

“A Girl in Combat in the City of Men”:¹

The Civic, Resistant, Ontological Woman in the Work of Nicole Brossard²

by Jodi Lundgren

In her metafictional autobiographical essay, *She Would Be the First Sentence of My Next Novel*, Nicole Brossard establishes the temporal parameters of the *écriture au féminin* (or, writing in the feminine) movement in Québec as 1975-1982 (86-7). As Peggy Kelly notes, Brossard and other Québécois feminists added “au” to the French term *écriture féminine*³ with the effect of stressing agency in “a conscious assertion of feminine subjectivity” (95, n.1). Since, as Susan Knutson argues, the term “in the feminine” refers to “the disruption of the generic along the axis of gender” and “indicates that female will be the contextual default” (194-5), it follows that, in her work from this period, Brossard makes a dual effort to anchor Woman in the symbolic order as a generic, neo-universal abstraction and women in an urban context as diverse, active participants.⁴ In what I will refer to as her “ontological project,” Brossard attempts to correct a centuries-long history of monosexual discourse that uses masculine subjectivity and the experiences of men as a basis for generalizations about humanity and for the creation of laws, institutions, and structures (both political and domestic). Given the specificity of Brossard’s aims for her work in the *écriture au féminin* period and the movement’s definitive end date, it is fair to ask whether or not she fulfilled her goals. I argue that, extrapolating from textualized lesbian eroticism the ontological existence of Woman, Brossard does inscribe a “pluri-elle singul(h)erity” (Brossard, “Textured” 114) that takes “the city” (rather than the more

territorialized and masculinist concepts of nation or state) as the operative spatial field. Notwithstanding this achievement, the increasingly representational and dystopian qualities of Brossard's later prose works suggest that she recognizes both the oversights of the ontological project and the failure of *écriture au féminin* to reach a younger generation of women.

In an interview, Brossard describes *Picture Theory* as concerned with “the ontological existence of women” (“Interview” with Cotnoir et al. 135), and in the essay “Synchrony” in *The Aerial Letter*, she uses the same phrase: “it really must be said that by taking back their body through writing, women confront writing, that is, they bring it face to face with what has never before come to mind: the ontological existence of women” (99-100). As the emphasis on “writing” in this passage suggests, Brossard takes for granted that this ontological existence is constituted in and by discourse. For Brossard, Woman is at once counter-hegemonic discursive formation and essence. Her work consistently and repeatedly rejects a reduction of women to nature—often imaged as vegetation—and she draws an important distinction between two kinds of essentialism: “an essentialism that would refer to biological determinism and essentialism as the projection of a mythic space freed of inferiorizing patriarchal images” (“Interview” with Huffer 118). Although her detractors frequently confuse (or conflate) these two concepts, Brossard embraces only the latter, “mythic essentialism,” which she considers an “ontological creation” (“Interview” with Huffer 118). Defining utopia as “the projection of the desire for the female symbolic,” Brossard insists that “there is utopia, celebration, and projection of a positive image of

women in my books” (“Interview” with Huffer 118). For Brossard, to invert (and, eventually, to transcend) the binary opposition that subordinates woman to man requires this “mythic essentialism” (“Interview” with Huffer 118) that “*overvalue[s]* women” (“Textured” 109). Abstracted from textualized lesbian eroticism, women’s ontological difference insists on its incommensurability and thus resists recontainment within the prevailing topos, “A Woman is a Man,” according to which a discourse of human rights suffices to articulate feminist concerns (*Aerial* 108). A “human rights” version of feminism has possibly achieved nominal equality for women, but at the price of *structural homology* to the norms and values of the masculinist regime.

The ontological status that Brossard strives to create for Woman thus rejects the false universalism of the masculine generic in favour of “singul(h)erity” (“Textured” 114). Rather than being denuded of particularity, Brossard’s rewritten universal subject contains a provision for internal differentiation, or singularity. In *Picture Theory*, holography forms the central metaphor for the production of Woman’s ontological existence. Since “any fragment of a holographic plate, when illuminated, will reconstruct the entire image from a different perspective” (Thompson 23), this metaphor takes into account specificity of location and a subtle, perspectival form of internal heterogeneity. A related way to singularize, rather than to homogenize, the generic or universal subject stems from Brossard’s acute consciousness of geographical specificity “as a North American of French descent” (“Interview” with Huffer 120). The clearest evidence of this geographical specificity appears in what might be considered Brossard’s secondary project with respect to the

city of Montréal. Because her early immersion in French literature made the streets of Paris more familiar to Brossard than those of her own city (“Nicole” 46), she viewed Montréal as “virgin symbolic territory” that “was still not sufficiently anchored as a desirable space in the imaginary landscape” (*She* 55). In *She Would Be the First Sentence of My Next Novel*, the self-reflexive narrator says of Brossard:

