fundamentally

linguistic or *nominal*, to borrow the distinctions established by John Locke and adopted by Diana Fuss (4-5) and Teresa de Lauretis (“Upping” 256-257), the feminine dimension nevertheless functions, on the surface, *like* a so-called *real* essence. As “a classificatory fiction we need to categorize and to label” (Fuss 4), a nominal essence might also require a suspension of disbelief by the strategist who creates *effects* of real essence by veiling their modes of production. To convince men in power of the legitimacy of *écriture féminine*, and to demonstrate a political solidarity with proponents of such writings, Nicole Brossard must at times *appear* to believe in an essential feminine difference, and therefore produce a referential illusion: “It is where one finds the ‘referential illusion,’ that, theoretically, we women traverse opaque semantic reality, and [that] the ‘fabulous’ unreal subject we are becomes operative” (*AL* 145-146).¹² In her essay “Critical Appreciation,” Brossard initially *appears* to ground “feminine and/or lesbian writing” in the body, but immediately follows with an exploration of the etymological Latin link between fiction and feint (*fingerere*), and draws attention to “the strategies (feints/tricks/devices) writing adopts to make the figures of the imagination materialize” (*AL* 91).

However, certain paradoxes are inherent in the combination of essentialism and feint. Deployed through ruse, figures of speech, and/or fiction, the act of feint can be first understood as a process, as the means by which so-called essential categories are constructed. On the other hand, the concept of feint also represents the sphere of falsity or inauthenticity against which the notion of essence is traditionally defined. This can lead to contradictory strategies. In order to maintain, on the surface, dualistic oppositions between an essential feminine difference and a pseudo-femininity determined by patriarchy, Nicole Brossard must often conceal the discursive seams that might be exposed elsewhere; she must hide her own feints, her own role in the production of persuasive “essential figures” (*AL* 141).

2. *Écriture féminine* as *réplique*

Although virtually antithetical, feint and essence not only interact like the interdependent poles of a dualism, they are also linked in a specular manner. This mixture of oppositional and mimetic interaction, for example, manifests itself through the French key word *réplique*, a polysemic term that can be translated as “replica” and “retort,” which is also linked to the lesser-known English word “retortion.” Used strategically, *écriture féminine* and “essential figures” are actually conceived by Nicole Brossard as a retort to patriarchy,¹³ but as such, they are also caught in a mimetic conflict that risks transforming the riposte into a replica of androcentric methods, since the retort consists in “the turning of a charge against its originator” (*Canadian Oxford Dictionary* 1232).¹⁴ To avoid such pitfalls, the Brossardian subject multiplies acts of simulation, as we soon discover in the inaugural text of *The Aerial Letter*, “Turning-Platform.” This text indeed deserves special attention, because it contains some of the most fundamental feints underpinning Nicole Brossard’s strategic relationship to both gender and genre.

Depicting “the discomfort of trying to overthrow patriarchal law from within” (*AL* 35), “Turning-Platform” opens explicitly with adversarial *répliques*, a word that I inserted in the English translation to underline its original manifestations:

For the rest of my days I’ll be a spinning top, a relentless spiral, stuck fast in the spew of those last words [*dernières répliques*] the phallocracy will address to the new values settling in. I am thus in history until the end of my days; and whatever the unformulated certitudes or affirmed theoretics I manage to maintain about the procedures for transformation and mutation of the species, I’ll have to be in the fray. Rudely accosted, I must protest [*réplique*]. [...] I write, therefore. I know the content of the text I will write to the very end of my days: the quest of my orgasmic body, the knowledge of my body’s ecstasy. (*AL* 37)

Since the spiral represents a displacement of the same, or a reproduction of the different, this

metaphor of the subject's position should in theory symbolize a failure of mimesis, and cause the specular intentions to deviate from their original target. However, the emancipatory movement usually attributed to the spiral is now "stuck" in a "relentless" conflict, as the *réplique* of the Brossardian subject echoes the *répliques* of phallocracy. From one riposte to another, this antagonism swirls towards an impasse, because the struggle for difference is enmeshed in a network of structural similarities between the opponents. Like the spiral, the *réplique* first gives an impression of progress as it seems to favour the "transformation and mutation of the species," but it also brings in its wave the peril of a double meaning, that of the double in itself, as the strategies of one party dangerously replicate those of the other.

