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Burgdorf, Arielle

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
SANTA CRUZ

**ÉCLATER LE LANGAGE : TRANSLATION, RESISTANCE, AND THE LESBIAN  
FEMINIST NETWORK OF MONTREAL**

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

LITERATURE

by

**Arielle Burgdorf**

August 2026

The Dissertation of Arielle Burgdorf is  
approved by:

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Professor Emeritus Susan Gillman, chair

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Professor Dorian Bell

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Professor Miléna Santoro

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Donald Smith  
Interim Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies



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## **Abstract**

*Éclater le langage : translation, resistance, and the lesbian and feminist network of*

*Montreal*

**Arielle Burgdorf**

This dissertation explores writing and translation as modes through which to interpret problematics of language and gender in literature. In relation to the community I study, translating and writing are not separate gestures, but rather two vital pieces of a queer, feminist ontology that resists hierarchies and binaries within language. I examine the practice of writing-translation in a group of women living and working in Montreal during the 1980s and 90s—the Montreal lesbian feminist network. This period, together with the physical space of urban Montreal and its radical history, influenced the experimental art produced. During this time, Montreal served as a central meeting place for lesbian and feminist writers, poets, artists, literary translators, and performers from Anglophone and Francophone backgrounds. Though incredibly diverse in their experiences and histories, these women shared a common interest in expressing anti-hierarchical perspectives on gender, sexuality, and language through formal experimentation. The extent to which they collaborated varied greatly—from those who worked side by side on projects, to others who referenced one another in what Julia Kristeva referred to as the intertext, mapping a broader feminist lineage that transcends geographical and temporal boundaries. Their collaborations did not always require physical proximity, often occurring in a theoretical realm less constrained by hegemonic borders.

The form of *Éclater le langage* mirrors the transgressive, rhizomatic, and collective nature of the Montreal network. The chapters are organized around major figures (Nicole Brossard, Gail Scott) and texts such as *Le désert mauve* and *Heroïne*, while the overall structure of my study methodologically queers time. This approach refuses chronological storytelling by demonstrating how the past continues to haunt and influence the present in overlapping waves. Similarly, operating on their understanding of national borders as porous, I show the evolving relationship between feminist and lesbian texts in Montreal and their global influences. Like those network texts, *Éclater le langage* combines the creative and critical, utilizing oral testimony from participants along with my own writing, and experiments with untranslated work, literary ethnography, and bilingual writing in order to develop a liberatory, political writing practice.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee: Susan Gillman, Dorian Bell, and Miléna Santoro, as well as the members of my QE committee: the late Carla Freccero, Susan Gillman, Miléna Santoro, and Vilashini Cooppan.

Carla was my original dissertation chair and advisor, and her passing left a huge hole for myself and the wider UCSC community. She encouraged and supported my writing in every way possible, from working with me on French texts to helping me attain fellowships and employment as her research assistant. She was instrumental in the development and direction of this thesis and I am heartbroken she will not be able to see the finished product. However, I am fortunate that Susan, Miléna, and Dorian have graciously stepped in to support my finishing the dissertation in her absence.

I would also like to thank my own “network” of collaborators: Julie Agu, Lianne Moyes, Claire Foster, Skyler Marshall, Emily G.T. Corrêa, Noelle Thomas, and Kelsey McFaul. On the administrative side, I would like to thank Carson Dance, Amy Tessier, and the absolute angel, Janina Larenas. Thank you to Sherry Simon, Julie Doucet, and Gail Scott for agreeing to be interviewed as part of this project. Lastly, I would like to thank my parents, my sisters, and my partner, Joey Patchan.

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## Introduction

It's hard to believe that there was a time when I was not familiar with the Montreal lesbian feminist network. I found the author Nicole Brossard whilst starting to explore my own growing interest in the art of translation in graduate school. I entered the PhD program intending to concentrate on queer Mexican fiction from the 1980s, but slowly began to realize it was the translational elements of the project that interested me most, and that while I found the challenge of learning Spanish as an adult enjoyable, I missed speaking and reading in French. My parents were responsible for encouraging my initial interest in the French language, and I remember staying home from school sick and watching *French in Action* on PBS with my father. I had long thought that translation as a profession required perfection in a chosen language, and that because I was not born bilingual and didn't have the means to afford an intensive language course overseas, I'd already lost any practical translating opportunities. This belief was further reinforced at the public elementary school I attended, where the French immersion program was open only to those who had been speaking French since birth. My relationship to French was like a crush—shy admiration from afar, but I never dared get close enough to see if the feelings were requited.

Then, decades later in my PhD program at UC Santa Cruz, I discovered the joy of translation for its own sake, creating unpublished (and a couple published) little experiments that felt like trying to solve a larger mystery. Brossard's book, *Mauve*

*Desert*, a novel that highlights all the joy and fear of translation, was a revelation to me.<sup>1</sup> *Mauve Desert* feels like a transmission from another world, a text that creates its own rules and own universe. By this point, I had visited Montreal many times and developed an affinity for the city after a trip with my mother. We had an amazing time taking in Indigenous art, bilingual films, and a bizarre, no-waste vegetarian restaurant in the Gay Village where you were forced to eat all of your leftovers. I was not surprised that *Mauve Desert* came out of this colorful, vibrant city. And while *Mauve Desert* has no obvious comparisons, I suspected that the novel did not exist in a vacuum. I hoped that where there was one subversive and intricately woven novel, there might be others, so I tugged on the thread. It turned out that I was right; there were hundreds of exciting feminist works written in Montreal during the 1980s and 90s—not just novels but poems, plays, magazines, graphic novels, essays, theory, cross-genre and hybrid works. Brossard was a door into another world that was previously unknown to me. Through her, I came to understand the complexity of language politics in Quebec and the impact of intellectual feminist and lesbian writing circles in Montreal, which like the novel were truly unique in their specifics.

Around this time, I also discovered books theorizing the characteristics and importance of feminist experimental writing in Montreal, to which my dissertation owes an intellectual debt. These include Karen Gould's *Writing in the Feminine: Feminism and Experimental Writing in Quebec* where she analyzes writing by Nicole

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<sup>1</sup> I originally read *Mauve Desert* in English, and then immediately after read the original French version.

Brossard, Madeleine Gagnon, Louky Bersianik, and France Théoret, connecting their writing to Québécois, French, and American feminist movements. Also important for my thinking were Miléna Santoro and Paula Gilbert's co-edited *Transatlantic passages: literary and cultural relations between Quebec and Francophone Europe* and Santoro's *Mothers of Invention: Feminist Authors and Experimental Fiction in France and Quebec*, where she puts the work of two French feminist authors (Hélène Cixous and Jeanne Hyvard) into conversation with the work of two Québécoise authors (Madeleine Gagnon and Nicole Brossard), offering a transnational perspective on feminism and experimental fiction. In Sherry Simon's *Translating Montreal: Episodes in the Life of a Divided City* and *Le Trafic des langues: Traduction et culture dans la littérature québécoise*, which formed much of the original scaffolding for my project, she takes the perspective that translation is an ongoing process rather than a product and theorizes the multicultural writing of Quebec, applying it to other global contexts. Simon analyzes translation as an agent of cultural formation and engages with the matrix of identity, giving examples of writers she views as "traffickers" of language such as Abraham Moses Klein, Jacques Brault, Nicole Brossard, Jacques Poulin, and Daniel Gagnon. Finally, articles by Marguerite Andersen, Rose Marie Arbour, Lianne Moyes, Louise Von Flotow, and Patricia Smart provided additional context for this project.