She would have liked Montréal to glitter like a northern jewel in the consciousness of restless minds which, the world over, dream of somewhere else. She dreamed of a mythic Montréal, infinitely desirable, like Buenos Aires had become for her. She said that in order for a city to enter the imagination, it must enter literature. (55)

Brossard’s goals and methodology with respect to Woman and Montréal are thus roughly analogous: both must be given a mythic existence. The simultaneity of these projects ensures that there is always a geographical as well as a gendered specificity to the Brossardian subject.

Indeed, the issue of space is integral to Brossard’s ambitions with respect to women’s subjectivity. In her essay “Green Night in Labyrinth Park,” Brossard vividly illustrates the process of opening up spaces for subversive intervention in the interstices of hegemonic discourse. The following passage deserves to be quoted in full because it displays in microcosm the central strategy that Brossard uses to achieve her ontological project regarding women:⁵

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questions that follow on one another in archipelagos

first, there was the tranquil water of my childhood. Then life began giving

its heterosexual explanations on art, love, nature and history. Naturally, life took its course, but each time I addressed questions to art, love, nature, and history, these questions became pebbles. In continuing to question, I finally found myself on an island composed entirely of question-pebbles which I had trouble walking on, at first. But in trying to soften the pain caused by the pebbles, other questions came to me, so many that they in turn formed another island. One could have said that I was **here and there** at the same time, here on the now familiar ground of the first island, and there on the still foreign ground of the second one in view. The islands multiplied and created a beautiful archipelago. Over the years, I learned to travel with ease from island to island. My questions created new islands, my answers served to move me from one to another. Between the islands, I could now make incredible leaps that were soon transformed into beautiful silent gliding flights. And with that my vision changed. From terrestrial and partial, it became aerial. It was at that time that I multiplied the trips between the islands until the day when, from all evidence, I realized that I had finally succeeded, thanks to the archipelago, in diverting the normal course of tranquil explanations that life had once given me about art, love, nature and history. (129-30)

This passage importantly demonstrates that even when Brossard's characters take "island vacations," they are not retreating to utopia in any apolitical sense. Since the islands arise from questions directed at conventional sources of knowledge, their relationship to dominant discourse is oblique but not insubstantial. The eventual creation of an archipelago that permits an independent, aerial vision furthermore attests that the speaker's contestation does not merely reinscribe a centre/margin paradigm that would recentre the "heterosexual explanations" and marginalize the questions. Rather, the archipelago itself becomes a discursive formation with reference to which Brossard's lesbian subject can structure, realize and validate herself. This "feedback loop" whereby moments or points of dissent, extrapolated from the interstices of dominant discourse, create a counter-hegemonic discursive

formation that then subtends further instances of dissent, exemplifies Brossard's central feminist, textual strategy.

While Brossard valorizes women's space—the spatial metaphor “continent” of women organizes *Lovhers* (87 ff.), the “island” of women constitutes a pivotal location in *Picture Theory* and elsewhere, and “fluorescent cities of visionary learned women” illuminate *The Aerial Letter* (94)—the space exists in the interstices of the patriarchal city, rather than in exile from it. The patriarchal fictions that constitute “reality” are highly visible in the urban centre and Brossard recognizes the importance of confronting and interrupting them: “the reality we live in is fictional for women because it is only the fantasy of men throughout history who have transformed their subjectivity into laws, religions, culture, and so on” (“Patriarchal” 44-45). Since these masculine fictions have, nonetheless, been damaging to women, Brossard elects “to stay in the *polis*... instead of retiring to the mythic island of the Amazons” (“Interview” with Huffer 120).⁶

For Brossard, the particular agency that creates space for women as subjects rather than objects in discourse (and hence in the city) is lesbian eroticism, a thematic especially prominent in the following texts (published between 1977 and 1982): *These Our Mothers* (*L'Amèr*), *Surfaces of Sense* (*Le Sens Apparent*), *Lovhers* (*Amantes*) and *Picture Theory* (originally titled in English). In *Surfaces of Sense*, Brossard's project of using lesbian desire to extrapolate from women's particularities an integral woman begins to take shape. In another instance of the technique of abstraction illustrated by the “question pebble” passage from “Green Night in

Labyrinth Park,” here writing (such as erotic poetry) that is distilled from non-normative sexual practices is seen as capable of altering the imaginary understood as a “stock of picture post cards” (*Surfaces* 24) by which human beings order and make sense of their experiences.

