"*bringing me into the world*": *Brossard's <u>Lovhers</u> and the Domain of Linguistic Survival*

Word-work is sublime, she thinks, because it is generative.[1]
~Toni Morrison

Since the 1970's, Nicole Brossard has contributed substantially to the representation and legitimation of lesbian existence. Today, Brossard's is a familiar voice in the context of lesbian feminist literary practice. Her work constitutes "one of the most articulate and persistent efforts to think [about] otherness…that have been produced in Québec" (Siemerling 173). Noteworthy in this regard is Brossard's long poem, *Lovhers*.[2] With aid of theoretical writings of Gayatri Spivak and Judith Butler, I explore the lesbian-feminist poetics of Brossard's poem with special focus on the concerns of discourse and language it raises. Spivak's notion of "worlding" and Butler's speculations on the double movement and dual potentiality of injurious language help unpack the political implications of the linguistic performance of *Lovhers*. Brossard fashions lesbian subjectivity by refusing heteronormative discourse, turning the violent language of patriarchy back upon itself; in turn, she remakes that language so that it may serve as the material with which to fashion a "domain of linguistic survival" for lesbian existence (*Speech* 41).

Brossard achieves these effects by "worlding" lesbian subjectivity. Worlding, a term coined by Gayatri Spivak and a major precept of postcolonial criticism, is one of a number of processes of othering carried out through colonial discourse. To effect and maintain hegemonic control over territories under conquest, colonizers take over the major modes of representation so as to produce rhetorically a common belief in the 'natural' inferiority and delinquency of native subjects and cultures (Said *passim*). One of these methods of othering Spivak calls *worlding*: specific colonial otherings whereby individuals and areas are presided over and inscribed by imperial figures in conspicuous, dramatic ways.[3] Through worlding, colonized natives and territories are defined in Eurocentric terms, translated through the colonial language and

designated as subject to Euro-imperial authority. As Spivak explains, worlding "effectively and violently [slides] one discourse under another" ("Simur" 133).

Here, I translate Spivak's colonial discourse theory into the milieu of sex and gender discourse theory. I want to consider the implications of this process for women's sexuality and think about practices of gendered socialization as methods of othering. In my view, the worlding of heteropatriarchal dominance "effectively and violently" slides the discourse of lesbian subjectivity under that of heteronormativity. The heteropatriarchy is "worlded" through appropriations of not colonial space but the space of the female body. Women are marked by heteropatriarchal language in much the same way colonized populations and areas are marked European in colonial discourse. Women are defined in heteronormative terms, translated through patriarchal language and designated as subject to male authority. Whereas native subjects are forced to experience 'home' as a colonial territory, lesbian subjects are compelled to experience their bodies as patriarchal property—as such, women are likewise subject to "compulsory heterosexuality" (Rich 347 - 48). Heteropatriarchal dominance is a particular problem for lesbians—an emergency really—because it not only designates them inferior to men but also situates them inside a sexual identity deeply discordant with their being.

Lesbian subjectivity in postcolonial conditions is a triply marginalized subject position, violated through and oppressed by processes of colonialism, patriarchy *and* heteronormativity. Both in and outside colonial contexts, however, women's bodies can be viewed as a 'colonized terrain.' Not only is the lesbian thus 'colonized,' she is further proscribed by being denied a place in discourse, a gendered form of displacement exacerbated by the fact that whenever she has 'snuck in,' her lesbian existence has been rapidly extinguished. Several lesbian feminists make this argument, and it is evidenced in any case by documentary history—the multiple orders

of multiple Popes to burn Sappho's work being only the oldest known example.[4] With her enigmatic poem, *Lovhers*, Nicole Brossard responds to the historical absence of lesbian existence, a problem likewise theorized in the work of Judith Butler. In *Excitable Speech*, Butler shows how what she calls "linguistic vulnerability"—the potential for being victimized and displaced through injurious speech—might develop into an empowering dynamic whereby "an unexpected and enabling response" is produced (*Speech* 2). My position is that the worlding of heteronormativity is an excellent example of the injurious speech Butler theorizes. By countering the destructive processes of heteropatriarchal worlding, Brossard's *Lovhers* realizes Butler's "enabling response" in the context of lesbian subjectivity and dramatically demonstrates how "surviving takes place in language" (*Speech* 4).