Although scholars have thoroughly analyzed the work of Brossard and her contemporaries, I felt that there might still be a new contribution I could make in my own research. I was not interested in a corrective attempt to "fill gaps" in the

archive(s), but rather, a far-reaching, interdisciplinary study which might be able to connect the work female artistic practitioners had been doing in different fields within the same temporal span. It was also important to me to bring translation to the forefront of my analysis, to give credit to the act of translating as a form of feminism in itself, a subversive way women were able to listen to, interpret, and write one another.

Regarding my own identity, as someone who identifies as non-binary and queer or bisexual, there is an obvious question as to why I have chosen to focus on writing about a group of majority lesbian and cisgender women. I have never identified as a lesbian, but I have always understood the need for gendered solidarity and deeply respect those who chose to prioritize companionship with other women, regardless of sexuality. While being a non-binary person is an important, positive piece of my life, the experience of growing up socialized female in the United States is also central to how I see and understand the world around me, and central to how I am treated by others. Experiencing sexism from a young age made me into a feminist for life, even as my own relationship to gender changed over time. As the author and critic Olivia Laing wrote on social media, “while I’m a feminist to the core my own section of the ballroom is among the non binary [sic].” I do not see these two identities as in conflict, because I never saw feminism as a movement for “women.” bell hooks teaches that feminism is for everybody. Men are also hurt by patriarchy, and every gender can benefit from a more liberated society with fewer restrictions. Despite differences in gender, culture, language, and time period, I’ve found much in

the work of the Montreal lesbian feminist network that is useful and applicable to my own cultural work. Scott's questioning of language made me question and restructure my own use of language. Brossard's writing a novel about translation gave me a model as well as the courage to write my own novel about translation and gender. Further, a lot of the network's contributions could be relevant for researchers and artistic practitioners in a variety of fields, including linguistics, queer theory, gender studies, writing, translation, theater, and those who study artistic communities. My dissertation aims to isolate some of the strategies used by the network and make an argument for their current and future utility. What follows is a brief summary of various forms, theories, and techniques employed by the network that I have chosen to adapt in my own writing. My goal in utilizing creative-critical adaptation is to transcend the role of recorder of history, actively asserting and inserting myself into the feminist lesbian lineage. The use of experimental forms represents a way to connect myself to the Montreal lesbian feminist network, to engage with and continue building on the groundbreaking work of women like Brossard, Scott, and Marchessault, while also updating their tactics to suit the needs of contemporary artists facing new geographical, political, and artistic contexts.

### **Notes on Autotheory and "I"**

[T]he style that I had been taught since I was an undergraduate; that one writes oneself out of the story, one is quote-unquote, objective...I had to unlearn all that.

—Rashid Khalidi<sup>2</sup>

The idea of selfhood, the idea of diaristic writing by women being criticized for being selfish and narcissistic—It's like, 'Oh, sorry I was being selfish. I wanted a self.'

—Kristen Stewart<sup>3</sup>

I want to be clear from the outset of this project that I am not only interested in compiling my original research on the topic of women's writing and collaboration in Montreal during the 1980s and 90s, but also in chronicling and actively reflecting on the mechanisms of the research process itself, thereby making them transparent for the reader. Think of this dissertation as a living archive of my experiences in piecing the final product together. In doing so, I wish to center the body, emotion, vulnerability, and affect, as these have often been left out of traditional scholarly accounts of research, especially those written by men. The body is so central, yet so often removed from conversations about writing, scholarship, and translation, therefore it must be re-inserted into our understanding of creativity. Grief, loneliness,

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<sup>2</sup> Alice, R. Interview with Rashid Khalidi. *Tolka Journal*. Issue 11, Dublin: Ireland, pg. 36.

<sup>3</sup> David Marchese, The New York Times, Dec. 6, 2025, "Kristen Stewart Wants to Blow Up the Myth of the Brilliant Male Actor, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/12/06/magazine/kristen-stewart-interview.html>

fear, and pride are all affects that have grazed my writing in the process of putting the work together, just as they have touched the writing of other participants in the network, and you should be able both to read and to feel their presence in these pages. I greatly admire the work of Saidiya Hartman and her concept of ‘critical fabulation,’ although this term does not completely describe my writing. Unlike Hartman, I am working with a more recent time period and have access to numerous archives and living subjects. Therefore, fabulation in my work serves a different function than filling in gaps in the archive. My work is additive to the assembly already present in the archive, historicizing literary products and their circulation to better understand how they came to be, and what their larger influence was on culture. I see myself as a kind of literary ethnographer rather than a literary critic, in that I employ the methodology of auto-ethnography, embedding myself within a literary culture to conduct fieldwork, and using the resulting fieldwork as a way of reading texts. My fieldwork notes are interpreted (translated) through the technique of creative writing, which I borrowed from the artistic practices of the network. To offer more transparency for you, the reader, I have italicized the artistic parts of the text which move historical content into the present through creative writing, signaling a shift from a traditional mode to a less traditional one. However, the sections in italics are not extraneous; the narrative fragments are as deeply researched as the unitalicized sections. In much of my research, I aim to combine personal narrative with theory, popularized in the term autotheory. Autotheory is a discursive strategy I have picked up from many of the women I study, particularly through analyzing the text *La*

*theorie, un dimanche* as a model for rigorous and creative theorizing. While I always knew I wanted to include autotheory and personal narrative as part of my project and that it was an important way of organizing the text, the use of autotheory is still stigmatized in scholarly circles, and so I would like to address the aversion directly.

There is a longstanding historical debate within many disciplines, from anthropology to sociology, over the positionality and transparency of the researcher. The directive to, as Middle East scholar Rashid Khalidi says in the quote that opens this section, be objective and write “oneself out of the story,” is often presented to emerging scholars as an ethical imperative and professional custom. And yet, many scholars do not agree that objectivity is desirable, or even possible. Journalist Lewis Raven Wallace, in their book *The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity*, observed, within their field, “a troubling double standard in which cisgender white men are treated inherently as ‘objective’ even when they’re openly biased, while the rest of us are expected to remain ‘neutral’ even when our lives or safety are under threat.”<sup>4</sup> Raven Wallace theorizes objectivity as a construct that mainly benefits those already in power. In mainstream media, hegemonic entities often represent what is natural, normal, status quo, while it is others who are called to question their bias. And while there is nothing wrong with questioning one’s internal bias and particular lens on the world, the belief that this practice is only necessary for certain groups of people is harmful. The same principles Raven Wallace describes are

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis Raven Wallace, *The View from Somewhere: Undoing the Myth of Journalistic Objectivity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 4.

also applicable to scholarship, and the outdated concept of the “objective” researcher is a myth. As someone who writes about women, queer people, people of color, non-binary people, trans people, and other marginalized groups, there is a political element to resisting conventional objectivity or neutrality as a guiding ideal. While biases have certainly been weaponized historically to hurt marginalized groups, the demand that those groups keep the personal out of their work and consider both sides equally at all times is absurd. As the feminist movement reminds us again and again, the personal is political. I have spoken to so many graduate and undergraduate students who have direct personal connections to their areas of research; for instance, a student who is studying the financial conditions of Black farmers in the Mississippi Delta because of their ancestors. They bring valuable knowledge and experiences to their research that result from their history and positionality in the world. What if the goal were not objectivity, but something else instead?