Although *écriture du corps* purports to be an original response that may avoid the pitfalls of a mimetic conflict between feminism and patriarchy, this riposte not only reflects *in form* the (counter)attacks from phallocracy, but in the following paragraphs of "Turning-Platform," it also retorts a similar *content*, based on the opponent's knowledge:

My woman's being uses men's knowledge to better resist and annihilate the violence and oppression on which this knowledge of men (of humanity) is built.[...]

In the days when I thought like a man, I had simple ideas. Now, I have two sets [*en double*]¹⁵. [...]

My form is encumbered by the refound feminine. I am pregnant with a form I'm not able to make my own and which marks me in my difference and in my other subject. I am made of man's knowledge and of a feminine condition: a hybrid. [...] [A]ggravated, for if I long pretended not to remember the little girl, the adolescent, the young bride, today it is I who crop up face to face with an opaque image, I who still do not acquiesce totally to the intimate memory of empty Sundays in white [...]. (AL 37-38)

At first glance, the strategy of retorting to the adversary his own arguments seems to differ from a reply through *écriture féminine*; however, an in-depth reading of the previous excerpt will demonstrate the imbrication of both tactics, as we discover multiple shifts between various

subject positions, between manners of passing in the masculine and ways of recuperating feminine forms. Of course, it is tempting to follow the temporal markers officially laid out by the narrator, and accompany her from time “A,” when, with “simple ideas,” she “thought like a man,” until time “B,” when, with ideas “in double,” she finally adopts a hybrid position combining the masculine with “the refound feminine.”¹⁶ However, as shown by the French historian Michel Foucault, such a linear progression may conceal some gaps and contradictions under its varnish.¹⁷ Indeed, the continuous passage from a simple thought/position to a double thought/position will prove to be misleading, produced by more or less tacit feints. These feints will implicate not only the notion of hybridity or “men’s knowledge,” but also and especially, the very foundations of Brossardian feminism.

If we begin by comparing the two phases, we discover that the initial period is as much marked by duality as the subsequent one. At first glance, the main difference between the two manners of *thinking/passing like a man* is apparently a question of intention, that is, a matter of duplicity. Before outwitting her opponents with a retort of their own knowledge, the narrator once uncritically assimilated this knowledge as her own, without any apparent sign of feint. Yet, an imitative and analogical structure unites the thinking subject to “his” androcentric model: the speaker does not think *as* a man, but *like* a man. And, since the preposition “like” implies a persistent mimetic distance between the subject and other male thinkers, we can, therefore, seek an anchorage point from which man must have been emulated. In this search, we find that which the narrator has herself “refound”: the sphere of the feminine. However, the rediscovery of this territory is accompanied by the revelation of a feint: “I long pretended not to remember the little girl, the adolescent, the young bride.” To think ostensibly like a man, she had to simulate lapses of memory and dissimulate her successive feminine subject positions, her “feminine condition,”

symbolized notably by the institution of marriage. With the disclosure of this feint, we are witnessing the manifestation of a duplicity *always already there* in the past, as Jacques Derrida would say, since by pretending to forget the feminine, the Brossardian subject also feigned to conjugate her thought/position only in the masculine.

Although suddenly “aggravated,” this anterior duality (“A”) is nevertheless repressed in the shadow from where it has just emerged, constantly disavowed by the discourse that paradoxically reveals it, by a narrator who “still [does] not acquiesce totally to the intimate memory of empty Sundays in white.” A first eclipse of the feigned omission of the feminine is discernible through the periodization used to dichotomize the narrator’s journey, since the attributes of “hybrid” and “double” that Brossard reserves for the second phase of her evolution tend to divert our attention from a hybridity that already implicitly underpinned the previous stage. In fact, by erasing from her periodization her former duplicity (“A”), the Brossardian subject *is still pretending, during the current time of her narration (“B”), to forget the feminine that she once feigned to forget (“A”)*. This means that she *reproduces* her previous feint in the present by making us believe that she once thought only like a man. The simple thought/posture associated with the initial period thus proves to be a simple imposture.