The manifestation of lesbian subjectivity performed in the poem problematizes its discursive invisibility, exposes the always prior "worlding" of the heteropatriarchy and qualifies *Lovhers* as a significant instance of linguistic lesbian survival. In Butler's terms we might say Brossard's poem concerns the "social ritual[s] that decide, often through exclusion and violence, the linguistic conditions of survivable subjects" (*Speech* 5). Just as the inscription of empire on the colonial territory and subject is violent, the inscription of heteronormativity—the "interpellation" of the subject into spontaneous compliance with heterosexuality—is similarly violent for lesbians.[5] However, as Butler argues, "if to be addressed is to be interpellated, then the offensive call runs the risk of inaugurating a subject in speech who comes to use language to counter the offensive call" (*Speech* 2). Butler further claims that because subjects are "interpellated within the terms of language, a certain social existence first becomes possible" *through* language, even as and when it is oppressive (*Speech* 5). Thus, discourse varyingly harms, destroys *and* upholds the subject as we are "alternately sustained *and* threatened through

modes of address" (*Speech* 5). Victims can reverse the effects of wounding speech in such a way that the response "turn[s] one part of that speaking against the other, confounding the performative power of the threat" (*Speech* 12).

Butler's speculations on the dynamics of linguistic exchange suggest a few things. First, in somewhat the way Spivak imagines colonial discourse as a mobile force 'sliding around' over other discourses, Butler views instances of speech as continuously running language threads that ricochet back and forth between speakers—including authors, books and readers. Rather than simply being delivered, and the delivery constituting the conclusion of the exchange, for Butler, language rebounds in a conceivably endless loop. This view attributes a plasticity to processes of interpersonal communication; and, it implies that discourse is a never-ending 'conversation' with no discoverable origin. As speech is received and responded to, words and phrases are translated by participants and hate speech is returned in new forms with new meanings (*Speech* 14). Moreover, when an instance of injurious speech is committed and the victim 'catches' the harmful words, the hegemonic ideas signified are likewise opened up to the possibility of translation and transcreation. Thus, along with victims, the very terms of the address are 'exposed' and 'under threat.'

What this means ultimately is that hateful language could actually turn out to be the stimulus prompting an alteration of the terms of the discourse itself. As Butler argues, the "effects [the speech act] performs must exceed those by which it was intended" (*Speech* 14 – 15).[6] She is also careful to stipulate that linguistic agency is not owned by single speakers or housed within individual occurrences of speech because words acquire their power to wound through *time*. Instances of speech are, for Butler, "condensed historicit[ies]" (*Speech* 3), "extended doing[s]," and "never merely a single moment" (*Speech* 7). Specific words and

phrases are capable of injury only because they are part of a historical speech continuum and have been conventionalized. Accordingly, we see how, as Butler proposes, "loosening…the link between act and injury...opens up the possibility for…a kind of talking back" (*Speech* 15). As a literary performance, Brossard's poem exemplifies and enacts Butler's theory of "talking back," demonstrating how words can "become disjoined from their power to injure and [be] recontextualized in more affirmative modes" (*Speech* 15).

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Spivak and Butler's theories complement Brossard's work profoundly because, for all three authors, place and being are inextricably and fundamentally connected—an idea plainly indicated in Butler's notion of a *domain* of linguistic *survival* (*Speech* 41). Both theorists work from common ontological ground offering theories of being that are essentially spatial. Where Spivak speaks of displacement through "worlding," Butler speaks of the absence of "place." The "place" for some members within "a community of speakers," she tells us, may be "no place" at all (*Speech* 4). Despite its metaphysical character, *existence* or *being* must have a distinct, discernible *place* for these writers. Likewise, Brossard's *Lovhers* is a *spatial* response to the problem of lesbian displacement; when her speaker reads a discursive text, this activity "takes spaces away from" her (26).

This explains why Brossard appropriates a form of worlding in a poem about forging and affirming lesbian existence. Colonial and heteropatriarchal worldings are performative mechanisms designed to displace subjects in precisely the way Butler describes. These violent discursive gestures necessarily exclude other places of being and erase other possibilities for human relationship. Repairing exclusions and displacements inevitably involves carving out or making space in discourse. For example, worlding doesn't merely indicate that the colonizer
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dominates the territory represented, it also says that the place of the text was "no place" before it was thus conquered and inscribed. And, just as colonial discourse legitimates colonial authority, heteropatriarchal worlding makes a place for male authority through men's discursive dominance over women's bodies.[7] For all intents and purposes, private and public, 'woman' doesn't exist before her inculcation by a male figure. Woman is 'nothing' and 'no one' before a male gazes upon her, 'wakes her up' and seductively draws her into a prescribed existence. As Farwell explains, "the traditional narrative is the movement of a mobile figure, marked male through a…passive space marked female. …[O]nly one gender has agency or subjectivity, and this gender also has the ability to conquer and control its constructed opposite" (158).

