

**Before and after *écriture au féminin*: Uncanny Gothic connections in Nicole  
Brossard's *These Our Mothers Or: The Disintegrating Chapter*, and *Mauve Desert***

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Although Nicole Brossard's text *Mauve Desert* was published both in French and in English translation after the period Brossard establishes as *écriture au féminin*, this paper will look at the links between this novel and Brossard's earlier *écriture au féminin* text, *These Our Mothers Or: The Disintegrating Chapter*, which theoretically foregrounds many of the actions in *Mauve Desert*. Moreover, this paper will look at the uncanny connections that both of these texts have with the Gothic writing of Mary Shelley. In *These Our Mothers Or: The Disintegrating Chapter*, Nicole Brossard makes the following apparently monstrous, Gothic, and certainly spectacular statement. In her words, "I have murdered the womb and I am writing it" (*These Our Mothers Or: The Disintegrating Chapter* 21).<sup>1</sup> Brossard underscores this statement, literally by underlining it, and repeating it in different contexts, within her text. But she also underscores this textual double gesture—which she enacts again in *Mauve Desert*—for multiple reasons.<sup>2</sup> Brossard suggests that writing this body part will, in a Lacanian sense, murder it.<sup>3</sup> However, she also wants to disturb this murder, so she reproduces the violence of signification and uses a "system of death as dialogue to reinvest life in words" (*TM* 38), which is the kernel of the Gothic that arises in her work. She writes the living-dead, or perhaps I should say she writes the dead living. Brossard's writing in this text shows her engagement with French theory and Québécois feminist networks. Her statement of murder, then, is arguably meant to be a feminist poststructuralist disturbance of the Symbolic. This paper, though, will

explore the themes and figures that Brossard borrows from the Gothic in order to write a new matrix of desire and subjectivity that begins in the poetic-theoretical developments in *These Our Mothers* and continues in *Mauve Desert*.

### **Gothic connections and grotesque *écriture au féminin* creations**

Murdering the womb by disrupting the heterosexual narrative of reproduction is a somewhat popular theme within nineteenth-century Gothic novels and tales, although it is often attempted by a masculine entity, who, like Mary Shelley's Victor Frankenstein, raises pieces of dead flesh, or like Shelley's character from "The Mortal Immortal: A Tale," finds an elixir of apparent eternal life. With this disruption and raising of a new species of the Undead, a space is created in which culturally repressed or tabooed desires, desires that exceed phallic narratives and a heterosexual reproductive framework, may also arise. Unlike the English elegy, which, as Peter Sacks asserts, replays the Oedipal narrative as a process of consolation and recovery that puts the dead to rest, so to speak (8-9), Shelley's engagements with death and mourning in tales of monstrosity, grotesque maternal bodies and inconsolable grief disrupt the teleology of phallic narratives. It is not surprising, then, that Brossard uncannily returns to Shelley's Gothic themes of raising the dead in her own feminist texts, which disrupt phallogocentric language. And Brossard is also concerned with symbolically murdering the phallicised and heteronormatised reproductive womb by resurrecting unspoken desires.

However, before getting too carried away with Brossard's links with the Gothic, it should be said that Brossard's work, like Shelley's, is distinct from more logocentric Gothic, like Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, in which there is often an attempt to re-contain these cultural ruptures within the enclosure of narrative. Of course,

attempts at re-containment, if positioned or read critically, can illuminate structures of power and their projections/abjections, as Brossard shows us in *Mauve Desert* in her Frankensteinian depiction of Robert Oppenheimer (the nuclear scientist credited with building the atomic bomb). Although somewhat different from the English elegy, logocentric Gothic stories are often a (re)writing of the mythic Oedipal narrative, and an anticipation or (pre)writing of the Freudian Oedipal narrative. An abject, Undead feminine-figure arises and is killed, re-killed, staked, or torn to pieces, which fulfills both the desire for a return to the maternal and for the matricide that the feminist Lacanian theorist Elizabeth Bronfen incisively suggests is an attempt to hide the knowledge of genealogy and mortality. Bronfen argues that Oedipus would have murdered his mother in order to escape the knowledge of his maternal genealogy and his own consequent mortality, if she had not already killed herself. Furthermore, Bronfen argues that Freud covers his own fear of mortality by focusing on sexual stages, and castration, when in fact it is the Real knowledge of death—the inevitable lack of being—that both Oedipus and Freud cannot face (12-17). With this illumination in mind, we can see that in logocentric Gothic narratives these phallic returns to the maternal through the murder of abject feminine figures, like the English elegy, also put the dead to rest, so to speak. They are cathartic experiences, very much like that of the Romantic sublime, which as Vijay Mishra explains, takes one out of oneself only to reinforce the ego (25).