The discussion over objectivity also mirrors the frequent debate in translation theory about how much of herself the translator is allowed to include in her translation. For many years in the discourse, the primary goal for the translator was to make herself absent or invisible, to include nothing of her positionality in the work. Yet as British translator and author Jen Calleja writes in her memoir *Fair: The Life-Art of Translation*, “We want the creative person we’re supporting to take centre stage, that is key. But we also believe that in the interest of transparency, people should know who is facilitating, mediating and representing the work and the person who made it. We want outsiders to know there are different approaches to our work,

not one way.”<sup>5</sup> Even translation, a medium that arguably strives for even greater objectivity than journalism, is understood more and more as a product of the specific translator and their unique biases, gifts, and flaws. A translator may choose a particular word over another one because she is more accustomed to hearing it, because she has positive associations with it, or simply because she likes the sound of it more. These subconscious choices are repeated thousands of times in translated works, and together, they make up the translator’s version as a whole. This subjectivity is crucial to what differentiates one translation from another, and what constitutes a translator’s “voice.” For me, the self and “I” are not items left behind at the coatcheck in order to enter the drawing rooms of journalism, translation, or research. To the contrary; when used properly, they are tools that can greatly inform and enrich one’s work.

The contemporary rise of autotheory is a response to discourse surrounding the use of personal narratives, a formal rejection of neutrality and the dissolution of theoretical/personal boundaries. As Canadian scholar Lauren Fournier writes in *Autotheory As Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (2021): “Autotheory reveals the tenuousness of maintaining illusory separations between art and life, theory and practice, work and the self, research and motivation, just as feminist artists and scholars have long argued.”<sup>6</sup> Of course, autotheory is more than simply using “I.” It can involve a reflective process, a meta-analysis of research or the research process

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<sup>5</sup>Jen Calleja, *Fair*, (London: Prototype Press 2025), 118.

<sup>6</sup> Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory As Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021), 10.

within the text itself, and a subversive or playful relationship to citation, as well as other elements. However, the use of “I” is the component most associated with the genre, and because of the “I,” autotheory is widely misunderstood as a narcissistic practice. *Self* quickly distorts into *selfish* and *self-centered*. Instead, I argue that autotheory is the political stance that what happens in a person’s life cannot be isolated from what happens in theory. Theory is made by digging deep into the soil of life, the thinking goes, therefore the use of material from one’s life in research does not pollute the theoretical. The use of the two parts, auto (meaning self) + theory (derived from the Greek for contemplating or viewing) bring valuable insights we could not get from looking at one element alone. Using the subjective “I” in one’s writing tells the reader why the topic matters, demonstrating how the author is involved and/or implicated in their research. As the poet Diane di Prima writes in Revolutionary Letter #1: “I have just realized that the stakes are myself.”<sup>7</sup> Autotheory is an excellent way to inform the reader of the stakes and their connection to the author. Furthermore, because the personal is political, writing the self in autotheory can be the beginning of transforming the *I* into the *we* and the *us*.

Feminism was never about achieving freedom or equality for a single individual; the feminist “I” always reaches outwards to other Is. While Virginia Woolf identified a room of one’s own (and money) as essential for women writers, she was missing the essential need for a wider community. As Louise Dupré writes in

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<sup>7</sup> Diane di Prima, “Revolutionary Letter #1” in *Revolutionary Letters* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1971), 5.

the English translation of *Theory, a Sunday*: “Consciousness is the ability to set oneself to the side, to move from *I* to *we*,”<sup>8</sup> and yet she notes at the same time, “Writing means accepting that a feminist consciousness will never succeed in completely tearing the *I* from itself.”<sup>9</sup> Dupré makes frequent use of the *I* throughout her essay, but is ultimately writing for the *we*. This is the tricky tightrope that the feminist or queer theorist must walk: maintaining a strong awareness of their particular place, role, and individuality, while maintaining an even greater awareness that theirs is not the only consciousness that matters. They must consider the consciousness of the audience, and the consciousness of the collective. It’s true that reading, writing, and translating are collaborative acts, but acknowledging the use of *I* does not negate this. When you see the word “I” in the text, please understand that it is my attempt to be accountable in the research process, to inform you of my personal stakes in the project, and to be part of a larger feminist community.

### **Defining the Contours of the Network**

In order to explain why the Montreal lesbian feminist network was so unique and complex, it is essential to contextualize it to contemporaneous feminist and queer literary movements. I will begin with my own country, and the one I have studied the most—the United States. During the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, U.S. feminist and queer theorists, including Judith Butler, June Jordan, Chandra Mohanty, Donna Haraway,

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<sup>8</sup> Louky Bersianik, Nicole Brossard, France Théoret, Gail Scott, Louise Cotnoir & Louise Dupré, *Theory, a Sunday* (New York: Belladonna, 2013), 92.

<sup>9</sup> Bersianik, Brossard, Théoret, Scott, Cotnoir, and Dupré, *Theory, a Sunday*, 99.

Susan Stryker, and Audre Lorde, found a home in the academy, where decently-paid teaching positions provided them space and financial resources to publish new writing, as well as the ability to meet and organize with others with similar beliefs.<sup>10</sup> They were also able to attend conferences, arrange speaking engagements, and take part in visiting professorships around the world (for example, Lorde's professorship in Berlin) that first opened their eyes to other feminisms and shaped their discourse. The American dependence on the university was criticized by some as the "academization" of feminist movement and theory, seeing it as out of touch with or removed from the concerns of working class people.<sup>11</sup> As a whole, American feminist theory was characterized by robust public debates, postmodern and poststructuralist definitions of gender, a critique of the possibility of a universal feminism, and a concentration on the intersections of race and gender, often leading to splinter groups within movements. Groups like the Combahee River Collective critiqued what they called white women's feminism for ignoring the particular struggles faced by Black women and not fighting for the rights of all women. This would remain a major criticism through the 2017 #MeToo movement, which was created by Tarana Burke, a Black woman, but came to be associated more with white female actresses in Hollywood.

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<sup>10</sup> Of course, the state of feminist professors within American universities was and remains precarious at best. Professors could be fired for expressing certain political beliefs, which is to say nothing of what the feminist theorists themselves thought about being a part of an institution and their place within it. Yet in many ways, I believe, feminist theorists in the 1980s and 90s in America had more protections and job security than they do today.

<sup>11</sup> Ann R. Cacoullos, "American Feminist Theory." *American Studies International* (Washington) 39, no. 1 (2001): 72–117.

Canadian feminism of this time period, in contrast, was not as firmly rooted in academia. Although theorists like Barbara Godard and Kathy Mezei taught at universities, there was a concerted effort to enact feminist consciousness-raising outside of the academy. Feminist theorists included not only professors, but working class women and professional artists of various backgrounds. There were tensions over race and gender, but the main dividing factor in Canada was language. The Canadian feminist movement was primarily divided amongst the dominant Anglophone and the minority Francophone feminists, as well as Indigenous and women of color feminisms that rejected mainstream Canadian feminism, which they saw as exclusionary and colonialist. The same multiple language divisions were also present in the Canadian literary community. Arguably the most famous feminist Canadian writer is Margaret Atwood, born in Ottawa in 1939. Atwood published her award-winning novel *The Handmaid's Tale* in 1985, a few years before Brossard published *Le désert mauve*. Because Atwood writes fairly non-experimental science fiction, a better comparison for her might be the Quebecois author Louky Bersianik; but either way, in contrast to the women in Montreal, Atwood is now a multi-millionaire, with a net worth of \$20-25 million estimated as of 2025.<sup>12</sup> She is the winner of two Booker prizes, as well as other prestigious awards, and her books have been adapted into numerous movies and TV shows.