The speaker of *Surfaces of Sense* emphasizes this recursive pattern of lesbian erotics when she imagines the character of Adrienne in New York musing “on those powerful currents of vitality which run through her and which animate her Amazon companions in the city and in the country. ...I know that in the spiral of their writings she will find that turn of mind which stimulates her radical way of loving” (13). The writings, derived from subversive practices, in turn double back and inspire, structure and validate the practices. This action of doubling back characterizes the spiral, which “turns back on itself, causing delirium, completely fluid” (15). The spiral shape relates to the act of writing in that “the woman writing in the spiral hears the waves generated by her own energy—waves which are inaudible under normal circumstances of reality, waves which travel through houses, assuming forms which are different to those you would imagine” (15). This transformative process amounts to “beginning to live in another way”—one wherein “the senses open up to the spiral and the spiral revolves around the lovers’ arms” (15). Crucially, this other way of living takes place in the city. In one of the pages of poetry interspersed among the blocks of prose in *Surfaces of Sense*, a further connection appears between amorous “arms” and civic space: “fictional and abstract reality: I then imagine / arms quivering at the turn of day / the actual space in the city inhabited *in a different way*” (35). Entering the city is

enabled via language—"I am simply taking my name into the City" (16)—but a single action does not result in a permanent inscription. Rather, women's involvement must be continuous: "It was essential that we play an active role in this City, for there was a huge danger of disappearance: incarceration, incineration, annihilation" (70).

Women's civic activity becomes visible or legible only through counter-hegemonic discursive formations, to the development of which Brossard's work, especially her lesbian erotic poetry, contributes.

Before becoming the main focus of *Picture Theory*, the process of abstraction in its spatial dimension gains emphasis in *Lovhers*. *Lovhers* conceives of female space as a precipitate from texts written by multiple women in particular cities. Although the island appears in this text as a source of rejuvenation, the vacation that takes place there, a precursor to the island vacation in *Picture Theory*, exploits the homonym between *vacances* (vacation) and *vacance* (vacancy), a reminder that this generative space exists not in a removed utopia but in the interstices or vacancies of patriarchal discourse, where it is created by turning the contradictions of patriarchal discourse back on themselves. In *Lovhers*, the spiral shape—"neither galaxy, nor nautilus, nor an optical illusion"—that for Brossard offers such an important alternative to linear and closed structures appears "right in the heart of Manhattan, as though fixed by certainty or by a vision" (81). This reference to the spiral shape in Manhattan immediately precedes an image of a women's literary community: "all around her, women are turning pages, reading, buying books—Je veux acheter un livre—she thinks there is no such thing as chance but rather collusion in the exploration of forms

and that this one aims to tell the *essenshe'll* about the spatial era of women” (*Lovhers* 81). Women’s “collusion” in the exploration of forms occurs in part because of a shared experience of oppression, as implied in an earlier passage that concerns the related phenomenon of women’s “complicity”: “*Picture theory*: these women and i are products of the same system. our albums of perception are full of complicity. we know the structure” (*Lovhers* 24). Whereas the desire to base a group identity on a commonality *other* than shared oppression may lead to biological essentialism, for Brossard, that women’s “fictions intersect” (*Lovhers* 23) circumvents having either to posit a common, extra-discursive essence or to reify experience in order to give grounds for resistance. “The spatial era of women” is instead a continuous, collaborative construction in discourse. Importantly, the feminist intertextual and/or interpretive community to which Brossard alludes gives priority to women’s attention to other women, an attention best fuelled by erotic desire: “an intuition of reciprocal knowledge / women with curves of fire and eiderdown” (*Lovhers* 61). That this reciprocal knowledge is intuited from sensuality helps to explain Brossard’s claim that “to believe in *Woman*, through women, is a philosophical act to which lesbians are the only women to have shown themselves disposed” (Brossard, *Aerial* 122). Lesbian eroticism, put into language, furthers the creation of ontological *Woman*, which in turn undergirds women’s presence in urban space.