Conversely, although both Brossard and Shelley depict these attempts to escape mortality, they disturb this catharsis with grotesque figures that rattle the frames of phallic narratives. In *These Our Mothers*, Brossard murders the womb and resurrects a grotesque figure in order to write a hidden genealogy. Similarly, in *Mauve Desert*, she symbolically murders the phallicised womb in order re-inscribe it with

lesbian *jouissance*, but, at the same time, Brossard, like Shelley, shows the masculine attempt to escape mortality, which causes many murders. Thus, in *Mauve Desert*, Brossard, like Shelley in *Frankenstein* and in “The Mortal Immortal: A Tale” both depicts and critiques logocentric Gothic narratives and phallic structures of power. In *Mauve Desert*, Brossard’s ghostly reiteration of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* depicts this attempt to escape genealogy and mortality through her fictional characterisation of Oppenheimer as Longman, who creates the atomic bomb as “a hope for beauty” (31) and then performs a subsequent murder of, in his eyes, an abject feminine figure. However, as we will see, Brossard’s dead characters are not singular and not so easily put to rest. Brossard uses the hybrid figure of the mother-daughter-lover, a grotesque figure of incest, which she develops in *These Our Mothers*, in order to write the womb and write the dead living. This figure, which is coined “(m)other-daughter-lover” (59) by Alice Parker, is, as Parker explains, a ““differential equation”” (59), an unfixable multiplicity, and this unfixable multiplicity from *These Our Mothers* is resurrected in *Mauve Desert*. Moreover, in both of Brossard’s texts the writing becomes a grotesquing of language—a grotexualisation, because it defies categorisation. As Geoffrey Galt Harpham explains in his discussion of the grotesque and strategies of contradiction in art and literature, the grotesque is “a species of confusion” that causes us to “experience certain methodological problems” (xxi). Brossard creates a species of confusion in order to disrupt methods of interpretation and categorization. Although Harpham’s work does not look at avant-garde poetics, he does look at the failure of language to define the grotesque because it “occupies multiple categories” and “falls in-between categories” (3), which is the only way one could attempt to describe Brossard’s work.

Brossard's disruption of form is also coterminous with Bakhtin's description of the grotesque body, which is full of gaps and gaping orifices, dismembered and leaky. Brossard's writing, which could be called Gothic *écriture au féminin*, opens up the textual body and exposes its multiplicity and fluidity. This textual fluidity enables her to open the wound of subjectivity and embrace the phantom limb of the lost maternal in a lesbian *jouissance*, which becomes a grotesque figure, a hybrid, fluid form. Therefore, in both *These Our Mothers* and *Mauve Desert*, Brossard performs this symbolic murder of *le ventre*—the masculine noun—and this Gothic resurrection in order to modify “the first clause” of his-story, “the instrument of reproduction” (*TM* 27), so that she can write a desire that exceeds both heterosexual and symbolic reproduction but, nevertheless, acknowledges maternal genealogy.

### **The Real Revolution in *These Our Mothers***

I will come back to *Mauve Desert* after I further examine Brossard's theoretical developments in *These Our Mothers*. Like Julia Kristeva's theory of the chora— which Kristeva first develops in *Revolution in Poetic Language*—Brossard's writing in *These Our Mothers* suggests that there is a bodily language or an economy of exchange between mother and child that precedes Symbolic entrance, a semiotic exchange that can disrupt the Symbolic:

her mother's daughter. A finger between my two lips close, as they say, as the bark and the tree, bringing about the ellipsis daughter mother which makes the passing from one to the other without intermediary without interruption. Couple and generation at one and the same time. Instantaneity. Of Death in its process: Blossoming: new cortex. (*TM* 24)

The textual placement of the homonym close/close, which could be the verb or the adjective, suggests both a closure and a continued connection, a presence/absence like

a phantom limb. And the ellipsis of daughter mother suggests a continued unspoken connection, which is repeated by the words “couple and generation at one and the same time.” However, in sympathy with Luce Irigaray and Catherine Clément, Brossard also asserts that the womb, by association with the unknown, has been filled with the myths of masculine narratives as the metaphoric place of man’s unconscious, his mystic truth—or the impossible prehistoric place before language, the remains of the Real, the womb/tomb of the symbolic subject, the place of death and *jouissance*.<sup>4</sup> Brossard also uses the womb as a metaphor, but she de-mythologizes it by translating it into *écriture au féminin*, which is its “[d]eath” and grotesque “[b]lossoming” (*TM* 24), its resurrection. Brossard describes a woman’s sex as “[m]ythically covered...[w]ithout mask, nor mask, without genitals, nor genitals, without woman, nor woman, without words” (*TM* 27). Her aim, however, is to write in this space of absence, as she states more explicitly in an interview: “only through literally creating ourselves in the world do we declare our existence and from there make our presence known in the order of the real and the symbolic” (cited in Holbrook 127).