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<sup>12</sup> Danielle Jennings, "Author Margaret Atwood's Impressive Net Worth Is Worthy of Writing About," *Distractify*, Nov. 10 2025, <https://www.distractify.com/p/margaret-atwood-net-worth>.

Atwood is well-known and celebrated outside of Canada, and although there are many differences between her and the women in the Montreal lesbian feminist network, it's hard not to associate her success with the fact that she is an English-language Canadian author, rather than a French-language one. Within Quebec, it can be advantageous to be a Francophone writer, given the numerous grants and prizes to encourage the publication of French-language work. However most North American readers are not familiar with contemporary Francophone Quebecois authors like Caroline Dawson, Ève Lambert, Dany Laferrière, and Kim Thúy, even though all of them have had their work translated into English. In order for a Canadian author to succeed in the North American market, the usual pattern is to write in English, even if it's not their native language. For example, *Life of Pi* author Yann Martel, born to Quebecois parents and whose first language is French said: "I'm comfortable writing only in English. I feel I control that language, that I can play it like an instrument, as I want to."<sup>13</sup> In general, the choice to publish in English outside Quebec is not solely an aesthetic one, given that there is a tangible financial incentive for writing in English. This economic incentive is why, as we shall see later, it was remarkable for the Montreal lesbian feminist network to operate in English, French, and sometimes more languages, and for authors and translators to write, speak, and translate outside their first languages. Although the members of the network were certainly concerned with finances and the ability to sustain themselves, it was far more important to them to

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<sup>13</sup>Lee Yew Leong, "An Interview with Yann Martel," *Asymptote Journal*, 2026, <https://www.asymptotejournal.com/interview/an-interview-yann-martel/>.

publish work that they felt had integrity and artistic merit than to cater to specific markets. At the same time, the members were hyper-aware of conversations going on outside Quebec and of international feminist conversations happening around them.

Francophone feminist theory from Quebec was composed of a variety of influences, including the impact of American feminists who visited Canada, such as poet Adrienne Rich, as well as French feminists like Simone de Beauvoir and Hélène Cixous. The Francophone feminists also viewed themselves as economically oppressed peoples within the dominant Anglophone Canada, and so their liberation was often associated with the goal of gaining sovereignty for Quebec. While I discuss the characteristics of Canadian feminist theorists across language lines more thoroughly in Chapter Two, a brief summary here of the network's unique contributions highlights what is arguably their most important contribution, the writing movement known as *écriture au féminin*.

### **Écriture au féminin**

“Écriture au féminin” is a Quebec-specific transformation (or even translation) of the French “écriture féminine” popularized by French literary theorist Hélène Cixous in her 1975 essay, “Le rire de la méduse.”<sup>14</sup> According to Cixous, *écriture féminine* was a way for the feminine subject to challenge phallogentric logic and access hidden signifiers in language through strategies such as stream-of-consciousness writing. The term was subsequently associated with Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, though

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<sup>14</sup> Hélène Cixous, “Le rire de la Méduse.” *L'Arc* 61(1975): 39-54.

neither theorist ever referred to *écriture féminine* by name.<sup>15</sup> Over time, *écriture féminine* was reduced by some Anglophone feminists to mean embodied writing by women, feminist writing, or writing that women needed to do in order to become liberated.<sup>16</sup> Importantly, Cixous did not view *écriture féminine* as a practice only women were capable of; she uses James Joyce and Jean Genet as examples of *écriture féminine*. Interestingly, it was Cixous herself who also likely invented the term *écriture au féminin*, as Jacqueline Taylor notes: “Cixous shifted early on in her writing from using the term *l’écriture féminine* to ‘*écriture au féminin*,’ meaning ‘writing in the feminine’ or ‘writing said to be feminine.’”<sup>17</sup> Why this shift in language? The transition from “women’s writing” or “feminine writing” to “writing in the feminine” suggests a more distinct, yet capacious meaning. “Writing in the feminine” takes the emphasis off the category of woman, and places it onto the writing. The translational shift is a linguistic way to untangle femininity from womanhood, to assert that these elements are not intrinsically linked. The orthographic change from *féminine* to *féminin* underscores that the French word for feminine is, ironically, a masculine noun.

*Écriture au féminin* was intended to be similar to and in conversation with *écriture féminine*, but with important distinctions. Like many of the terms used by Quebecois feminists, *écriture au féminin* has a variety of different definitions,

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<sup>15</sup> Irigaray is French-Belgian and Kristeva is French-Bulgarian.

<sup>16</sup> Jacqueline Taylor, “Thinking Difference Differently: An Exploration of *l’écriture féminine*, Women’s Art Practice, and Postfeminism.” *L’Esprit Créateur* 58 (2018), 41.

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, “Thinking Difference Differently,” 48.

including ones that are sometimes contradictory. Feminist translation scholar Luise von Flotow describes *écriture au féminin* very broadly as “experimental feminist writing” and an “avant-garde literary scene.”<sup>18</sup> Although she situates the movement within Quebec, the labels of “experimental feminist” and “avant-garde” could equally be applied to non-Quebecois feminist authors of the 1970s and 80s, such as Lucy Lippard, Dionne Brand, Ann Quin, Lynne Tillman, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and M. NourbeSe Philip. The Quebecois feminists share much in common with these innovative writers, as well as with American literary movements such as New Narrative, Language poetry, and also with the Sixties experimental writing movement in Britain. However, the differences between experimental feminist artists in and outside Quebec were notable. Although the literal meaning would suggest otherwise, unlike *écriture féminine*, *écriture au féminin* was openly intended solely for women; Joyce and Genet were not examples of this form. There is a queerness to *écriture au féminin* that is not apparent with *écriture féminine*, as many of its practitioners were out lesbians who believed queerness was important to their writing process, and even those who weren’t often chose to orient their lives around the presence of women. The members of the network viewed the world as divided into gender categories that resulted in oppression and violence, and their response was to make transparent or to alter the gendered dynamics of the French language. Although the applications of *écriture au féminin* were often playful, the activist-theorists were objecting to a

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<sup>18</sup> Luise Von Flotow, “Legacies of Quebec Women’s ‘Écriture Au Féminin’: Bilingual Transformances, Translation Politicized, Subaltern Versions of the Text of the Street.” *Journal of Canadian Studies* (Peterborough, ON: 30, no. 4 1995), 88, 90.

structure of language that effaced women from culture in dangerous ways. One disturbing example of such erasure was news reports about the killings of fourteen women in 1989 at École Polytechnique. Due to the fact that one man, the murderer, was included in the group of people killed, the phrases describing the killings were gendered masculine plural in French instead of feminine plural. Linguistically, the lives of fourteen women were occluded in the reporting by the gender of one man—summarizing the patriarchal mindset that led to the killings in the first place.<sup>19</sup>

Eventually, thanks to the contributions of translators like de Lotbinière-Harwood and bilingual writers like Gail Scott, the practitioners of *écriture au féminin* would disrupt the gendered structures of the English language as well. They shared this mission with other North American feminists of the 1980s and 90s, a phenomenon that I discuss in greater detail in Chapter Three. The demographics of the Montreal lesbian feminist network were never half Anglophone, half Francophone, but instead a majority Francophone group chose to sometimes write in English out of necessity and artistic intent, with a few Anglophone women involved. Their identity as a linguistic minority was essential to their work as artists. Despite this, the network also consistently chose to reach out and make connections to Anglophone feminists in Canada and North America such as Daphne Marlatt, Adrienne Rich, and Kathy Mezei, as well as feminists worldwide. Even with these relationships, there were times when the Anglophone members of the network felt isolated. Scott described why she chose to get involved with the New Narrative

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<sup>19</sup> For further discussion about the École Polytechnique Massacre, see Chapter Two.

movement in the United States, “most of my friends had this principle that you shouldn’t get too involved with English. So I hardly ever got really good feedback from my francophone cohorts about my English writing, and I was starving after a while.”<sup>20</sup> I do not want to imply that the network represented perfect political, linguistic harmony, or that there was never conflict over language and privilege. I am aware of my own position, coming from the United States, and of the Canadian context, where English still dominates official communications, despite the number of other languages present.