As the zenith of Brossard’s effort to recreate the symbolic order in the feminine, the anti-novel *Picture Theory* exceeds in length and scope any of her earlier texts; in it, she incorporates all of her previous work in “a synthesis like a conclusion

which simultaneously opens up on a new horizon” (“Before” 72). The text is international in its reach, touching down in the Caribbean and in Paris even as it revolves principally around Montréal, New York and an island south of Cape Cod. The first “book” of *Picture Theory* sets up an opposition between “The Ordinary” as a world of injustice (especially of misogyny), and “The White Scene” as an “amorous scene” that, “repeated, ... determines the opening and the vanishing point of all affirmation” (*Picture* 40). Brossard explains in an interview on the book that in “The White Scene,” which is a “love scene,” she has abstracted “the essential or the light, the aura produced by the two lovers” (“Interview” with Cotnoir et al. 129). The process of abstraction allows the women characters to be “everything, complete. They can be angels, light, the four elements, etc.” Thus, the White Scene forms a crucial stage in the textual creation of the ontological Woman, or, “her through whom anything can happen” (“Interview” with Cotnoir et al. 129). Structurally, the “White Scene” (signalled at each appearance by the heading “The White Scene” at the top of a page) punctuates “The Ordinary,” a fragmented, cyclical text that keeps returning to a few scenes and characters in Montréal, Paris, New York and Ogunquit.

The extremely disorienting nature of this text not only poses a challenge to linear reading practices but attempts to instruct the reader in a three-dimensional process of reading. On page 34, the text references page 162, overtly signalling that the reader do what the tropes of repetition and return imply throughout; that is, read the novel “in a continuous to and fro between the pages” (“Interview” with Cotnoir et al. 125). In this way, the eventual abstraction of ontological Woman as hologram is

made a function of a non-linear process of reading. As Dawn Thompson points out in her detailed discussion of the novel from the point of view of holography:

holography actually bypasses mimetic representation since the 'text' itself is beyond interpretation. Instead of recording the image of the object that it photographs, holography records the light waves themselves as they bounce off the object.... Thus the hologram is not a copy of the object, but a code for how the object manifests itself to the visual sense. (23)

Thompson compares the substance of *Picture Theory* to the holographic plate. The plate, which records the intersection of two beams of light, contains "interference fringes...that appear to the eye as grey smudges, specks, blobs, and whorls" (22). To read *Picture Theory* in a linear fashion is to confront these blobs and whorls; "a three-dimensional linguistic text is non-sense as it is spoken or written in a linear language" (28). The coherent light that will illuminate the holographic plate and permit the projection of the integral woman as hologram is abstracted from the amorous scene between Claire Dérive and the narrator, which begins in The White Scene and is expanded in the poetry that comprises the book's second section, called "Perspective." In being "perfectly readable," a phrase that becomes a refrain in the final section of the text and on which the text comes to its provisional linear close (after all, the book was sold in conventional bound form and not, for example, as a box of loose, unpaginated sheets), the integral woman fulfills Brossard's overarching desire not simply to unfix images that debase women but to pool a new energy source that will power Woman as a positivity.

In their utopianism, *Picture Theory* and Brossard's other *écriture au féminin* texts do not represent social antagonisms such as misogyny and economic injustice; in the words of the narrator of *Surfaces of Sense*, "Real life is so painful that I am reluctant to discuss it" (66). This claim denotes not simply middle-class faint-heartedness, but the discursive politics of someone who knows how imbricated description and prescription can be. Instead of reinforcing material inequity by describing it, Brossard almost always explodes the practices of representation that reify those differences. Yet, despite its rationale, this strategy understates the existing stratification among the vectors of difference that comprise women's subjectivities. In *Picture Theory*, for example, Brossard downplays the class privilege her characters must enjoy to travel freely among Montréal, New York, Maine, Paris and the Caribbean, staying in four-star hotels such as the Hilton. She also invokes a highly suggestive opposition between "The White Scene" (associated with light, women's love-making, and writing) and the "black out" (21) (associated with absence of light, masculinism, and the screen of culturally available images and concepts that determines most of what can be perceived and thought). Its reliance on an opposition between white and black where white has positive connotations and black negative racializes this text. Although it is uncharacteristic for Brossard to employ a clichéd dichotomy without examining it—usually, she opens up language, inscribing difference in terms of Derridean *différance* rather than in the disparities of social realism—this oversight symptomatizes the downplaying of racial and other material differences in her work. As such, Brossard's non-referential utopianism has often

been construed as both aesthetically and politically “elitist” (Brossard, *She* 75). Although the narrator of *She Would Be the First Sentence of My Next Novel* declares that the younger Brossard “didn’t much care” (75) about these accusations, the question of reception becomes important when assessing the efficacy of a writing project, especially one with a subversive or transformative intent.