In addition, Brossard's aesthetic choices are variously strategic—a transposed, subversive counter-worlding is coupled with the feminist practice of body writing such that the poem functions at multiple levels of 'place.' Body writing is obligatory in lesbian counter-worlding since it is the female body that is inscribed by and violated through heteropatriarchal discourse. Paradoxically, this is also what makes the appropriation of the practice of worlding an effective counter-hegemonic strategy. The literary means of lesbian feminism practiced here involve the reconceptualization and reappropriation of this process through (what I am calling) "counter-worlding"—a response to the problem of 'placelessness' that is both empowering and liberatory. In *Lovhers*, Butler's "enabling response" becomes a discursive place of survival through the worlding of an othered figure. Counter-worlding "talks back" (in Butler's sense) to a prior injurious worlding through the retrieval of 'conquered' space. It is a responsive, place-making 'counter-action' designed to make room for a proscribed subjectivity: *lesbian existence in the world*. More to the point, Butler arrives at the following conclusion in *Excitable Speech*:

> Indeed, as we think about *worlds that might one day become thinkable, sayable, legible,* the opening up of the foreclosed and the saying of the unspeakable

> become part of the very "offense" that must be committed in order to *expand the domain of linguistic survival*. The resignification of speech requires…speaking in ways that have never yet been legitimated, and hence *producing legitimation* in new and future forms. (41, my emphasis)

Butler's theory thus concerns the possibilities for and practices that would expand the *space* of survival for Others. As we know, lesbian subjectivity is, effectively, a 'homeless' subjectivity. Through work produced by poets like Brossard, the lesbian subject moves from "no place" to "some place." In this poem, Brossard uses counter-worlding to oppose the always already worlded heteropatriarchy, to expose the violence of that process, and to give her proscribed, historically invisible subject an avowed presence *in the world*.

As a poetic performance, *Lovhers* radically frees 'woman' from heteronormative captivity. To accomplish this, the writer requires a counter-language. Hegemonic language lacks words in which the subject might 'live' or 'reside': "i put the number (4) before inscribing *Lovhers* and i can only make headway by initials" (25). To use language *as it is given* will never permit the inscription of lovhers for the writer has only fragments of language with which to work. As such, lesbian feminist literary practice necessarily involves the re-coding of language. The central metaphors for lesbian existence in Western feminist theory are simply not permitted existences in the dominant language and its discourses—this includes, for example, Rich's notion of the "lesbian continuum" articulated in "Compulsory Heterosexuality," Wittig's celebration of "the lesbian body" in her classic novel of the same name, Butler's theory of the "lesbian phallus" theorized in *Bodies that Matter*, and Brossard's lesbian "lovhers." We might say that each of these metaphors constitutes a lesbian counter-worlding, a "response" (in Butler's usage) to the fact that their authors' lived realities are not recognized as part of "the social reality of what a woman is" (*Speech* 68).

Brossard reconstitutes language—"so transform me, she said" (65)—by translating the invisible reality of lesbian desire *into* the dominant language, reshaping that *language* to "fit" the *subject*. The poet creates neologisms like "*essenshe'll*" or "possibles" (81) and continually commits grammatical transgressions—the lack of capitalization, unconventional inventive uses of punctuation (parentheses, dashes, slashes), and the substitution of numbers for words, like "(4)" as "for." She also plays with the way words appear on the page, such as in the line: "vociferating mythologies of voices caught in the cliché, cities, (*i*n *play*)" (60). The words "*i*n *play*" are noticeable as much for their parenthetical status as for their partial italics. The line suggests two ideas. We can interpret "*i*n *play*" in its Derridean connotation *and* we can read it without the "n," as "*i play*."[8] Consequently, Brossard intends to destabilize "vociferous mythologies," or put them into play, and to 'play' with subjectivity—as in, 'this is *i play.*' The subjectivity being 'played' transgresses the mythologies referenced, an idea further signified through parentheses. In addition, the 'missing' period at the end of the line assigns a timelessness both to the discourses being contested *and* the deconstructive play of *Lovhers*.