Not content with Kristeva’s notions of the semiotic chora or a thetic break in the Symbolic, then, Brossard takes Kristeva’s revolution a step further. In an Irigarayan catachrestic gesture, she writes the impossible by miming the Real, the unknown space or order that exceeds language, what I will call the phantom limb of the lost maternal because Brossard suggests that we are never completely severed from this connection; it is always both present and absent.<sup>5</sup> Not only does Brossard’s grotesquing of language, her disruption of time and space, her disintegrating chapter, her blurring of genres, her textual non-sense seem to enact the disintegration of Symbolic language and narratives that would apparently occur in an hallucinatory encounter with the Real, but she also attempts to simulate an impossible encounter

with the Real. Her text becomes the skin screen on which the stain or mauve bruise of the unknowable within the Symbolic rises to the surface. And what arises from this encounter is a hybrid, *féminin* grotesque figure. She re-configures desire by re-configuring a subjectivity that is not whole but not completely split per se either, not half-ed, but tripled, a subjectivity that is palimpsestic, multiple and monstrously in process, a grotesque body engaged in the cultural taboos of incest through an impossible, continuous link with a maternal body. This is the figure of the mother-daughter-lover:

[t]hree-faced incest that refuses the lie yet whose eye nonetheless keeps all traces of it. The origin of Ah! From the depths of the throat. Chaos, our limbs afire. Maybe to burn out the fuse before the letter. To set our breasts ablaze. Sour milk. And the mamilla dyed green as in science fiction. Because the trial has begun. At last two generations of women have touched each other on the mouth and the sex and found their target. Each whirlpool with a different woman, because I had to go into black, water, blue and drown the acidity of the white. (TM 14)

By miming and simulating the “Chaos” and the abyss, the “whirlpool” of an encounter with the Real and turning this death of subjectivity into a palimpsestic multiple figure of impossible *féminin jouissance*, Brossard de-mythologises the unknown with a *féminin* genealogy. She exposes the “lie” of the phallus and re-fuses the complete severance from the maternal.

In Lacanian terms she forecloses the Name-of-the-Father, but rather than a complete psychosis occurring, what emerges is a different model of subjectivity. This model is similar to Lacan’s own radical reconfiguration of subjectivity that occurs in his unpublished, late seminar *Le Sinthome: Seminar XXIII*.<sup>9</sup> Through reading James Joyce’s radical engagement with language, Lacan asserts that Joyce avoids psychosis through his engagement with language. Thus, the father figure is reduced to a minor role. Through language, Joyce achieves a different enjoy-meant; instead of the Name–

of-the-Father knotting Joyce's subjectivity together, or a father figure intervening and shielding him from the overwhelming desire of the mother, his *sinthome*, his symptomatic engagement with language, knots the Symbolic, Imaginary, and Real together, which enables a more fluid movement through these registers. Similarly, Brossard maintains the traces of both the Symbolic and the Real in the I/eye of her simulated scene; she drowns the acidity of the white, the sour milk of non-reproductive desire and the white of the page on which the Symbolic is written or spoken. However, rather than avoiding the overwhelming desire of the mother, as Lacan seems to suggest that Joyce does through his *sinthome*, Brossard plays with cultural taboos of incest. This incestuous play could also be seen in Lacanian terms as a traversing of the fundamental fantasy, a return to the Real of one's desire that occurs at the-end-of-analysis, as Lacan conceptualises it at the end of Seminar XI: *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (263-276). Essentially, the analysand repositions herself in relation to the mOther's desire, because, in effect, the analyst enables the analysand to face the Real drive of her (or his) desire, and reconfigure her relationship to desire.<sup>7</sup> Although this may not be Brossard's intent, the literal effect is similar because she does reconfigure desire and suggest a more fluid form of subjectivity. Like Shelley's Gothic tale "The Mortal Immortal, A Tale," in which Shelley's character Bertha ages grotesquely to become the narrator's dying mother and his beloved, Brossard plays with notions of maternal incest and multiple subjectivity in ways that suggest that neither subjectivity nor desire is completely fixed or uni-directional.