One way to measure the success of *Picture Theory*, and *écriture au féminin* more broadly, is to consider the effect they have had on subsequent Québécois women writers. In the estimation of Brossard and others such as literary critic Lori Saint-Martin, the generation of Québécois women writers that has succeeded the practitioners of *écriture au féminin* lacks the radicalism of their predecessors (Brossard, “Energy” 60; Saint-Martin 285-86, 301). In fact, Brossard casts doubt on the success of her own ontological project when she contends that waves of feminism have difficulty surviving into the next generation. In Brossard’s view, “without cultural and institutional supports, without mythic space and anchorage in the imaginary,” feminist thought is “incapable of reproducing itself” and feminism is “incapable of turning the corner with a second generation of women just as radical as the first” (“Textured” 109-110). On the question of historical context, Brossard’s comments in a 1994 interview are poignant:

I don’t see any women writers [in Québec] pursuing in a very radical way the writing that was being done in the 70s and 80s. Women like France [Theoret] and Jovette [Marchessault] are going deeper into their own personal universe—always with a feminist consciousness. And maybe it’s the same for me also. As for younger writers, I believe they are feminist but they also are pursuing an individual project where the collective “we women” is not at stake as it was in the 70s. I guess that there are privileged moments in the history of

a literature when the *I* and the *we* come together in a very powerful way. Then the creative *I* goes its way and the political *we* is being taken care of by activists or lobbyists. (“Energy” 60)

While the increasingly representational style and dystopian themes that occur in Brossard’s own work after 1982 in themselves ambiguously signal either success or failure of the projects to anchor Woman in the symbolic and women in the city, the dispersion of the community of feminist experimental writers surely helps to account for these changes. In fact, Caroline Bayard, contrasting Brossard’s early (pre-feminist) work to that written post-1974 (the year in which Brossard declared her commitment to feminism), notes that a rigorously non-referential language eventually proves insufficient for Brossard’s political commitment, which cannot “convincingly operate without historical/referential pointers” (185). As Brossard pursues her feminist goals after 1974, her texts appeal more often to certain qualified forms of representation. For all its grounding in a specific political discourse, though, the prose and poetry of Brossard’s *écriture au féminin* period remains esoteric. It is only after her ontological project culminates in *Picture Theory* in 1982 that her style becomes more accessible.

Having framed her earlier works within an aesthetic of *modernité*, Brossard’s 1987 novel *Mauve Desert* (*Le Désert mauve*) is the first that she is “willing to call postmodern” (Parker 127). In her 1998 retrospective essay, Brossard recounts that she “had agreed to more descriptions” in *Mauve Desert* and “had taken the time to love her characters, to give them identities and to set them into a landscape” (*She* 11). She does not clearly explain her decision to embrace a more representational style, but she

offers some hints. She admits that she may have erroneously conflated the words “story, prose and anecdote” (*She* 19), or in other words have consigned novels and prose to a “bourgeois mentality,” associating “most novels’ format and function...with the small talk that only serves to perpetuate the linear mediocrity of daily life” (*She* 11). Brossard’s reflections on the legacy of *écriture au féminin* suggest a more telling reason that she may have modified her style:

we can claim that by generating hybrid texts containing only brief narrative interventions with a poetic resonance, writing in the feminine has, so to speak, led a second generation of women writers to preferring the story in the form of quick sketches and outlines, where precedence is given to the I of childhood memory as well as to an introspective I increasingly isolated from history and solidarities. (*She* 91)

This subsequent generation of writers has thus appropriated the forms while evacuating their political content, motivating feminists like Brossard to abandon the forms and attempt other tactics. It is unclear, however, whether Brossard views the increasing referentiality of her own prose as advancement or regression. If the mainstreaming of feminist ideas means that a writer with Brossard’s politics no longer needs to resort to formal iconoclasm, then her use of a more conventional narrative form might denote success. On the other hand, the move to more exoteric forms may be motivated by a sense of having failed to communicate, especially to younger generations of women. Brossard’s response to an interviewer’s question on this issue is ambiguous:

Daurio: Is it possible now to write a more traditional book, as in *Mauve Desert*, and have it carry the weight of feminist and lesbian ideas, without

it having to be so radical in the way the language works?