Lines like this remind us that the crisis of this poem is a crisis of language, that what is put into play first and foremost is language itself: its "(crisis)" is "linked to words / (machine for divining symbols)" (46). Brossard's subject is called *"lovher,"* a new word for a subject forbidden historically; this transgressive word is itself a linguistic 'dwelling place.' In this poem, we see how language has been *done to* women—"This text was written before it *happened to* me" (26, my emphasis)—and in turn how women might *do* language in reply: "*i* am writing *you* now" (23, my emphasis). If the self is constructed in and by language, then identity can be *re*-constructed by the same means (*Speech* 5). As Parker claims, if "language mediates/constructs our perception and experience of 'reality'...it is surely 'political' to intervene through language,

to operate on the image and the word in order to reconstitute…subjectivity" (10). The opening section of the poem, "(4) Lovhers/Write," establishes the text's deconstructive aims—this is a poem in which the "texture of identities" will be confronted, analyzed and reformulated (15). "Texture" is a pun in this instance: it means *texture* as in the content, features and character of identity, and also implies *texture* as a verb—to perform the "texting" of or to "texture" an identity "(4) Lovhers" (that is, "*for* Lovhers"). As Siemerling argues, Brossard "has no qualms about the theoretical possibility of women's access to subjectivity...through the praxis of writing" (175). Nonetheless, to accomplish this "texting" the author must "invert" the system—language—and it is "this text, under the eye," *Lovhers*, performing that inversion (15).

Note the last line on page one: "in reality, there is no fiction" (15). Fiction—the writing of culture, history, identity—opposes the self-fashioning "textured" in *Lovhers.* The latter identity is "barred" (Lacan 146-75) from cultural 'consciousness' because it is denied a place in the cultural, national or colonial language. Brossard's term "lovher" is a signified (a reality) without a signifier (a place in language). One suggestion Brossard seems to make is that lesbian subjectivity is part of Lacan's "real order"—"real" but without language and thus outside social, normative, discursive "reality"—what he calls the "symbolic order."[9] In fact, at times, Brossard engages Lacan in an explicit dialogue: "everything is in the beyond" (24). And later: "i'm dispersed / in the survived of things of the real" (43); still later: "i succumbed: that's what drags me / into the real…" (76). The lesbian subject is barred by the sign "woman" in its normative constitution, as well as signs like "wife" "mother" and, of course, "lover." The "texting" of a barred identity is, in Lacanian and Kristevan terms, as also in Brossard's, the subversive or "revolutionary"[10] movement from the real to the symbolic, a lesbian 'coming out' into a linguistic *place* constructed by Brossard.

Early in the poem and in striking ways, Brossard shows how women are "`put in their place' by…speech" (*Speech* 4). "June the Fever" opens with an announcement, one of the chapter's refrains: "i read the text of your project" (23). The constitution of identity is invoked not only through this refrain, but through another refrain that begins here and continues into the next section: "I don't stop reading/deliring." Here, a woman is seated at a public café. She speaks in the first person. She reads "your text," a text written by an unspecified "you" who writes "excessively as if nothing could stop you" (23). The text Brossard's speaker reads is both the single text of an individual author *and* Butler's "[whole] history of speakers" (*Speech* 52). We see its specificity in the way Brossard speaks of an 'i' and a 'you' and refers to a particular text from which "Murray" is quoted (23). At the same time, the generality of "your text" is also clear because this is "a *shared* reading facing the certainties *i sometimes push away* with tears, with *forgetting* or again with writing so as *never to forget* even if it is never entirely a question of memory" (23, my emphasis throughout). Some realities must be written down so as not to be forgotten, even when 'writing-to-remember' isn't the only action called for—this would be especially important for a subject without a place in her 'world.' But what is crucial here is that this reading experience is "shared," thus discursive.

What is more, the speaker feels that the text should in some way correspond with her self. After scrutinizing the book and trying to locate herself in it, she concludes: "i am obstinately looking for traces of everyday life in your work. nothing" (24). That she is compelled to make this comparison insinuates "your text" as part of normative discourse, 'written' by those who have had "the power to gender" (*Speech* 49). The speaker reads the language of culture in a compulsory manner. She seems somehow duty-bound to read this text. While reading, she reflects, "i go at your project in pieces because literally it burns me" (23). The speaker can only

handle a little bit of "text" at a time because it is hostile to her lesbian body and "burns" her. Not desiring male intimacy, she is injured ("burned") through the inscription of heteronormativity. Parts of the text threaten to become part of her, to define her within its terms: "each fragment becomes my 'integral' of you" (23). As Brossard later says, "THE (male) politics of the gaze of sexual bliss is also the silence of bodies elongated by hunger, fire, dogs, the bite of densities of torture" (85). It is heterosexuality that is "inflicted on women's bodies" causing the "prolonged silence" of a certain "*species of woman*" (82). That species of subject has been "slid under" the discourse of heteropatriarchy in Spivak's terms, "injured" in Butler's, and "tortured" in Brossard's.