These strategies are aimed at different targets and audiences, specific to each period of the timeline: “I wrote in a common-law relationship with and while men were reading me [“A”]. But, deep down, I write only under a woman’s gaze, feverishly received [“B”]” (*AL* 42). The only ruses or feints readily unveiled by the narrator – the current retort of “men’s knowledge” and the previously faked inability to recall the feminine – are intended for a public steeped in androcentric beliefs. When the enunciator exhibits a tactical recourse to men’s knowledge, the target of this subterfuge differs from the privileged audience in whom she is currently confiding.

However, when the speaker reproduces the past simulated loss of the feminine in the present, this new subtle feint is aimed presumably at feminist readers, especially because this pseudo-loss involves other corollary feints, which, if they were revealed, would undermine the project of *écriture féminine*.

To detect such paradoxical undercurrents, the correlation between the forgotten feminine and the “refound feminine” must be considered. Logically, a simulated memory recovery corresponds to a simulated amnesia, because an object that was never forgotten cannot be suddenly refound as if it had been lost. More specifically, the act of pretending to forget the feminine underlies a feigned rediscovery of this dimension; the feminine that is said to be refound never had to be recovered in the first place as it never disappeared from the narrator’s consciousness. Consequently, when Brossard declares to have refound a feminine whose loss had been only simulated, she disclaims once again the initial feint or pretends not to have feigned amnesia, which also contributes to masking the implicit duality (“A”) that preceded the explicit hybridity (“B”).

These acts of simulation involving Nicole Brossard’s ambivalent relationship to the feminine are some of the most crucial feints underlying her strategic essentialism. Although the critic Michel van Schendel considered it contradictory to “employ the expression of feminine writing only by strategy and on the other hand, [to search] the specificity of a woman’s writing”¹⁸ (Fisette and van Schendel 14), in “Turning-Platform,” the quest for an essential feminine difference is itself the object of strategies or feints. When the narrator feigns the passage from an exclusively androcentric, simple thought/position to a hybrid thought/position based on an inauthentic rediscovery of the feminine, she gives the impression of evolving from a state of unawareness (or false patriarchal consciousness) to a state of feminist consciousness. In

other words, the Brossardian subject previously feigned the loss of the feminine in order to think/pass like a man or a patriarchal woman; later, it seems that she pretends to refind the feminine in order to think/pass like a feminist, or, more specifically, a differentialist.

In the context of “differentialism,” the rediscovery of a forgotten feminine plays an important role in the larger project of recovering a “gynecological memory” (*AL* 76), of retrieving a dimension that is considered to have existed prior to patriarchal determination and/or outside its ascendancy. In “Turning-Platform,” however, the “refound feminine” turns out to be a “feminine condition,” a “form” that the narrator “is not able to make [her] own and which marks [her] in [her] difference” (*AL* 38), as if it also required an effort to think *like* a so-called woman. According to universalists, a differentialist would not feign to forget the milestones of her condition, but would instead *truly* forget that the feminine is a cultural construct or the product of power relations, and mistake it for woman’s *nature*. As explained by psychoanalyst Juliet Mitchell, “the unconscious mind *is* the way we acquire” “the ideas and laws of human society” (quoted in de Lauretis, “Eccentric” 124). Instead of relegating the “feminine condition” to the unconscious, Nicole Brossard thus pretends to forget it. If it were recognized by the official periodization, the inauthentic memory loss would not only render the two-phase progression incoherent, it would undermine the dream, or more precisely, the *act* of recovering a “gynecological memory,” since the feminine was only falsely refound.