### **Mauve Multiplicities in Brossard's Desert of the Real**



Brossard repeats this play and mimicry in *Mauve Desert*—at both the textual level and through her hybrid constructions of subjectivity. At first glance, one can see that *Mauve Desert* blurs the boundaries between fiction, theory, and poetics. It is called a novel by the publisher, but Brossard’s decomposition of narrative into named parts such as “Characters,” “Scenes,” “The Revolver”—to name only a few—not only exposes the process of constructing a narrative, but also turns her book into a writing in continual process, a disintegrating novel, constantly decomposing and recomposing, which creates a Real textual vertigo for the reader. Coterminous with her hybrid construction of subjectivity in *These Our Mothers*, her text is a grotesque figure, not only a grotesquing of language, but also a grotesque “species of confusion” (Harpham xxi), because it is at least three faced. Her multi-narrative construction of three texts within one consists of two independently named texts/novels entitled *Mauve Desert* and *Mauve, The Horizon*, the latter appearing to be a translation of the former. These two apparent novels or novellas are bookends for the larger middle section of the book, which is entitled *A Book To Translate*. Of course, there is a somewhat ghostly fourth section that looms within the other three parts and is contained in a file of photos in the middle section—this is the aforementioned figure of the father of death, Longman/Oppenheimer. As I will elaborate below, Brossard plays with historical reality and mythology in order to expose the myths or fantasies of history. Longman is a historical figure and a mythical figure, a Frankensteinian Oedipus and a descendent of Osiris, who Eric Neumann—in his own discussion of the grotesque and Osiris—describes as both the “dismembered god” and the “procreative mummy with the long member” (cited in Harpham 58).

Although the entire book is a translated text, Brossard plays with notions of translation within one language. By inserting the process of translation between two

texts, the process remains as a surplus in motion, moving in and out of the other two texts. This surplus in motion invites the reader to read backwards as well as forwards, in multiple directions within her texts, which becomes a model for Brossard's matrix of desire. Katherine Conley compares this motion with a "möbius strip" which "circles back on itself endlessly" (150). Interestingly, this figure of the möbius strip, is similar to Lacan's figure of the "internal eight" (*Four Fundamentals* 270), which he uses in order to imagine the possibility of traversing the fantasy in Seminar XI, because it enables a moving back and forth along a shifting plane. Similarly, the middle section of Brossard's text becomes the "world's gaping" (*Mauve Desert* 176)<sup>8</sup> that she invites the reader to enter. It is the multiple space or order in which the text is continually reconfigured as the translator's symbolic constructions begin, are composed, decomposed and recomposed. As with Shelley's epistolary construction of *Frankenstein*, in which letter writers, speakers, and readers blur into each other, this process turns the translator in *Mauve Desert* into a hybrid figure as her subjectivity blurs with the other writers and the very language of the text. Moreover, like Shelley/Victor's creature, Maude seems to be discovering language and thoughts anew, which draws attention to the materiality of language and its surreal possibilities:

Maude Laures put her lenses in, got ready in front of the mirror. She suddenly had the feeling she was soon going to be nothing but a resonant instrument. She saw herself by turns lyre, theorbo, viola. The mauve decomposed, was recomposed, palimpsest, in her eyes, an air. (*MD* 154)

As language is reconfigured, Maude's subjectivity is reconfigured, multiplied into a palimpsest. In Brossard's text, metonymic and horizontal movements of language intersect with vertical and metaphoric movements of language, which tear at the seams of language from multiple directions. As Maude tries to describe the desert, the

horizontal movements of her words are interrupted/intersected with vertical sproutings of surreal associations. As she says, “at the moment of writing these words it is the ‘cluster of flowers’ part that rushes like a torrent through my thoughts. Salt lakes that surge all in reflections, beauty’s frosted surfaces” (*MD* 138). Her sentence is torn into clusters of words/images that are connected through dreamlike associations which are both metaphoric and metonymic—and exceed these categories, as flowers sprout on the landscape of language and rush into a lake that becomes a frozen image of beauty, trembling between these movements of meaning production. It is through this trembling between spaces that language opens up and turns into a grotesque. This transformation enables the unspeakable to be spoken and enables the palimpsestic, three-faced figure of incest to appear, as Kathy (Brossard’s main character’s mother) and her lover Lorna form a “[v]ertical section on the horizon, their bodies form a certain presence in the mauve” (*MD* 123). They are mauve multiplicities—lesbian mothers, lovers and daughters. Brossard thus suggests that desire can be palimpsestic, both metaphoric and metonymic; desire, like her textual process, can be grotesque. Desire can be “a fluency of the body, a rhythm in the flesh, a carnival multiplying dawns, silks and bones in a costume blurred by light” (*MD* 142), as Maude further describes the process of writing and translating.