With Butler's help, we recognize that this oppressive action may also be potentially empowering. For example, just as Brossard uses burning to metaphorize the injurious power of language, that burning morphs from pain into desire. Having 'caught' the normative address, the speech of "your text" is now in the speaker's hands. This language rebounds and is returned. Brossard's subject desires to re-imagine this text: "i don't know why but rather than reading what you have written, i'd like to imagine it" (23). The injurious language violates her, but that same violence produces in her the "desire for words, my appetite for what allows me to imagine the real" (24). While reading "your text," Brossard's speaker narrates her thoughts and reactions to it, *addressing* the text and *replying* to it. In order for "your text" to function it *must* be read by an 'I' capable of responding to it in unpredictable ways. The speaker's response to the text is enabled precisely because she is made to dwell in and know its language. Since the heteropatriarchal hail is, as Butler shows, not simply a 'delivery' but part of a dialogic exchange, it actually 'generates' the possibility for a generative reply to the invisibility created through discursive worldings. Brossard "talks back" to this text—literally and in Butler's sense—by

"[imagining] new customs with these same mouths that know how to make a speech" (*Lovhers* 18).

Importantly, Brossard's speaker not only reads and speaks, she also *writes.* Moreover, Brossard carefully underscores the fact that her speaker writes *in the world*: "i am writing you now *from a sidewalk café on St. Denis* where i have been sitting for an hour. it is a fine day and all about there is an air of reality. this café is called La Cour, it has a little yellow fence" (23, my emphasis). She locates the speaker in a public café for which the details are remarkably precise. While many parts of the poem lack context, in this case Brossard gives the speaker a time (an hour on a fine day) and a place (La Cour café on St. Denis street in Montréal) with explicit characteristics (a sidewalk, a yellow fence). The counter-worlding fully realized by the conclusion of the poem commences in this early scene. At the close of *Lovhers*, Brossard relocates the speaker from this public café in Montréal to another public establishment *in the world*, the Barbizon Hotel for Women in "America" (62). Throughout *Lovhers*, Brossard names and occupies public places like this obsessively, and she sets the speaker down in explicit locales repeatedly: "July the Sea" (29); "the island (4) loving women" (33); "Milan" (53); "*space (mâ)*" (63); "Lexington Avenue" (64); "the continent of women" (75). In addition, Brossard translates poetic issues—history and desire, for example—into spatial metaphors time and again: "time is measured here in waters / into vessels…" (62); "tonight we are going to the *Sahara*" (65); "i succumbed to the fury, the cities and the etchings" (70). The movement of this poem is always in the direction of spaces and geographies; this spatial inclination is in some way about creating "studios for correspondence"—places for lesbians to write themselves into existence (66). In the spirit of worlding, Brossard "run[s] the risk of conquest / so as not to be non-sense"—for her, in

order to exist at all she must 'conquer' and lay claim to these worlds. The lesbian subject will be counter-worlded in a terrain she is seen to preside over, inscribe and occupy.

In subsequent chapters, Brossard makes use of the voice fashioned in this dramatic exchange between text (discourse) and reader (subject) to form a two-fold body: the lesbian subject ("the two women…in the narrow bed," [83]) and the place of linguistic survival for her ("mâ," [63, 89]). Late in the poem, for example, Brossard writes: "my continent of spaces of reason and / (of love) like a history of space / where we can speak concretely about allegiance…" (91). In the end, for Brossard, the theory, the metaphor, the desire, the heart of the poem itself—"it's in space" (82). To get to the point where she can pen these lines, however, Brossard's speaker must first recognize that the text she reads is injurious, that it threatens her lesbian existence. She concludes thus that the "strategy of the books must be unmasked" (26). Lesbians are read to and written upon erroneously; as a result they "leave foundering there in the course of the reading, [their] biological skins" (26). The "skin" of normative socialization will be shed so that the lesbian subject can "find [her] surfaces again" (26). She burns, fragments, founders as "your text" threatens to interpellate her, to displace her into a false version of herself: "i read the text of your project and i find it provocative. it takes spaces away from me" (26).

But, the speaker resists, offering up a 'threat' of her own: "don't confound the surfaces of meaning and the sense of this text" (26)—don't confuse reality with "your" "convenient fiction" (23). Threats to the survival of the subject are countered through references like the conspicuously capitalized *and* italicized "*Emerging*" (31) or "thought takes shape" (33). The fever of desire to counter heteropatriarchal hate speech and affirm lesbian existence is fertilized: "I run the risk of conquest so as not to be nonsense" (34). An idea is conceived, a creative act conjured as the speaker moves from reading to writing—"we can conceive anything" (36). She

"borrow[s] from the dictionary" (43) and "dive[s] head first into reality / such a compatible writing" in order to make "women in ink / calls forth the unrecorded" (44). The process of emergence is figured as a veritable flood of unrecorded facts and formerly invisible desires: "open veins of biographies" (46).