In the midst of such feints, the network of *répliques* serves as a reminder of the double process of essentialization and differentiation that determines the masculine as essential and the feminine as different, inessential. Although some feminine positions, such as the utopian figure of the lesbian and the metaphor of *l’essentielle*, are presented as external to patriarchal determination, they nevertheless function as *répliques* to patriarchy,¹⁹ and, as such, are still

entangled in a mimetic conflict with their adversary. The “essential figures” (AL 141) are thus brought back to a paradoxical point of origin, into the patriarchal arena they were supposed to avoid, as Nicole Brossard also seems to recognize when she writes “that in wanting to lance a retort, [the feminine subject’s] hope is eroded” (AL 145). Despite the author’s intentions, the *réplique* of a feminine difference can therefore “amoun[t] to the same thing because in the end, difference distinguishes between a power and a non-power. Power of words, political power. Power which encompasses differences, appropriates them” (AL 40). Because the *réplique* entails both antagonism and mimesis, or both difference and sameness, its specular function undermines any simplistic opposition between essence and falsity, between *l’essentielle* and the “patriarchal woman,” and so on. It is a reminder that the “essential figures” are just as discursively constructed as the patriarchal images of woman that Brossard denounces as fabrications.²⁰

On another level, the *répliques* also mirror possible dangers of a strategic recourse to *écriture féminine*. Although feigned or tactical, this form of essentialism is not necessarily immune to problems of exclusion, especially when it serves a differentialist perspective that focuses mainly on gender, and tends to minimize other differences *between* women. Despite her formalist resistance to traditional principles of representation governing the realistic novel, Nicole Brossard often grounds her feminist vision in a network of mimetic analogies between herself, other women with whom she identifies, and “essential figures.” This emphasis on similarities occurs, for instance, when the Brossardian subject “summon[s] together the *us of the retort* [*le nous des répliques*] each one of us is,” since “we all have the [same] build for it” (AL 40). A collective feminine retort is thus composed of replicas among women who, as underlined by theorist Annamarie Jagose, “whatever [their] ethnic or religious origins, [...] all belong quite visibly to the category ‘women’” (AL 133-134). As further explained by the author of *Lesbian*

Utopics, Nicole Brossard's "postulation that there is an easily discernible and overriding equivalence between women despite their various and almost negligible differences [...] is evidence of [her belief in] the existence of a universal patriarchy which allows for only one distinction, that between the categories 'men' and 'women'" (45-46).

However, when "another difference" (*AL* 43) emerges, a lesbian difference, a disruption occurs in the field of *écriture féminine*. Although Nicole Brossard does not adhere explicitly to Monique Wittig's famous statement that "lesbians are not women" (32), her discourse often illustrates this distinction in spite of her declared intentions. For example, in the essay "Lesbians of Lore," where she initially considers lesbians to be women, she then refers to "women and lesbians" as two separate groups (*AL* 135). By doing so, she implicitly recognizes that the category "women" is not solely defined by anatomy, and that in fact, the feminine gender is modulated by a sexual orientation that is so dominant that it goes without saying. Her text demonstrates the double process of inclusion/exclusion underlying the synecdochic relationship between "women," as a whole, and "lesbians," as a part.

A similar problematization of gender by sexuality occurs when Brossard, in her essay "Critical Appreciation," proposes the concept of *écritures féminines et/ou lesbiennes* (*LA* 74). Although the author celebrates elsewhere the image of "the political lesbian" (*AL* 122), the notion of "feminine and/or lesbian writing" first appears in a paragraph that depoliticizes such writings (*AL* 91), as if the lesbian supplement could not acquire an institutional visibility without appearing less radical. However, the isolated expression *écritures féminines et/ou lesbiennes* is testimony to the "body politic[s]" (*AL* 91) that underlie the making of *écritures au féminin*. When Brossard supplies the lesbian dimension to *écriture féminine*, she brings into light the filter of a dominant sexual orientation *always already* presupposed by the feminine, and thereby

moves the feminine body into the realm of gender by revealing it as a social construction with heterocentric foundations. The concept of *écritures féminines et/ou lesbiennes* betrays the power relations between a centre and its margins, and seems to expose the conditions governing the integration of lesbian writings into a “system of feminine values” (AL 93). The only way for Brossard to conjugate lesbian writings in the feminine, is to keep silent on certain tensions occurring within the group of women, and never to name explicitly those whose dominant position determines the feminine. This silence – a gap in Brossard’s writing – is what allows her to create the illusion that the signifiers “lesbian” and “feminine” are interchangeable, mere *répliques* of one another.