In contrast to traditional novelistic narratives, and like Shelley’s short Gothic tales, the plot of the translated story itself has very little movement. Mélanie, a fifteen-year-old daughter of a lesbian couple who own a motel in the Arizona desert, falls for a woman scientist in her forties, who is then murdered, so it seems, by Longman/Oppenheimer as he watches them embrace. As the passages above indicate, however, what happens in the plot is only part of the story. I will focus on two other passages in which the palimpsestic, three-faced figure of incest that Brossard

conceptualises in *These Our Mothers* arises in *Mauve Desert*. In the first passage, Mélanie is just discovering her sexual desire, and is driving through the desert, “enter[ing] the fear of the unspeakable” (MD 27), as she describes it. In *Mauve Desert*, the lost maternal landscape is also the desert landscape, a place of masculine territorial inscription and death as the first site of the atomic explosion, but also a space of discovery and a re-configuring of subjectivity through a simulated return to a Real womb. As Mélanie describes her acceleration across the desert in her mother’s Meteor and the experience of being swallowed up in the night by a sand storm, she seems to be revisiting this maternal landscape, and hearing an all-encompassing noise:

In the dark of the dust I know how to exist. I listen to the dreadful sound, the roar of wind and sand against the car’s metal body, I yield totally to blindness, I lightly press two fingers against each eyelid and look inside the intimate *species*, at time going by in the back of my mind. I see seconds, small silvery scars, moving along like creatures. I recognize the trace of creatures who have passed through there where seconds form pyramids, spirals, among the remains, beautiful sandstone chevrons. Only once words I was unable to read. And their form soon faded as if it were a partial transcription of light deep in the mind. (MD18-19)

Similar to Brossard’s writing in *These Our Mothers*, this passage first appears to evoke Kristeva’s chora, because in this passage Brossard suggests that there is a bodily language between mother and child in which words are not words, not readable within the Symbolic, signs that were “once words [Mélanie] was unable to read. And their form soon faded” (MD 18). However, unlike many masculine avant-garde texts that Kristeva cites as revolutionary, Brossard’s text is not just an encounter with the abject, or a momentary surrender to the nothingness of masculine *jouissance*.

Mélanie’s journey, through the desert and through language, takes her to a hybrid space, in which she discovers an “intimate *species*” (MD 18-19) of the non-species, “a species of confusion” (Harpham xxi), as Harpham describes the grotesque. Mélanie not

only enters a space in which semiotic and symbolic aspects seem to interact, as “seconds” become “small silvery scars, moving along like creatures,” but it is also a space in which there remains a “trace of creatures who have passed through” (MD 19). It is not a space that Mélanie has completely left—a trace remains in the body of her memory, and she is still part of this space as a creature that has passed through and left her trace. Like Derrida, Brossard uses the notion of the trace because it “threatens the law of the signifier” (Derrida 469). However, through this imagined encounter Brossard also suggests that, as Elizabeth Grosz asserts in her discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s work, “[p]erception is, as it were, midway between mind and body and requires the functioning of both” (Grosz 94). Hence Brossard suggests that pre-linguistic memory traces, or corporeal sensations, can be triggered through the body, and sensual memories that exceed language can erupt in the discursive present. Through an embodied time—a time-frame that exceeds the linearity of language—Mélanie is able to access the trace of the lost maternal and the remains of the Real within herself, a “transcription of light deep in the mind” (MD19).<sup>9</sup> Although these memories are unspeakable within the Symbolic, Brossard shows that they can be spoken in a *différent* economy of language. Her grotesquing of language disrupts the hegemony of the Symbolic by uncovering its multiple orifices, its gaps and fissures, as Lacan asserts that Joyce does in his symptomatic/sinthomatic engagement with language. According to Lacan, “[i]t is through the intermediary of writing that language [*la parole*] breaks up at the moment of imposing itself as such, in a deformation which is always ambiguous” (*Le Sinthome* 17<sup>th</sup> February 1976).

Moreover, Brossard suggests that Mélanie’s passage could be a model for the process of subject development. Subjectivity, like Brossard’s engagement with language, could move in metonymic links and spiral out in metaphors of the womb

and the desert, creating a shifting palimpsest as “seconds form pyramids, spirals, among the remains, beautiful sandstone chevrons” (*MD* 19). Linear movements of time and teleological narratives could be disrupted in the “spirals” of “remains” (*MD* 19)—traces of the *féminin* in the shifting sand. Unlike Longman, as we will see, Mélanie is able to face her wound and accept the presence/absence of her phantom limb. Although she feels that she is an “exemplary solitude” (*MD* 19) at times, she still feels umbilically linked to her lesbian mother, which Brossard represents through a strand of hair “going from mother to daughter, silken strand, ancient tie” (*MD* 142). In the passage through the desert Mélanie’s awakening sexual desire links her through embodied time to her mother, and thus as Mélanie enters this hybrid space to “look inside the intimate *species*,” she becomes an “intimate *species*” (*MD* 18), a grotesque figure, a hybrid species, a mother-daughter-lover.