To manifest the place of being for *Lovhers*, Brossard must invoke the history of lesbian existence—which, in an inverse way, also evidences the worlding that proscribes and demonizes lesbian subjectivity, an othering Brossard dubs the "torture" that is "thousands of years old" (56). This history is represented by the days of the week which advance in reverse order. Because time moves 'backwards,' the creator of this counter-world 'reverses' history, and, assuming time continues in the same direction, the day of creation for Brossard's subject—the *first* page of the next chapter, "The Barbizon"—is "sunday."[11] In one of many discursive reversals, the subject is "texted" on the Christian Sabbath, the day of rest. This is significant not only because several obvious references to Genesis follow it—the first being, unsurprisingly, "in the beginning" (53)—but because, as we know, the primary discourse under attack in *Lovhers* is defined through that story. It is not insignificant that the sub-section called "The Temptation" features the Genesis inspired refrain, "i succumbed"—a statement appearing a total of *eight* times in this segment, at least once on all but one page. These allusions are important because they point to the identity "texting" central to this poem and place that transgressive production within the frame of heteronormative discourse. In Butlerian response mode, the injurious speech of Genesis is translated, transcreated and returned: "(the moon came up at the same time as a thousand / women got up…)" (53).

When "The Barbizon" opens, it is "sunday" and we are in the midst of a queer oblivion—set down in a discourse community where clocks run counter-clockwise and reality is

'backwards.' Now, lips open to utter Butler's "enabling response" (*Speech* 2): "here the girls of the Barbizon / in the narrow beds of America / have invented with their lips / a vital form of power" (63). The celebration evinced on page one (a "love festival" [14]) is finally manifest through ecstatic moments of "spiraling" in which the speaker and her partner spiral downwards, as if falling through or into a transgressive vertigo. The speaker narrates her fall, saying: "i succumbed to the impression.../ --life mobilizes itself / with the fine ardour of women showing forth / ...seized suddenly / in the most ritual amorous slownes s ex--- / temptation with all gravity / of ecstasy" (73). Brossard scripts the fall into lesbian subjectivity as the dropping "gravity / of ecstasy," a "temptation beyond words / ...moving me towards the other woman" (76). Despite being outside normativity and thus "beyond words," Brossard creates words to produce the narrative of her subject's paradoxically life-*sustaining* fall.

This lesbian 'creation story' celebrates the fall *into* a counter-worlded lesbian existence, the fall *out* of "the law of patriarchal heritage" into a reconstituted "symbolic order" and sign: "woman" (79). In this place, two women "[celebrate] the daily / emergence of temptation" (73). A key image reads: "that's when we find the two women again in the narrow bed" (83). "Again" suggests the women have been together *in the world in the past*. Their placement in a bed is an overt suggestion of intimacy and, because the bed is narrow, there is no room for anyone else—specifically, that is, for a woman's normative intimate: a male. I think it is essential to recognize not only the way the "texts" of two female bodies operate in opposition to "your text" (15), but also how each of these women functions as the other's mirror image. Earlier, the speaker reflected: "in the taste of the kiss. i know that you are real to me/therefore" (28). It is significant, however, that she is real to *herself* by the same means. The subject is constituted by *reading* the body of her partner—they become "my double" for each other (92), and as such: "doubled by the

startled bodies [they] [agree] to the awakening" (83). The women affirm one another's lesbian existences, their mutual lesbian desire, their reciprocal lesbian bodies.[12]

Thus, the body of another woman initiates Brossard's lesbian subject. More specifically, replacing the patriarchal phallus here is a female-feminist 'icon,' the nipple of a woman's breast. A certain "*species of woman*" (82, Brossard's emphasis) is "coming *showing the tip of a breast* as though to signal *the beginning of a cycle*" (82, my emphasis). This is a "lesbian phallus"[13] imaged in the 'language' of the female body: "breasts get the better of breath / we find there/ writing" (90). Both an *erotic* and a *life-sustaining* bodily site, the female breast replaces "your text" (15); in the wider symbolism of psychoanalysis, the mother replaces the father, representationally, and the nipple the phallus (Lacan 281 – 291). Brossard's phallic nipple—"pupil essential in the unfolding" (92)—serves as a counter-interpellative sign to women lovhers to 'come out' and 'come home.' Thus hailed, Brossard's speaker dramatically transforms into Butler's "survivable subject" through the fashioning of both the subject and a 'home' for her (*Speech* 5).