A central part of *écriture au féminin* also involved coining neologisms or redefining words to serve a queer/feminist context. Writers Nicole Brossard, Louky Bersianik, and France Théoret pioneered the use of the concept “fiction théorique,” as well as other keywords including *délire* (to unread, also a play on the French noun meaning delirium, here transformed into a verb), *déparler* (to unspeak), *l’inédit* (the unspoken or unsaid). Although not included at the time, I think *à désapprendre* (to unlearn), after the Khalidi quote, is relevant here as well. They wanted to unlearn vocabulary forced on them by the patriarchal society and viewed language as the most fundamental building block of a new terrain. According to the linguistic reality or Whorfian hypothesis, language influences an individual’s perception of reality. The network’s philosophy was that, therefore, by changing language, one could

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<sup>20</sup> Dylan Byron, “An Interview with Gail Scott,” *The Believer*, July 26th, 2023, Issue 142, <https://www.thebeliever.net/an-interview-with-gail-scott/>.

change the perception of reality.<sup>21</sup> Whether or not they changed reality itself is debatable, but they spoke again and again about how changing language made them feel more empowered and more connected to other feminists.

Aside from neologisms, and an emphasis on language, there were other significant contributions of *écriture au féminin*. In “Écriture au Trans-féminine: Trish Salah’s *Wanting in Arabic*,” scholar Susan Billingham describes the common threads of *écriture au féminin* also present in some contemporary Canadian writing: “a feminist approach to writing that emphasizes gender in all aspects of being and textuality; a fusion of creative and theoretical modes, employing ludic wordplay and intertextuality to contest existing paradigms; the concept of the subject-in-process or reinvention of self through writing/reading; and the desire to achieve communal, collective political consciousness through writing.”<sup>22</sup> The application of creativity in theory was a central piece of the Montreal lesbian and feminist network’s ideology. They saw many elements in fiction that could be harnessed for political causes. Dupré again: “A lot of dreaming has to go into *transforming* a culture. You have to know how to imagine. You have to know how to develop that ‘memory of the future.’”<sup>23</sup> We are now living in the future that was their memory.

## Translation Theories

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<sup>21</sup> Teagan Wolter, “Whorfian hypothesis” in *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, <https://www.britannica.com/science/Whorfian-hypothesis>.

<sup>22</sup> Susan Billingham, “Écriture au Trans-Féminine: Trish Salah’s *Wanting in Arabic*,” *Canadian Literature*, Vancouver, no. 205 (July 2010), 34.

<sup>23</sup> Bersianik, Brossard, Théoret, Scott, Cotnoir, and Dupré, *Theory*, 98.

Translators are often described as being invisible, discreet, self-sacrificing presences. Their names are frequently absent on book covers; their roles are meant to be supportive. Once the book has been translated, they are expected to erase themselves out of the picture and allow the book to speak for itself. Indeed, feminist scholars have argued that the practice of translation corresponds to traditional feminine archetypes in which a woman's position and identity were subservient to a man's.

—Jhumpa Lahiri, *Translating Myself and Others*<sup>24</sup>

“[E]verything about a language is eternally and inherently changeable.”

—John McWhorter, *The Power of Babel*<sup>25</sup>

The theory and study of translation, especially what is known as feminist translation, form part of the backbone of this project, perhaps a natural progression for approaching a movement fixated on language and new semantic meanings. The conception of translation as labor and art has undergone a long journey—from a well-paid and respected profession in ancient times to modern translator activism advocating for translator's name to be on book covers and for them to share literary prizes with the authors, up until the present dystopian moment, when many corporations hope to replace the human element definitively with machine translation and AI. I've turned to a variety of translation theorists to better understand what the

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<sup>24</sup> Jhumpa Lahiri, *Translating Myself and Others*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022), 50.

<sup>25</sup> John McWhorter, *The Power of Babel: A Natural History of Language* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2003), 12.

women of the network were doing. These include Walter Benjamin, whose famous essay “The Translator’s Task” was fundamental to the genesis of translation theory as a discipline, and Lawrence Venuti, a tireless advocate for translation and original critic of the translator’s “invisibility,” who built on the work of French translator and translation theorist, Antoine Berman.<sup>26</sup> There are also Jacques Derrida, George Steiner, Umberto Eco, and Eugene Nida. Although I have picked these examples to make a point, you will notice that they are all male and all Western. There are many excellent female translation theorists, but many of them had to struggle for recognition and respect.

In response to the gendered inequality present in translation theory, what was known as the Canadian feminist school of translation developed. This consisted of translators and translation theorists like Sherry Simon, Annie Brisset, Susan Bassnett, Barbara Godard, and Luise von Flotow. The Canadian translation school was:

inherently multivocal... identified by Barbara Godard and Susan Bassnett by its conceptualization of translation as a political act, ‘as rupture and creation implicating relations of power.’ . . . Translation is figured as an act of iconoclastic repossession that rewrites a source culture to create something radically new in a transformative afterlife.<sup>27</sup>

These women elevated the role of the translator and highlighted the political power of language with their translations. They were “pioneering and experimenting...

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<sup>26</sup> Venuti was essentially discriminated against for his interest in translation, unable to receive tenure for many years, and his work translating from Italian was not counted as part of his publishing history.

<sup>27</sup> Anne-Marie Wheeler, “Issues Of Translation In the Works Of Nicole Brossard,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 16.2 (2003), <https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/issues-translation-works-nicole-brossard/docview/205453540/se-2>.

making visible the task of translation.”<sup>28</sup> Some of the women, like Simon and Godard, lived in Montreal, while others like von Flotow did not. I include those who did live in Montreal as part of the network, and they were responsible for theorizing not only the techniques of female translators at the time, but also those of experimental feminist writers like Brossard.

French philosopher Barbara Cassin’s “Dictionary of Untranslatables” was another major influence on my project. Although not strictly translation theory, her project of collating untranslatable concepts in different languages highlights the power of linguistic diversity and adds support to the Whorfian hypothesis. What are the consequences of being born into a culture that foregrounds *saudade* as opposed to one that believes in *weltschmerz*? The conclusion of her project is similar to Benjamin’s view in “The Task of the Translator,” that there can be no true equivalency because the “bread” one person pictures in English is not the same as “pain” in French or “brot” in German, though Cassin is more concerned with the philosophical implications of translation than the pragmatic or economic ones.

Emily Apter and Gayatri Spivak both saw translation studies’ usefulness within discussions of comparative and world literature. In her book *Against World Literature*, Apter references the existence of untranslatable words as proof that the original work is always superior to the translation. Spivak, on the other hand, is notable for calling translation the “most intimate act of reading,” highlighting the

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<sup>28</sup> Agnès Whitfield, *Writing Between the Lines Portraits of Canadian Anglophone Translators*, (Waterloo, Ont: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2006), 250.

affective aspects underlying the practice. In her book “Death of a Discipline,” she proposes studying translation as a way to reinvent (and thus continue the survival of) the subject of comparative literature. Spivak also considers the relationships inherent in the practice of translation, between that of the colonizer and what she called the subaltern.