However, as Mélanie discovers, just as in many Gothic narratives, there are forces that object to this hybridization, forces that want to maintain their territorial inscription and binary logic. Brossard illuminates this desire for territorial inscription through a dialogue between Mélanie and Angela in Maude Laures’ translation in process: “[t]he desert is a space. Men came there one day and claimed that space was now conquered at last” (*MD* 127). The ultimate demonstration of this desire is of course the use of the New Mexico desert as the first site for the explosion of the atomic bomb, and as Brossard illuminates, this creation was a desire to correct what men perceived as an error of nature—death. As Mélanie/Maude explains,

[t]hey claimed they suffered over their conquest. They suffered because the desert suffers no error. But men confused error with suffering. They concluded that their suffering could correct the error of nature, the very nature of error. This is how they hooked into death. (*MD*127)

Of course, the desire to control death through constructions of power causes more death and destruction through phallic explosions. It is in the fall-out of these phallic explosions, in a sort of post-apocalypse, that the characters and writers of Brossard's intertexts are able to build their relationships and Brossard is able to rewrite the womb. She creates an extending mauve horizon out of the Thanatosian dust of the arid desert, but she does not ignore this dystopia.

The atomic explosion of the desert is repeated in the interspersed, numbered pages in which Longman, or O'blongman in the translated text, the Frankensteinian Oedipal Osiris, masturbates, waiting for the "explosion" (*MD* 21). Unlike Victor Frankenstein's creature, however, his creature is not an embodiment of his split subjectivity that is capable of destabilizing his Cartesian consciousness, nor is it a post-modern android that dreams of electric sheep. Rather, Longman's construction seems to be an attempt to sublimate his fear of mortality in a signifier of pure power, a signifier that he thinks can prevent death but actually causes great violence to others. In the historical case of Oppenheimer, several notable scientists expressed their concerns—in what is now known as the *Franck Report*—about the use of the bomb and the beginning of an arms race. However, Oppenheimer and his associates convinced themselves that their "two overriding considerations were the saving of lives in the war and the effect of [their] actions on the stability of the post-war world" (Oppenheimer cited in Rouzé 77). Similar to both Bronfen's reading of Oedipus and Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Brossard's text reveals that this desire to control death is also a desire to erase maternal genealogy and escape one's own vulnerability and mortality. As the Gothicist Marie Mulvey Roberts points out in a discussion of Oppenheimer, his creation takes on mythical proportions; it is described with sacred and mythical language that suggests transcendental creation and denies the existence

of maternal genealogy and mortality. The creation of the bomb is not only referred to as “the birth of a monster” by other scientists who worked with Oppenheimer (cited in Roberts 60), but the historian William Laurence describes the first explosion as “the Birth of the world” and “the moment of Creation when the Lord said let there be light” (cited in Roberts 61). Brossard undermines this mythology, however, and her depiction of Longman shows that the Symbolic phallus, too, is often used to cover up a fear of death. Moreover, through this depiction, Brossard shows the dangers of blindly accepting an Oedipal position or believing in one’s fantasy, and the importance of facing one’s mortality and remembering one’s maternal genealogy in order to reconfigure subjectivity and desire. As Elizabeth Bronfen posits, “at the epicentre of all traumatic knowledge, including what Freud calls the recognition of human impotence, lies a [sublimated] recognition of mortality” (15). Oppenheimer’s construction epitomises and exposes the ways that not facing the fear of mortality—mortality in Longman’s mind being “the error of nature”—can lead to a blind construction of phallic power in order to attempt to correct “his suffering” (*MD* 127).

