

Revisiting Nicole Brossard: An Introduction

by Jodi Lundgren and Kelly-Anne Maddox

In soliciting papers for a feature on “Revisiting Nicole Brossard: Québécois Feminist Subjectivity in the 21st century,” we hoped to orchestrate a modest retrospective on the corpus of this prolific experimental writer that would reassess her contribution to feminist literature and theory and gauge the impact of her work on a younger generation of feminist writers, especially in Québec. Richly rewarded by the calibre and range of submissions received, we believe that the first part of our mandate has been fulfilled, whereas with regard to the second, much scope for future work remains.

Our editorial process highlighted that, despite the quantity and quality of translations of Brossard’s work into English, Brossard remains a *Québec* author who writes predominantly in *French*. One of our main concerns was to continue to provide access to Brossard’s work through readings of her texts in translation, and at the same time to maintain the Francophone aspect of her writing. The feature thus opens with “Écrivaine,” a recent essay by Brossard reprinted in the original French. It is our hope that this text, along with others in this feature, will serve to underscore and reinforce Brossard’s status not only as an internationally-renowned feminist but as a Québec writer.

Prescient, self-reflexive thinker that she is, Brossard has already done much to situate her own body of work within Québec and feminist literary history in such texts as the 1998 *She Would be the First Sentence of My Next Novel*. Along the same lines, “Écrivaine,” which appears in this issue in Anne-Marie Wheeler’s English translation, “Auther,” for the first time, takes up in its opening line the millennial challenge in our call: “How appropriate that the end of

the twentieth-century should coincide with civilization’s passing from a culture of writing to one of information technology.” The reflection on the role of “information technology” that occurs here and in the two subsequent pieces is particularly fitting within the present context of *How2*, an online journal. In “To Revisit: A Transitive Verb? A babel translation of Nicole Brossard’s *Journal Intime + commentary*,” Kate Eichhorn goes so far as to claim that this virtual medium, necessarily defamiliarizing for a writer who has concerned herself with paper and ink most of her career, offers “a surprisingly appropriate stage upon which to return” to Brossard’s work since, in “revisiting” Brossard in English, we are already doing so *in translation*. Through the use of translation software, Eichhorn clearly demonstrates that the achievement in communication across languages and cultures that translation should normally strive to attain is lost once we remove its human element.

This human element takes center stage in “words looking for another possibility: *Dialogue sur la traduction à propos d’Écrivaine,*” the record of a face-to-face conversation between Brossard, translator Anne-Marie Wheeler and Susan Rudy, editor of a forthcoming collection of Brossard’s essays in English entitled *Fluid Arguments*. Their interview draws on the spirit of collaboration between translator and author exhibited in Anne Hébert and Frank Scott’s *Dialogue sur la traduction*, which inspired Brossard’s, Rudy’s and Wheeler’s own title. This collaboration reinforces what Hébert has called “une très grande générosité poétique” (48), or great poetic generosity, between translator and author and transforms the art of translation into what Northrop Frye designates in his preface to the *Dialogue* as “a creative achievement in communication, not merely a necessary evil or a removal of barriers” (14). Indeed, as we discussed Wheeler and Rudy’s interview, we constantly found ourselves wanting to join in this

conversation and participate in their discussion of issues relevant not only to Brossard's text, but to the practice of translation in general.

While these opening texts address Brossard at the millenium, the next three articles in the feature conduct a retrospective on her work, especially that from the *écriture au féminin* period. In an article that draws on certain linguistic nuances available only to readers of the original French, Ghislaine Boulanger—having translated her own paper from French into English—reconsiders crucial theoretical concepts articulated in Brossard's landmark collection of essays, *The Aerial Letter*. Using the idea of the strategic feint, Boulanger ingeniously intervenes in the essentialism debates that have caused some readers to dismiss Brossard's work, making evident that “the ‘essential figures’ are just as discursively constructed as the patriarchal images of woman that Brossard denounces as fabrications.” Even more compelling is Boulanger's related account of Brossard's “problemization of gender by sexuality”: “when Brossard supplies the lesbian dimension to *écriture féminine*, she brings into light the filter of a dominant sexual orientation *always already* presupposed by the feminine, and thereby moves the feminine body into the realm of gender by revealing it as a social construction with heterocentric foundations.” Boulanger thus establishes that by invoking lesbian sexuality, Brossard's work disrupts rather than idealizes the unitary, extra-discursive femininity to which critics of essentialism most often object.