Brossard: Writing *Mauve Desert*, sometimes I would pretend I didn't have the kind of knowledge that I have, because I needed that kind of innocence to go on with the characters and make them alive. If I, as the writer, knew everything, then I could not have created the characters. There are many things that I know because of the difficult work of *These Our Mothers*, of *Picture Theory*, and of *The Aerial Letter*, difficult work that you pay for. If you look at things from a lesbian and feminist point of view, reality has no more meaning, because we are not part of that meaning in the symbolic. It's as if you have to do the whole world again. So you have to be careful. There's a limit where you don't know if you are making sense. ("Patriarchal" 47)

Since in order to write a text such as *Mauve Desert*, Brossard has to set aside what she has learned through the process of writing her previous books, she cannot be writing for herself. Since those who have studied her earlier texts have received an in-depth course in feminist philosophy and discourse analysis, she does not need to bracket her knowledge in order to reach them. It seems likely, therefore, that Brossard is trying to reach a "virgin" audience, especially those women who demonstrate in their own writing that they have not ingested the lessons of *écriture au féminin*. Certainly, a sense that feminism has failed to transform a misogynistic real lends a pessimistic tone to both *Mauve Desert* and *Baroque at Dawn*. The more referential the prose, the more insistent the social antagonisms: thus, along with the increased referentiality of the prose in both novels come increased violence, death and despair.

The dystopian elements of these less project-driven works counter the elision of social conflict in the earlier work. In this way, Brossard's modification in poetics also responds to the critique of utopianism's homogeneity and elitism. Indeed, the political and psychological significance of mimesis (and anti-mimesis) becomes clear

in the closing section of *Baroque at Dawn*, which echoes the ominous note contained in an earlier section title, “The *Dark Future*.” In “One Single Body for Comparison,” an author—apparently the Nicole Brossard who appears as an anglophone (and seemingly British [126]) novelist earlier in the text—visits Montréal to work with the woman who is translating her book into French. (Unnamed, the book resembles *Baroque at Dawn* itself.) During this time, the novelist struggles with the sensation that she will not write any more, a sensation explicitly linked to realistic representation of the city:

Montréal’s lanes make me think of the time when I was stringing words together like beads. Never any loose ends. Description: solid, wall-to-wall, concrete reality. A sick tree, a cat, a street sign, I described it. A woman sitting on a bench, I showed her face, her red hands, swollen legs, clothes spilling out of a rumpled shopping bag; at her feet, cigarette butts and every kind of filth stuck to the sidewalk. In the time it took to look up and see the upper floors of a residential tower, I described clouds, balconies, urban vertigo. Yes, it was easy for me then. In a manner of speaking I described in writing “with my eyes closed.” Later I was presumptuous enough to think that what I was writing was giving meaning to my life. Then *I don’t write anymore* struck me down. (216)

Describing Montréal in a realistic fashion unparalleled in Brossard’s previously published texts, this passage makes the point that realism in literature invokes (discursively-constituted) material reality and all of its oppressions, including poverty, homelessness and sexism. Since the fictional author’s immersion in these social antagonisms has resulted in writer’s block, the passage inversely explains the utopian non-referentiality of Brossard’s earlier texts.

Insofar as realistic prose depicts the status quo as immutable and inevitable, it may well foster despair. Fortunately, the text disrupts both the immutability and the despair. Not only does the refrain “*I don’t write anymore*” fail to stop the novelist from relating her experiences in Montréal, but the “respectful connivance” (230) and “nice complicity” (118) that develop between her and her translator offer hope for an intimate, transnational exchange between women of words. At the least, such relationships counter the female isolation signalled by the figure of the solitary, homeless woman; at best, they challenge the structures of subjectivity that correlate to systemic inequity and help to perpetuate it. In contrast to *Mauve Desert*, in which a translator character can discover no information about the author whose work she translates, and of which the final line laments the impossibility of intimacy—“I cannot get close to any you” (202)⁷—in *Baroque at Dawn*, translator and author become friends: “Beyond the difference in age and culture, there is a kind of truth binding us, demanding fabulation. Today, while crossing Lafontaine Park, we addressed each other as *tu*” (230). As Peter Dickinson has noted, such feminist translation poetics do not necessarily imply transcendence of all discursive determinants, but call for the imagining of “communities other than the ubiquitous nation-state” (154). By supplanting “the dichotomous geopolitical regions of Canada and/or Québec with/into alternative physical and psychical spaces” such as “the *civic* space of Montréal” (154), Brossard intervenes in and realigns exclusionary, oppositional discourses of subjectivity. Despite Brossard’s own problematic downplaying of structural (as opposed to individual) differences among women, her lesbian, transnational paradigm