Spivak's and Butler's ideas are really helpful here because the completion of the subject goes beyond the space of the body or the psyche into the space of the world; *Lovhers* is, as Brossard says, "about the / spatial era of women" (81). The Barbizon Hotel for Women, La Cour sidewalk café and My Continent—these are places *in the world*, places *peopled by lesbians*. "The Barbizon" is a 'book of genesis' for lesbian subjectivity, but, it is a *reverse*-lapsarian apparatus in which the expulsion from Eden is desired so that a new 'lesbian Eden' ("mâ") can be established (89). The final chapter broadens the horizons of the poem suggesting a movement from the individual (specific, unitary) terrain of a hotel to the communal (general, societal) space of a world, "My Continent." And it is at this point that Brossard's lesbian counter-worlding and

Butlerian "response" is fully realized. Brossard realizes the possibility of survival *in* a lesbian geography, "the continent of women" (75), a "domain of linguistic survival" apart from and beyond patriarchal society but still recognizably *in the world* (*Speech* 41). The subject is fashioned through a performative utterance of a very particular kind—a worlding that does not oppress but rather 'de-colonizes' discursive space, creates 'breathing space,' 'houses' and sustains an endangered subjectivity. We see the way the worlds and the women of the poem are marked by and translated through lesbian language, defined in homoerotic terms. At the close of the poem, Brossard's subject 'names,' 'occupies' and 'conquers' "mâ": "My *continent* she now has" (89); "*my continent woman* of all the spaces" (90); "my continent of spaces of reason" (91); "my continent multiplied by those who have signed" (92); "my continent, I mean to talk about" (93). Here, the poet takes over and takes back terrains 'colonized' through patriarchy.

Brossard's aesthetic choices, especially in this regard, urge further consideration. Whereas the use of a phallus is complicated in any feminist context—as an appropriation of misogynist psychoanalytic thought it repeats the axiomatics of patriarchy—similarly, worlding is mired in the 'conquistadorial' politics of colonialism. On the one hand, reverse worlding and the employment of a lesbian phallus are tricky because such strategies would seem to reiterate the hierarchies implicit in colonialism and patriarchy. On the other hand, perhaps it becomes increasingly necessary to work with aggressive rhetorical constructs as and when the oppression is the most severe and the historical attack—the frequency and ferocity of hegemonic worldings—is the most extreme. Perhaps performances of this kind are productive if for no other reason than that they powerfully inspire and convincingly affirm contingent readers. Brossard works from within the nexus of discourses that oppress lesbians; thus, she chooses to 'fight' the oppressor with 'his own tools,' and, representationally, to stay on 'the battlefield.' In Butler's

view this makes it possible for Brossard to turn discursive violence into a dialogic battle that might transform the very terms of that discourse. As we know, the central argument of *Excitable Speech* rests on the assumption that "'offense[s]'…must be committed in order to expand the domain of linguistic survival" (41).

Butler and Brossard would appear to agree that committing 'offenses' may be necessary to 'survive' 'offensive' worlds. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler defends the use of the lesbian phallus on the grounds that it opens up this "signifying practice" to "resignification" such that the phallus can "signify in ways and in places that exceed its proper structural place within the Lacanian symbolic" (89). Her understanding of the 'use value' of the lesbian phallus for sex and gender practice can be applied more generally to 'uses' Brossard makes of other oppressive discourses, like worlding. Butler feels that "if the cultural construction of sexuality compels a repetition of that signifier, there is nevertheless in the very force of repetition, understood as resignification…the possibility of deprivileging that signifier" (*Bodies* 89). In the case of Brossard's poem, the phallus is "radically generated" in such a way that its use "underscores the very plasticity of the phallus" and this might only be 'perform-able' through employment of the very discourse by which one is oppressed (*Bodies* 89). As Butler shows, there is a contradictory double movement involved in the fashioning of a lesbian phallus:

> …it is and is not a masculine figure of power; the signifier is significantly split…it both recalls and displaces the masculinism by which it is impelled. And insofar as it operates at the site of anatomy [as with Brossard], the phallus (re)produces the spectre of the penis…to enact its vanishing.... (*Bodies* 89)

As the principal figure of speech in *Lovhers*, this symbol is not only the primary device for initiation of the subject but also (and importantly) for the *emasculation* of the heteropatriarchy. Brossard seems to feel that the lesbian subject must be fashioned by reiterating the injurious

language of psychoanalysis so as to enact its "vanishing" and that she must "recall" the discourses of colonialism and heteropatriarchy in order to "displace" them.