Furthermore, by showing Longman’s conflation of an atomic explosion with women’s genitals during a masturbation session, Brossard illuminates Bronfen’s assertion that “the phallic narrative represses this traumatic knowledge [of genealogy and mortality] by deflecting all the values connected with the paradigm of mortality onto the sexually different feminine body, finding its oblique articulation there” (17). The following passage illustrates this deflection of mortality onto the female body:

The explosion will occur. In the silence of the room the man eyes the genitals, their colouration. He does not see the faces. The faces, shadow of shadows, make white circles around the genitals. Then the circles make a noise like an explosion. He shuts his eyes. Dust falls slowly.... (*MD* 21)



Longman has created the bomb to overcome his mortality, but the bomb is, like the Symbolic phallus, a “fraud,” an insight that Jacqueline Rose attributes to Lacan (40).<sup>10</sup> That is, it has power but it is not transcendental; it cannot prevent death. Furthermore, Longman connects the bomb’s destructive qualities, its explosion, with the feminine body, with the “white circles” that “make a noise like an explosion” (*MD* 21). Although the connection of technological explosion and sexual explosion may seem cliché, Brossard uses this trope to bring forward this oblique articulation of the fear of mortality that is deflected onto the female body; it is important to note that it is the female body that Longman sees as the death machine and explosion. Longman does not want to admit that his creation is fraudulent, however, so when he is confronted with a *jouissance* that exceeds his restricted, phallic economy, he murders Angela. The “white circles” also link this atomic explosion with Angela’s murdered body, which is outlined in white chalk, and brings forward further recollections of murdered bodies. As Susan McGahan notes, Angela’s chalked body, a “bloody profile” (*MD* 46), recalls “images of bodies imprinted or scarred on pavement during nuclear demonstrations: the shadow of bodies recalling post-apocalyptic death” (110).

Angela is mysteriously shot while Longman watches her engage in a lesbian encounter with Mélanie. Angela and Mélanie’s ecstatic union is not only against the law and a cultural taboo because of their age difference, but it also threatens the law of the father because it implies mother/daughter incest, an unspeakable desire within a restricted, phallic economy, and one that suggests a foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father. As Mélanie embraces Angela their movement together is “fluid and slow” (*MD* 46); in Mélanie’s words: “[t]ime has slipped between our legs. Every muscle, every nerve, every cell is as music in our bodies, absolutely” (*MD* 46). This ecstatic moment of passion is a sensual union that Longman’s “impassive stare” (*MD* 46) cannot contain nor tolerate. Although he has made his own attempts to murder the reproductive womb by attempting to control and overcome “the error of nature” (*MD* 127), this embodiment of a symbolic murder of the phallicised womb and a resurrection, which does not hide genealogy and mortality, is too much for him. The

sight of Mélanie's and Angela's bodies becoming fluid, and each becoming a mother-daughter-lover—"a differential equation" (Parker 59) as opposed to "the beauty of [his] equations" (*MD* 31) of the bomb—threatens Longman's projection, exposing his wound and his own vulnerability to death. Consequently, he destroys what he sees as a threat to his restricted, phallic order. He seems to have some awareness that his creation has failed and considers his own subjectivity, like Osiris's dismembered body, "broken, mirror, fraction" (*MD* 31). Moreover, like Oppenheimer, Longman quotes the Hindu script *Bhagavadgita*: "I/ am /become death" (*MD* 17). However, he is, as Brossard points out, "incapable of figuring out his wound" (*MD* 17). He would rather be the procreative mummy with the long member. The sight of this *féminin jouissance* is abject to him because it threatens to expose his fraudulent phallus and the wound of mortality that he has tried to cover up with it.

Like the gathering of fellows who stake the sexually transgressive Lucy in Stoker's *Dracula*, and Victor Frankenstein, who tears his female creature to pieces, Angela is an abject creature who must be killed in a phallic order. However, although there is a "masculine" murder of a female character in the external narrative frame of *Mauve Desert*, Longman's act of murder is, after all, a reaction to the symbolic murder of the phallicised and heteronormatised reproductive womb and the rewriting of desire that occurs through a potential lesbian relationship. Moreover, in the whirlpool, the translating centre, of Brossard's text, Angela becomes the Undead and questions her own death, which opens up the violent signification of this phallic narrative. This questioning also, as Karen Gould asserts, brings forward further questions about "the role of superpower militarism" (200), questions that undermine "the discourses of democracy, science, and the military might that the United States has constructed for itself in order to legitimize its pursuit of nuclear superiority" (200). Consequently, Brossard shows that these discourses are national phallic fantasies that can be very dangerous if they are believed in blindly. This dystopia is, however, countered by other relationships in the text: relationships between lesbian mother-daughter-lovers that redefine those terms, relationships that exceed