of situated yet mobile subjectivity circumvents the centre/margin dichotomy that relentlessly resurfaces when marginalized subjects (women, the Québécois) address themselves to the dominant group (men, Anglo Canadians).

As the discussion of *Baroque at Dawn* has revealed, its representational aesthetic inhibits (though it does not eliminate) its transformative potential. Considering the depth of Brossard's former anti-representational convictions, the mutations in her style speak to the importance of historical determinants in shaping literary strategies. Moreover, that the subsequent generation of Québécois women writers could appropriate experimental forms developed by proponents of *écriture au féminin* while evacuating their political content means that there is no determinate politics to a given aesthetic form. Brossard's shift to more exoteric forms thus does not in itself constitute ideological capitulation, especially since political efficacy ultimately depends upon reaching an audience.⁸ Still, reflectionism by definition predisposes (if it does not condemn) a text to conservatism, whereas an aesthetic unrestricted by the conventions of realism facilitates challenges to received attitudes, stereotypes and discursive formations. Although her later texts may placate critics of her inaccessibility, Brossard's key contribution to feminist literature remains the utopian ontology that she developed in her *écriture au féminin* phase. Based in love between women rather than in opposition to a masculine Self, Brossard's "radical urban woman" (*She* 59) escapes structural homology to traverse civic and transnational space with a subjectivity proper to herself.

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 Notes

¹ Nicole Brossard, “Interview” with Huffer 120.

² I would like to extend heartfelt thanks to the readers of earlier drafts of this article—Carolyn Allen, Christopher Ian Foster, L. Chris Fox, and Kelly-Anne Maddox—for challenging me to refine and clarify my ideas.

³ *L’écriture féminine* can be translated as “feminine writing”

⁴ Knutson’s finely argued study addresses not only a grammatical female generic but also a discursive female generic “in which women and women’s points of view are constructed as default and normal” (195). These female generics are related to, but not identical with, the ontological entity of Woman that Brossard seeks to introduce into the symbolic field.

⁵ Notably, “Green Night in Labyrinth Park” was written about a decade after the *écriture au féminin* movement had ended. Articulating a highly optimistic vision of transnational feminist solidarity, this text stages a partial, or qualified, reprise of Brossard’s utopian, ontological feminist convictions. The retrospective tenor of the passage under discussion suggests nostalgia for her previous textual practice at the same time as other passages in the essay evince (or reference) the dystopian and mimetic elements that I will argue characterize her later works. For example, the narrator acknowledges in “Ninth Bend” that “putting a great deal of oneself into language does not eliminate the patriarchal horror” (133) and in “Writer’s Note” claims that “It is always pleasant, during a reading, to recognize a name here, a place there, a tree here, ‘the truth’ there. It is good to know that reality exists” (135).

⁶ The dominant literary genre in Québec from the mid-1800’s until World War II was the *roman du terroir*, or novel of the land, which extols agrarian values and vilifies urban mores and whose misogynist underpinnings Patricia Smart has exposed in her book *Writing in the Father’s House: The Emergence of the Feminine in the Quebec Literary Tradition*. Brossard speculates that as a result of this tradition, it is “easy for someone of [her] generation...to associate radicalism with the city” (“Interview” with Huffer 120). M. Jean Anderson further contends that Québécois women writers refrain from idealizing the country since literary history has firmly imbued rural Québec with a traditionalism far from liberatory for women (73-6).

⁷ Brossard’s original sentence is “*Je ne peux tutoyer personne*” (*Baroque d’aube* 220); literally, “I cannot address anyone as *tu*.” While *tu* and *vous* both translate as “you,” the former implies a familiar relationship between interlocutors and the latter a formal one.

⁸ Insofar as the size of the publishing house correlates to that of the audience, it is surely no coincidence that *Baroque at Dawn* is the first English translation of the author's work to be published by a mainstream Canadian press, McClelland and Stewart.