As Nicole Brossard attempts to conciliate opposite theoretical perspectives, her feints often seem to conceal the contradictions resulting from this attempt. According to Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, feint, “fiction, lie, and silence serve [indeed] to avoid an incompatibility on the level of action in order not to have to resolve it on a theoretical level”²¹ (267-268). In the historical context of the 1970s and 1980s, the strategic recourse to *écriture féminine*, or to an essential feminine difference, amounted perhaps to an art of compromise, as Brossard’s numerous feints betrayed a certain resistance to the categories at stake. And although her feigned essentialism was intended to subvert oppressive structures, her *retort* was not immune to the *replication* of similar limitations, in form or content. However, even if the acts of simulation that we have detected are representative of other feints in Brossard’s work, we cannot generalize from such occurrences. It would be more accurate to speak of strategic moments, which vary according to context, political objectives, and audiences. When the question of essentialism arises, Nicole Brossard reminds us that in the end, the *essential* author may always be mis/read: “You do not know who I’m taking myself for when I write, and I do not know who you’re taking

yourself for when you read me” (*Giant Nature* 8).

Works Cited

- Bayard, Caroline and Jack David. "De Toronto. Caroline Bayard et Jack David sont venus rencontrer Nicole Brossard." *Lettres québécoises* 4 (mars 1976): 34-37.
- Boulangier, Ghislaine. "Les Feintes de *l'essentielle* dans la théorie-fiction de Nicole Brossard." MA thesis. Carleton University, 1994.
- . "Feintes, essences et mimésis chez Nicole Brossard, Patrick Imbert et Marie-Claire Blais." Dissertation. University of Ottawa, 2004.
- Brossard, Nicole. *These Our Mothers. Or: The Disintegrating Chapter*. Trans. Barbara Godard. Toronto: Coach House Press, 1983.
- . *La Lettre aérienne*. Montréal: Remue-Ménage, 1985.
- . *The Aerial Letter*. Trans. Marlene Wildeman. Toronto: Women's Press, 1988.
- . *The Giant Nature of Words and Silence Around Identity*. Trans. Patricia Claxton. Shirley Greenberg Annual Lecture given on March 8, 2001. Ottawa: Institute of Women's Studies, University of Ottawa, 2002.
- Collin, Françoise. *Le différend des sexes: De Platon à la parité*. Nantes: Pleins Feux, coll. "Lundis Philosophie," 1999.
- . "Théories de la différence des sexes." *Dictionnaire critique du féminisme*. Ed. Helena Hirata et al. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000. 26-35.
- de Lauretis, Teresa. "Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness." *Feminist Studies* 16.1 (Spring 1990): 115-50.
- . "Upping the Anti (sic) in Feminist Theory." *Conflicts in Feminism*. Ed. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller. New York: Routledge, 1990. 255-70.
- Fisette, Jean and Michel van Schendel. "Un Livre à venir: Rencontre avec Nicole Brossard."