More recently, there have been some excellent contributions building on the postcolonial turn in translation studies, including the essential anthology *Violent Phenomena* from Tilted Axis Press (founded by translator Deborah Smith) and the Aster(ix) Journal issue “Kitchen Table Translation,” which ask profound questions about who benefits from the labor of translation, why immigrant translation is so devalued, the colonial impulse present in translation, and the instances where we should not translate at all. These and other postcolonial writings about translation inform my project, and help move us away from the idea that translation is always a positive and empowering act. Postcoloniality in the Quebecois context operates in different and specific ways from how it operates in other countries, which I discuss more in the first chapter.

### **Exploding Language in Three Parts**

Typically, scholars have written about either translation or theory or literature or visual art or activism in a given city as separate phenomena, instead of an interdisciplinary approach. My contribution to the existing body of scholarship is to underscore that for the Montreal lesbian feminist network, the boundaries between

these domains were *not* in fact rigid and can be looked at as one permeable practice that manifests in a myriad of forms, from theater to films. All of these forms, in one way or another, relate back to writing and translation. The melding of all these subjects resulted in the network having a strong sense of fluidity that dates back to the Automatists: an ability to move not only between art forms but also through time, to move forward and back throughout one's body of work, revisiting older projects and imagining future ones. The fluidity also mirrors their perspectives on national borders and is reflected in pointing out the slippages in gendered behavior, or what we might call "gender-bending." The members of the network experimented with what it might be like to have male genitalia, to use male pronouns, and to switch the assumed genders of their character on the page. In questioning gender, they question every aspect of society, extending to the way we speak, societal roles, how children are raised, and even the validity of our reality. The following chapters are my attempt to describe the characteristics of the network, their historical beginnings, and finally, their modern applications.

Chapter One, "Montréal: La Cité des dames?", considers the proto-feminist roots of the Montreal lesbian network.<sup>29</sup> My narrative starts with the main influence of the Montreal-based artist and political group, the Automatists, and the publication of their seminal 1948 manifesto, *Refus Global*. The story of the Automatists is told primarily through the experiences of its female members, highlighting their

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<sup>29</sup> The title of this chapter is a reference to the book *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*, by Christine de Pizan.

contributions to art shows, literature, and the enduring legacy of the group. I expand on the research in Patricia Smart's book, *Les femmes de Refus Global*, by also looking more in-depth at a key figure who was not herself an artistic practitioner, Mme Julienne St. Mars Gauvreau, and her role in shaping the trajectory of the Automatists by hosting salons and later art openings at her home and providing the funds for her sons to become painters. Literary salons are a major throughline in the artistic history of Montreal, from Mme Gauvreau to Brossard's gatherings at her home, to modern feminist writers replicating those gatherings during the pandemic. Then the story moves on to the writing of one specific female Automatist, Thérèse Renaud, who, although undercredited, had a huge impact on surrealism and contemporary feminist artists in Quebec. Renaud developed techniques that would later be used by many in the feminist network during the 1980s and 90s, in particular, Nicole Brossard. I close by emphasizing the need for affordable artist meeting spaces like the ones the Automatists had access to in Montreal today, showing how a growing lack of underground venues has contributed to the loss of groups like the Automatists and ultimately the shrinking of the network.

Chapter Two, "Composing a Network: Feminist and Lesbian Translations and Collaborations," develops the narrative of how the lesbian feminist network began to first take shape in Montreal during the 1970s and 80s, offering a brief history of several major collaborations in the network including La Théorie salon at Brossard's home and the bilingual feminist journal *Tessera*. I highlight some of the ideological resonances and disagreements of the women on *Tessera*'s editorial board and its role

in creating one face of Canadian feminist literary criticism. The scope then narrows to three specific participants in the network: Gail Scott, Jovette Marchessault, and Julie Doucet, drawing on in-person interviews with Scott and Doucet as well as archival research to highlight their individual contributions to the network and their unique perspectives coming from Anglophone, Francophone, and Indigenous backgrounds.

Chapter Three, “Beyond the Herizon: Nicole Brossard and Inter/national Feminist Solidarity” examines the role of Nicole Brossard in extending the feminist lesbian network from Montreal into inter/national borders. While Chapter Two began the discussion of intra-Canadian feminist collaborations with the history of *Tessera*, this chapter is focused on Brossard’s connections to English-speaking Canada, the rest of North America, France, and beyond. First, I show how her famous novel of translation, *Mauve Desert*, is a narrative in transit between Anglophone and Francophone and between Quebec and the American southwest. I highlight her use of a half-dozen languages in the novel, identifying the role of languages beyond French and English that have typically been recognized by Brossard’s literary critics. I then historicize the English translation of *Mauve Desert* in 1990, showing how it was part of a larger North American discourse at the time around language and gender, and also part of a wave of feminist art that resulted in films, most prominently, *Thelma and Louise*. The story shifts to another dimension of Brossard’s work: written chapbooks and physical performances with live audiences, what she called her ‘transformances’ with the Anglophone poet Daphne Marlatt, representing linguistic transgression across Canadian borders. I take up the term ‘transformation’ as a

strategy against conforming to fidelity in translation, one that allows for queer, poly, and platonic dimensions. I close by assessing Brossard's contributions to the network, arguing that her openness to changing beliefs embodies the ideology of the feminist translators.

## **Chapter One- Montréal: La Cité des dames?**

[I]t was language, language taking its pleasure all alone, body without subject.  
Nothing but language. It was snatches at first, of conversations heard in cafés, along  
the streets, in lines waiting, in the métro.

— Régine Robin, *The Wanderer*<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Régine Robin, tr. Phyllis Aronoff, *The Wanderer*, (Montreal: Alter Ego Editions, 1997), 5.

## **I. A Métro Ride**

*Julie, a friend from Marseille who I met in Montreal while researching this dissertation, sends me a photo. I open the attachment: it's a new, pink, artsy map of the Montreal metro titled, "Montréal: Ville de femmes." The original map is edited so the 68 metro stations are renamed after famous female creators either born or living in Montreal. These include singers, architects, translators, botanists, journalists, pianists, actors, painters, and dancers. I recognize a few important names: Nicole Brossard, Gail Scott, Sherry Simon, Françoise Sullivan, and Marcelle Ferron. On her website, project director Chantal Ringuet explains that the map "reenvisions Montreal through an inclusive and feminist lens."<sup>31</sup> She was inspired by similar feminist maps from other cities, the first of which was Rebecca Solnit's "New York, City of Women." Solnit, who has published widely on the politics of existing as a (white) woman in urban spaces, hoped to redesign what she terms the "manscape" of the city. She writes: "Almost every city is full of men's names, names that are markers of who wielded power, who made history, who held fortunes, who was remembered; women are anonymous people who changed fathers' names for husbands' as they married, who lived in private and were comparatively forgot-ten."<sup>32</sup> Names matter, places matter, she tells us. Naming is a crucial part of*

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<sup>31</sup> Chantal Ringuet and Université de Montreal, "Montreal City of Women." Montréal: 2025, <https://montrealvilledefemmes.com/en/projet/>.

<sup>32</sup> Rebecca Solnit, "City of Women." *The New Yorker*, October 11 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/city-of-women>.