The line "My *continent* she now has" (89, author emphasis) denotes the two essential movements through which heteropatriarchal discourse is "displaced" and "vanishes": the author of the text creates a 'habitation' for the lesbian subject *and* two women love one another's "continents" or bodies. These ideas are also interdependent. The love and erotic desire shared by two females is linked by and translates back and forth between mimetic female bodies and the material body of the text itself—they read one another as reciprocal mirrors in the same way the book is designed to function as such a 'mirror' for Brossard's reader. A related symbolic move is the way Brossard allies herself and her poem with a group of actual lesbians; in the closing chapter, a total of *twenty-four* such women are named. As Robinson notes, Canadian lesbians including Brossard "[cite] other women's writings plentifully in their own and [use] intertextuality as a tool in the creation of a sense of group purpose" (193). Brossard characterizes this group as "those who have signed: ...to write: the real/the skin clairvoyant" (92). Calling up women who exist *in the world and in print as lesbians* establishes historical lesbian existence and recasts the history of 'woman.' Thus, just as lesbian desire is translated between representative women's bodies and the material body of Brossard's text, so lesbian existence is translated back and forth between figurative lesbian bodies *in the text* and 'material' lesbian bodies *in the world*—now (Rich, Wittig, Daly) and throughout history (Jeanne d'Arc, Colette, Stein).

Lesbian subjectivity, a hidden discourse concealed by the always prior worlding of the heteropatriarchy, is generated through the material and figurative bodies of "this text, under the eye" (15). *Lovhers* is at once a "theory of reality" and the bodying forth of a specific, formerly

proscribed "reality": it represents the constitution of lesbian subjectivity and constructs material and conceptual dwelling places for lesbians (16). In the process of re-molding language so as to enable the "committing" of an "offensive" utterance in which *to* 'dwell,' Brossard creates "domains" for lesbian "survival": a *book* (a material body which is imitable or inspiring or affirming), a *domain* (the fictional "mâ," a conceptually habitable home), a "texted" *body* (the fictional lesbian figure with whom a reader identifies), and, a *community of bodies* (a lesbian collective that affirms the place of the lesbian reader). Through the construction of a place of being for a historically denied subject, Brossard commits "the very 'offense' that must be committed in order to *expand* the domain of linguistic survival" (Butler, *Speech* 41; my emphasis). Ultimately, *Lovhers* enacts the movement from heterosexual to lesbian, from complicity to refusal, from invisibility to emergence *in the world*—or, as Brossard herself expresses it, its project is "*bringing me into the world*" (90).

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Notes

[1] 2000, page 22.

[2] The original title is *Amantes*.

[3] For discussion and application of this term, see Chapters 2, "Literature," and 3, "History," in Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*. Perhaps her most widely read exegesis on worlding is her critique of *Jane Eyre* and analysis of the textual dynamics involving Jane, Bertha Mason and Rochester (see Chapter 2).

[4] On the erasure of lesbian existence from historical discourse, see Adrienne Rich "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence."

[5] Butler discusses Althusser's work in detail in Chapter 4 of *The Psychic Life of Power.*

[6] On this point, Butler actually echoes *Brossard,* who writes: "she sometimes thinks between two spirals that excess is her double and her strength" (*Lovhers* 85).

[7] A well-known example demonstrating these ideas is Kate Millett's 1969 study, *Sexual Politics*. Of course Millett doesn't use Spivak's language, but essentially D.H. Lawrence, Henry Miller and Norman Mailer are shown by her to have "worlded" the heteropatriarchy by representing men and women in strictly normative terms. Millett demonstrates that while the spaces of both body types are cast in the terms of heteronormativity, male bodies 'supersede' women's—'active' males define and dominate 'passive' females. See Millett, Part III "The Literary Reflection" (235-335).

[8] Here, I refer to Derrida's notion of "play" articulated in his essay "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences": "Play is the disruption of presence" (Derrida 101). He suggests that there is a tension between *play* (randomness, confusion, conflict, transgression) and *presence* (truth, or stable, fixed meaning). Play refers to the 'transgressive' movement of elements within a structure or idea, elements which are supposed to remain stable and rigid. Brossard's poem is deconstructive in this sense and she performs this in a self-conscious way in lines like the one discussed here.

[9] See Lacan – Translator's notes, Chapters 1, 3 and 5.

[10] Reference to Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*, excerpted in Rivkin and Meyer's *Literary Theory: An Anthology,* Blackwell, 1998.

[11] This reading works because Brossard frequently associates critical spaces of the text with critical moments in the content—for example, the last page of "July the Sea" begins: "last day on the island" (39). And, history is metaphorized throughout via structural time metaphors, like months ("June the Fever," "July the Sea").

[12] I am reading this passage at least partially *with* Lacan this time, using his mirror theory of self-identification (see *Écrits* 1-7). Also see the "Introduction" to Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter.*

[13] See Butler's discussion in *Bodies that Matter,* Chapter 2. Also discussed further in the concluding segment of this essay.

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