- Voix et Images* 3.1 (septembre 1977): 3-18.
- Foucault, Michel. *L'archéologie du savoir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969.
- Fuss, Diana. *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Girard, René. *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde. Recherches avec Jean-Michel Oughourlian et Guy Lefort*. Paris, Grasset & Fasquelle: Le Livre de Poche, coll. "Biblio essais," 1983.
- Jagose, Annamarie. "Space, Skin, Spiral: *The Aerial Letter* and its Holographic Projection." *Lesbian Utopics*. New York: Routledge, 1994. 43-67.
- Perelman, Chaïm and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca. *Traité de l'argumentation. La nouvelle rhétorique*. Bruxelles: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 1983.
- "Retort." Def. 2. *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*. Ed. Katherine Barber. Toronto: Oxford UP, 1998.
- Santoro, Miléna. "Drawing the Line and Transgressing Limits: Nicole Brossard's *L'Amèr*." *Mothers of Invention: Feminist Authors and Experimental Fiction in France and Quebec*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 2002. 153-207.
- Spivak, Gayatri and Ellen Rooney. "In a Word. Interview." *Differences: A Journal of Cultural Studies* 1 (Summer 1989): 124-55.
- Wittig, Monique. *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1992.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Jodi Lundgren and Kelly-Anne Maddox, for their insightful criticism and editorial guidance, and to Wendy McPeake, for proofreading the English translation of my work.
2. All future references to *The Aerial Letter* will appear in parentheses with the abbreviation *AL* followed by the page number. References to the original version, *La Lettre aérienne*, will be indicated with the abbreviation *LA*, followed by the page number.
3. To reflect the terminology used by Nicole Brossard at various stages of her work, I use expressions such as *écriture féminine* (1970s), *écriture féminine et/ou lesbienne* (1981), or “patriarchy.”
4. For an in-depth analysis of Nicole Brossard’s feigned essentialism, see Boulanger “Feintes, essences et mimesis” (4-191).
5. Although the first section of this article develops ideas initially explored in Boulanger, “Feintes de *l’essentielle*,” it is important to mention that Miléna Santoro also analyzes certain implications of Brossard’s tactical use of *écriture féminine*, but from a different theoretical perspective (Santoro 153-207).
6. See, for example, Spivak and Rooney (124-155).
7. My translation of the following excerpt: “*J’aime employer l’expression, mais en termes stratégiques. Parce qu’en fait le rapport qu’un sujet a à l’écriture à mon avis est identique pour un homme et pour une femme. Ce qui est important, c’est la notion de sujet. C’est un rapport qu’un sujet pose*” (Fisette and van Schendel 11).
8. For a discussion of *différentialiste* and *universaliste* philosophies, see Collin, *Théories* (30-32), or *Différend* (41-63).
9. My translation of “*les mots ne seront jamais le corps*” (Fisette and van Schendel 8).
10. My translation of Nicole Brossard’s words: “*On parlait d’écriture féminine, on peut faire des recherches là-dessus et dire que l’écriture féminine c’est ceci ou cela, mais ce qui est fondamentalement important c’est d’employer l’expression, parce que cela force les autres à se poser en fonction de cette expression-là. S’ils ne font pas cela, c’est nous qui allons devoir tout expliquer en fonction de l’écriture des hommes*” (Bayard and David 36-37). Brossard reiterates this position in Fisette and van Schendel 11.
11. My translation of the following excerpt: “*Nous entendons par lieu de l’essence [...] le fait d’accorder une valeur supérieure aux individus en tant que représentants bien caractérisés de cette essence. Il s’agit d’une comparaison entre individus concrets*” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca

126).

12. I have slightly altered Marlene Wildeman's translation in order to reflect in a more neutral manner the following French text: "*C'est là même où il y a 'illusion référentielle' que théoriquement nous, femmes, traversons l'opaque réalité sémantique et que le sujet fabuleux que nous sommes devient opérant*" (LA 139, AL 145-146).

13. See especially "Turning-Platform" (AL 37-50) and "Access to Writing: Rites of Language" (AL 139-146).

14. Regarding the notions of mimetic conflict or mimetic rivalry, see Girard, *Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde*.

15. In the original French text, Nicole Brossard uses the terms "*en double*" ("in double"). Throughout the following analysis of this excerpt, I will refer to the original word "double" because it is linked to the idea of duplicity.

16. To ensure the clarity of the following analysis, I assign the labels "A" and "B" to each time period.

17. Regarding the notion of discontinuity, see Foucault, *L'Archéologie du savoir*.

18. My translation of Michel van Schendel's words to Nicole Brossard: "*Tu dis n'utiliser l'expression d'écriture féminine que par stratégie et d'autre part, tu affirmes rechercher la spécificité d'une écriture de femme; ces deux positions sont inconciliables*" (Fisette and van Schendel 14).

19. See for example *The Aerial Letter* (141-143).

20. See especially Nicole Brossard's essay "A Captivating Image" (LA 125-130).

21. My translation of the following statement: "*La fiction, le mensonge, le silence, servent à éviter une incompatibilité sur le plan de l'action, pour ne pas devoir la résoudre sur le plan théorique*" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 267-268).

Ghislaine Boulanger teaches at the University of Ottawa, where she has completed her doctorate. She specializes in feminist and postmodern theories of literature, and is currently preparing other articles on the works of Nicole Brossard, Patrick Imbert and Marie-Claire Blais.