*mythmaking, nation-building, and the continued maintenance of borders and territories. But perhaps, Solnit suggests, naming could also be part of something else, a reimagining, a reclamation of space for marginalized groups.*

Many female writers have specifically focused on the Montreal metro as a site of possibility and futurity. Novelist Régine Robin structured her book *The Wanderer* around Montreal's metro stations (each chapter a different station), Montreal Booktuber Audrée Archambault specializes in hiding books for riders on the metro, and most recently author Heather O'Neill collaborated with her daughter Arizona O'Neill on a serialized, illustrated story for the Montreal Gazette called "Mystery in the Métro," that would eventually be turned into the book *Valentine in Montreal*.<sup>33</sup> The metro is ripe for reclamation because it is so dynamic, transporting residents to different areas of the city and thus different experiences, necessary as a space of refuge in a city with intense Canadian winters, and in many ways, a patriarchal space in need of reimagination. Currently, only three of its stops are named after women, and several of the station's names, such as Georges Vanier and Lionel-Groulx, have colonial or fascist connections.<sup>34</sup> The metro represents the thriving city-below-the-city, an underground world existing parallel to the overside. It is perhaps telling that Montrealers connect so much to this mostly unseen, secretive, yet vibrant space. For

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<sup>33</sup> CBC News, "The art of hiding, and finding, books on the Metro," Jul 18, 2017, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/montreal-metro-book-fairy-1.4208428>

<sup>34</sup> However, this appears to be a problem officials in Montreal are aware of and are trying to remedy, as three of the five planned new blue line stops are named after women—Mary Two-Axe Earley, Césira Parisotto, and Madeleine Parent.

them, as with other cities like New York who build their identity around it, the metro is alive. The trains are constantly in motion, circulating, routing and rerouting, teeming with people. The cars move residents from their neighborhoods to jobs, errands, school, lovers, leisure. The metro represents exchange, not just between areas of the city, but between parts of the world, including Montreal's European, Asian, Jewish, and Caribbean populations. Even within a single stop, you can see the hybridized history of Quebec. For example, the Square-Victoria station, named after Queen Victoria, is also a nod to Montreal's French heritage, designed to look like an art-deco Parisian metro stop. While French Canada has historically tried to fiercely protect its culture from outside influence, the truth is that the territorial boundaries operate more like the metro itself, in constant motion and open to negotiation. There are many Montreals operating simultaneously, shifting over time, and changing their meaning in new and different contexts.

*We will begin our journey into the heart of the network here, in this fictional metro that can transport us anywhere. Like the Ville de Femmes map, our metro allows for multiple timelines that intersect infinitely, and has the ability to travel back to visit important women from other time periods. Unlike the map, however, our metro goes beyond naming and conceives of feminist space in three dimensions. This does not mean the cars are painted pink or purple, but that they are spaces where women and gender nonconforming people of all kinds can feel safe and welcomed. The interiors are well-lit and warm, with soft, comfortable seats. There are no transit police here to*

*intimidate or scare passengers. Talking, laughing, breastfeeding, singing, and eating are encouraged. The walls of the cars are visually appealing, and instead of ads, they are covered in art from decades of Quebecoise artists, including rainbow surrealist drawings, colorful glass fractals, video footage of dancers, photos, and poems written in French and English.*

*You'll find the metro turnstiles are un-manned. Come in, and let's find a seat.*

## **II. First stop : Les Femmes Automatistes**

A favourite bedtime story among Quebec's creative class tells of how modernity came to the province by way of a slender booklet, penned by a group of frustrated artists, and which barely sold 200 copies.

—The Canadian Press<sup>35</sup>

[I]t was Borduas's artistic daughters, more than his sons, who carried on the Refus Global legacy, moving art literally outside the frames, the galleries, and the boundaries of academicism and into the public domain.

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<sup>35</sup>The Canadian Press, "Quebec artists celebrate 60 years after sending conservatives reeling," *CBC News*, August 8, 2008, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/quebec-artists-celebrate-60-years-after-sending-conservatives-reeling-1.727935>.

—Patricia Smart, *Les femmes du Refus global*<sup>36</sup>

Make way for magic! Make way for objective mysteries! Make way for love!

—Paul-Émile Borduas, *Refus Global*<sup>37</sup>

*Unfortunately, for us, before our journey can even begin, there is a delay. The announcer apologizes sincerely for the disruption. Without warning, we're engulfed by blackness and silence; the power has gone off. The train remains stationary on the platform for a long time—around 18 years in total. This stasis represents the historical period known as La Grande Noirceur (The Great Darkness), marked by Maurice Duplessis' conservative, and to many, regressive policies.<sup>38</sup> For Francophones, it was a time of political disenfranchisement and poverty. It was difficult for Quebecois families to get jobs without speaking English, and the schools were under Catholic control, often meaning they favored corporal punishment and religious education instead of skills that would lead to employment. This would not change until a period known as the Quiet Revolution, which began in 1960, after the general election following Duplessis' death.*

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<sup>36</sup> Patricia Smart, *Les femmes du Refus global*. (Montréal: Les Éditions du Boréal, 1998), 124.

<sup>37</sup> Paul-Émile Borduas, *Refus global*, La Bibliothèque électronique du Québec Collection Littérature québécoise, Volume 93 : version 1.0, 19 <https://beq.ebooksgratuits.com/pdf/Borduas-refus.pdf>.

<sup>38</sup> Serge Dupuis, "La Grande Noirceur (the Great Darkness)," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, December 15, 2020, <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/grande-noirceur>.

*As the electricity thrums again and the train comes out of the long dark tunnel, cracks of light break through the windows. We are still in the La Grande Noirceur, but beginning to see traces of a path outwards, a time when all this will end. The year is now 1947. Seven years before our trip, Quebecois women finally obtained the right to vote in provincial elections, much later than most women in Canada.<sup>39</sup> The Montreal metro didn't actually open until 1966, so this journey requires suspending our disbelief a little.<sup>40</sup> Our fictional feminist metro is anticipatory of its own invention, a queer futurist construction required for time travel. Part spaceship, part time machine, this metro is ideal for looking at elements of the future contained in the past.*

*The train car doors open and we step onto the platform, then climb the dimly lit staircase out of the metro. Outside, there's a crisp chill in the air and snowflakes float down the muddy street. We have to hurry; we are running late for an art exhibition. A small group of men and women convene at 374, Sherbrooke Street West, Apt. 1, the home of the actress and artist Muriel Guilbault. She's often reduced in literature to the description, "beautiful and tragic," a muse for everyone from Claude Gauvreau to Jean-Paul Sartre. But her life encompassed far more than that. She was part of a Montreal artist group known as the Automatists, who were inspired by the Surrealist movement and initially called themselves Surrealists before switching their*

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<sup>39</sup> Elections Quebec, "Right of Quebec women to vote and to stand for office," Chief Electoral Officer, 2026, <https://www.electionsquebec.qc.ca/en/understand/understanding-voting/right-of-quebec-women-to-vote-and-to-stand-for-office/>.

<sup>40</sup> People at the time traveled by street car.

*focus to Breton's concept of automatism and automatic writing.<sup>41</sup> The Automatists were often forced to exhibit their work in intimate settings like her apartment because no commercial galleries would have them. Poverty and marginalization necessitated that the young artists embrace innovation. In a documentary about the group, one of the women interviewed describes how, low on cash, they would draw on their apartment walls and then tear off pieces of the wall to exhibit.<sup>42</sup>*

### **Mme Gauvreau: a Blueprint**

Just a few streets down from Muriel's apartment sits another Automatist headquarters—75 Sherbrooke West, the home of Madame Julienne Saint-Mars Gauvreau, along with her sons, Pierre and Claude Gauvreau. If we want to trace the lineage of the Automatists in order to see how they influenced future feminist generations, these roots begin with Madame Gauvreau.