The centrality of lesbian eroticism to Brossard's philosophical project in her *écriture au féminin* period is reaffirmed in Jodi Lundgren's “A Girl in Combat in the City of Men”: The Civic, Resistant, Ontological Woman in the Work of Nicole Brossard.” Arguing that Brossard extrapolates from textualized lesbian eroticism a geographically situated yet neo-universal Woman, Lundgren then contrasts Brossard's nonmimetic, utopian writing with the more

representational, dystopian prose that follows. Pointing out that “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,” Lundgren considers possible reasons for Brossard’s stylistic and thematic transformations, including shifting contexts of creation and reception.

Together, Boulanger’s theoretical matrix and Lundgren’s synthesizing overview provide a framework for the close readings put forward in the feature’s final two articles. In an intriguing analysis entitled “‘bringing me into the world’: Brossard’s *Lovhers* and the Domain of Linguistic Survival,” Maureen E. Ruprecht Fadem demonstrates that Brossard’s poetics in this text (originally published in 1980) anticipated key directions that post-structuralist feminist theory would later take. Pairing an innovative inversion of Gayatri Spivak’s concept of “worlding” with Judith Butler’s relevant “speculations on the double movement and dual potentiality of injurious language,” Fadem explores Brossard’s book of poetry as a “significant instance of linguistic lesbian survival.” Echoing Lundgren’s spatial emphasis, Fadem’s celebratory reading places importance on Brossard’s construction in language of “material and conceptual dwelling places for lesbians.”

Reversing the more common contrastive approach to Brossard’s earlier and later periods, Nancy Gillespie establishes continuity among them in “Before and After *écriture au féminin*: Uncanny Gothic Connections in Nicole Brossard’s *These Our Mothers Or: The Disintegrating Chapter and Mauve Desert*.” The insightful and unexpected pairing of texts recurs when, employing Lacan and other psychoanalytic critics, Gillespie considers the connections between Brossard’s texts and the Gothic writing of Mary Shelley. She contends that, in what might be called “Gothic *écriture au féminin*,” Brossard engages in a “grotesquing of language” that

“disrupts the hegemony of the Symbolic by uncovering its multiple orifices, its gaps and fissures,” thus making it possible to reconfigure subjectivity.

Perhaps inevitably, in Gillespie’s discussion of *Mauve Desert*, the topic of translation resurfaces: “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.” Similarly, the present feature in *How2* can be read backwards as well as forwards or in a random order as the articles both intersect and glance off each other tangentially at felicitous, unforeseen moments.

Gillespie provides an optimistic reading of the trajectory of Brossard’s career, arguing for the ongoing vitality and relevance of post-*écriture au féminin* works. Certainly, as her essay “Auther” evinces in this issue, Brossard continues to bring her lucid intellect and visionary imagination to bear on contemporary phenomena and conundrums. Yet, Brossard’s persistent orientation towards the future coexists with an acute, generational longing for descendants, as a recent poem, “The Present Is Not a Book,” illustrates:

where women and other women touch
memory and pleasure

because of hands
of the line of time that runs through our hair
most of us dedicate our poems
life to girls capable of tongues and future. (4-9)

In these lines, Brossard desirously invokes the notion of a feminist lineage. What has come of such earnest dedication to these capable girls?

In fact, our intense curiosity, as editors, to read criticism that compared Brossard's work to that of younger Québécois women writers remains unsatisfied. Although Maureen Fadem's paper implicitly (and persuasively) positions contemporary feminist theorists writing in English as Brossard's inheritors, the question remains: what is Brossard's relationship to a younger generation of experimental poets and imaginative prose writers—"girls capable of tongues and future"—both within and outside of Québec? We hope that some of this feature's readers will pursue this topic in their own future projects as it forms part of an important, broader issue: how to honour, sustain, and further the literary beneficence we have received from such innovative, feminist trailblazers.

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