heterosexualised and reproductive scripts. Brossard exemplifies Luce Irigaray's assertion that in a non-phallic economy "relationships defy being cut into units" and "two does not [always] divide into ones," because this defiance appears to be the case with Brossard's characters (236). Their desire is not cathected from one object to another, but is fluid and, like Brossard's text, moves in multiple directions at once. As the Frankensteinian Longman obsessively draws death on the wall of his motel room, writing endless calculations and waiting for the "[h]eart leaps, body leaps. A final shiver" (*MD* 21), a new matrix of desire is being written. A Gothic hybrid species, a grotesque creature that Brossard creates in *These Our Mothers*, is "[b]lossoming" (*TM* 24), opening the wound of subjectivity, exposing the lie of the phallus, and embracing the duplicity of the pain of loss and the *jouissance* of continual (dis)connection. Thus, although *Mauve Desert* was written after the established time of *écriture au féminin*, Brossard's radical (de)form of writing continues to transform the Symbolic, here and elsewhere, by offering un-thought of possibilities of desire and subjectivity.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the rest of this article the abbreviation *TM* will be used in parenthetical references to *These Our Mothers Or: The Disintegrating Chapter*, and when the text is referred to directly in a sentence it will be abbreviated to *These Our Mothers*.

<sup>2</sup> I should make clear from the start that when I refer to Brossard in my article it is not Brossard in the flesh that I refer to, but rather the textual effects of her writing. Moreover, working with her texts in English translation means entering a transforming feminist dialogue between Brossard and her creative translators: Barbara Godard, and Susanne de Lotbinière–Harwood, and I am called into this dialogue by its textual effects. Thus when I refer to Brossard I am referring to the flesh of the words her writing brings to life, the flesh of an intertextual and interlinguistic feminist dialogue, and the multiple layers of all these textual effects. I have no intention of producing a definitive reading of Brossard’s texts or to claim authorial intention, but intend to add to the dialogue that her texts continue to create.

<sup>3</sup> I am referring to Lacan’s discussion in *Écrits* of “the murder of the thing” in signification as the constitutive moment of the Symbolic subject (104).

<sup>4</sup> George Bataille’s *Madame Edwarda* is one good example of this use of the womb.

<sup>5</sup> In the later work of Lacan, he asserts that the Real does not exist prior to the splitting of the subject through Symbolic entrance; consequently, the Real could not be a lost maternal per se. However, it is, in a sense, the separation from the maternal that creates the Real. Thus the phantom limb of the maternal—like the object *a*, or “bit of real” that Lacan refers to in *Le Sinthome* (16<sup>th</sup> March 1976)—gestures towards what is lost and what is now Real, what is present/absent, phantasmatic and Real. Moreover, with a psychotic subject, or a subject who forecloses the Name-of-the-Father, there is no complete severance from the maternal body (or the mother as subject), and the register of the Real. This subject is divided or multiplied in different ways, ways which are similar to Brossard’s grotesque triadic construction, which I will discuss at further length below.

<sup>6</sup> This seminar is a continuation of Lacan’s focus on topology and his concept of the Borromean Knot, which he proposes as a model of subjectivity in his previous seminar: *R.S.I.* But rather than the rings of the Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic being knotted together by the Name-of-the-Father, they are knotted together by the *sinthome* (an archaic spelling of symptom), and this looser knotting allows more slippage. With this radical reconfiguration of subjectivity, Lacan suggests that the aim of the end-of-analysis should be an identification with one’s symptom/*sinthome*, which means no longer believing in one’s fantasy or symptom, or the big Other, but finding a way to make use of one’s symptom, and thus turn it into a *sinthome*. I am working with an unpublished translation, by Luke Thurston, of *Le Sinthome*, but I also refer to a French transcription that is available on-line. The passages that I quote can be found by the date I list in parenthesis in either document, but I will list the website in my Work Cited list because it is easily accessible to readers.

<sup>7</sup> Throughout most of his seminars and in *Écrits*, Lacan asserts that desire is the desire of the Other; this is because the mother’s desire initiates the constitution of

subjectivity and entrance into the Symbolic—the big Other. Thus one's desire is always the desire of the Other, but by traversing the fundamental fantasy—the narrative or symptom that shields the subject from the engulfment of the Real, and the veil that hides the contradictions of subjectivity—one can reposition oneself in relation to desire and make this relationship more fluid.

<sup>8</sup> Throughout the rest of this article the abbreviation *MD* will be used in parenthetical references to *Mauve Desert*.

<sup>9</sup> The concept of embodied time comes from Kristeva's analysis of Proust in *Proust And The Sense of Time*. Proust suggests, as Brossard does, that the body has memory. Although what I am suggesting with my use of this term is close to Freud's concept of deferred action or *nachtäglich*, which also suggests a different sense of time—a non-linear movement of time—I am not suggesting that these sensations are repressed because of their traumatic content. Rather, that they simply need a different economy of language in order to be realised.

<sup>10</sup> In fact, throughout most of Lacan's work, part of a successful end-of-analysis, as he conceives of it, is the analysand's recognition of this fraud, and an acceptance of vulnerability and mortality.

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