What's known is this: Madame Gauvreau's husband (described in different accounts as either a soldier or a traveling salesman) left her immediately following the birth of her son Claude, forcing her to raise two young children alone.<sup>43</sup>

Undeterred, she brought the boys up in a lively environment, encouraging their artistic pursuits. Mme Gauvreau also worked at the box office for the Montreal

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<sup>41</sup> Ray Ellenwood, Afterword to *The Sands of Dream* by Thérèse Renaud, (Department of reissue No. 1, Toronto: BookThug, 2007), 37.

<sup>42</sup> Labbé, France. "Les femmes du Refus global en 1971." *Femme d'aujourd'hui*, 1971, Radio Canada Archives, video.

<sup>43</sup> Alan Hustak, "Pierre Gauvreau helped launch Quebec's Quiet Revolution," *The Global Mail*, April 20, 2011, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/pierre-gauvreau-helped-launch-quebecs-quiet-revolution/article578846/>. It should be noted Mme Gauvreau was wealthy, and thus did not have to worry about the financial hardship caused by her husband's departure.

Repertory Theater and also served in the Woman Voluntary Reserve Corps / le Corps de réserve national féminin during the Second World War. Her sons had access to her “extensive library” and she kept her house busy with meetings, exhibitions, and well-attended salons.<sup>44</sup> Pierre recalls,

My mother had freethinking friends and held what she called her ‘Literary Mondays’. There was always a speaker such as Robert Choquette [a Canadian poet and diplomat]... After the lecture, we would discuss. My brother Claude and I would eat what was left of the sandwiches. That's how culture came to us: via the stomach...”<sup>45</sup>

Pierre also notes that it was one of the guests at these salons, the painter René Chicoine, who encouraged him to pursue art and apply to art school.<sup>46</sup> All throughout La Grande Noirceur, Mme Gauvreau was inviting men and women to come speak at her home on topics such as surrealist literature.<sup>47</sup> In addition to her apartment, Mme Gauvreau also provided the space for an earlier Automatist exhibition in 1946 at her office, 1257 Amherst Street (now renamed Atateken, the Mohawk term for brothers and sisters). Had it not been for her curated intellectual community and generosity in lending two venues to her sons to use for art exhibitions, the Automatists might never have existed.

Mme Gauvreau also served as one of the first mentors and role models for the female Automatists. As Smart writes, “[elle] offrait un modèle d’autonomie aux jeunes femmes du groupe...et le sentiment qu’il existait pour elles de nouvelles

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<sup>44</sup> Hustak, “Pierre Gauvreau.”

<sup>45</sup> Claude Gosselin, “Mapping the Automatists in Montreal”, (#123 The St. Louis Square and the Automatists March 7th, 2022), 1.

<sup>46</sup> Gosselin, “Mapping the Automatists,” 2.

<sup>47</sup> “Aux Lundis Littéraires” *L’illustration nouvelle*, BANQ, (12 février 1940), 10.

possibilités [she offered a model of autonomy for the young women of the group...and the sentiment that new possibilities existed for them].”<sup>48</sup> Rather than formalized courses, book talks, or other events involving institutions, Gauvreau found value in salons, curating ephemeral gatherings often with no stated goal or material outcome. She brought the European tradition to Montreal, where it had an almost DIY feel. Sullivan’s first contact with the future Automatists was through one of Mme Gauvreau’s social gatherings: “c’est au salon très couru de Julienne Saint-Mars Gauvreau...que Françoise Sullivan croise plusieurs de celles et de ceux qui deviendront les Automatistes [at Julienne Saint-Mars Gauvreau’s very popular salon, Françoise Sullivan meets many of the men and women who would become Automatists].”<sup>49</sup> Later, Gauvreau hosted Sullivan’s conference on Dance and Hope (out of which her *Refus Global* text eventually came) as part of her Literary Mondays series. Though rarely credited, she was instrumental in the birth of the Automatist movement and in its continuous survival.

*Back to Muriel’s place. We examine the invitation to the art exhibition, printed playfully to look like a funeral announcement. Inside, triangle shapes dot the gray walls and in front of a thick jute curtain, paintings seem to dangle loosely on the makeshift fences fashioned out of wire. The method of hanging the paintings from rope allows visitors to walk in front of or behind the works to examine them, rather*

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<sup>48</sup> Smart, *Les femmes*, 102.

<sup>49</sup> Ariane Émond, “Françoise Sullivan : portrait d’une géante discrète,” *Gazette des femmes*, 20 juillet 2023, <https://gazettedesfemmes.ca/23279/francoise-sullivan-portrait-dune-geante-discrete/>.

*than a fixed position on a flat gallery wall. The only remaining record of this event is Maurice Perron's photos, printed in silver gelatin. Many scholars have noted that Perron's focus was more on the attendees than the exhibit itself. The photos are also framed artistically, the subjects in specific poses that do not appear candid. In all Perron's photos of the exhibition, Guilbault seems too large for the room. In her heels, she is constantly hunched over or bending backwards. In the center of the room, like a lone island, is her bed. Visitors sit or lay on the bed while they take in the art. The exhibition is a beautiful example of what the Automatists set out to do—rethink everything, including the way galleries operated, the way events were preserved, and even the way art is displayed for the viewer. Here, the paintings were freethinking, freehanging. The exhibition was declared a success, and represented a major public (if not institutional) event for the Automatists. The following year they would go on to publish their famous manifesto, Refus Global, originally intended to accompany another art exhibition that never occurred.*

### **A Constellation of Artists**

It is impossible to discuss the Automatists without their charismatic and controversial leader, Paul-Émile Borduas. Borduas, an art teacher and abstract painter a generation older than most of his disciples (made up of mostly teenagers), was the instigator behind the group. Alfred Pellon, a Quebecois painter who lived in Paris for many

years, introduced surrealism to Borduas, who in turn introduced it to his students.<sup>50</sup> They initially identified as the Quebecois Surrealists, before forging their own path with a greater emphasis on the concept of automatist drawing and writing, eventually adopting the name the Automatists. *Refus Global* was a pamphlet printed in a run of 400 and sold for \$1. *Refus Global* was partly inspired by Breton's 1924 Surrealist Manifesto, and partly a response to the more recent *Rupture inaugurale* (1947), written by Henri Pastoureau, a student of Breton's. The Montreal Automatists were invited to sign Pastoureau's manifesto, as well as participate in the International Surrealist Exhibition in Paris, but refused (all except for Jean-Paul Riopelle), establishing a long tradition of Quebecois artists choosing to adapt international movements, be they Surrealism or second wave feminism, to the specifics of their province, language, and history.

Though he is often described as uniting all of the Automatists for the first time (Breton: "Borduas showed himself to be a first-class artistic entrepreneur by gathering around himself a constellation of young poets and artists"), in reality, many of them had known each other since childhood and had been discussing literature and art for years, or attending Mme Gauvreau's salons together.<sup>51</sup> As teens, they were already reading Marx and avant-garde poetry.<sup>52</sup> Rather than creating an explosion by himself, a more accurate metaphor for Borduas' influence would be a spark for dry

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<sup>50</sup> Edwin Hamblet, "André Breton and the Montreal Automatistes," (Montreal: Quebec Studies 1, 1983), 257.

<sup>51</sup> Breton qtd. in André Bourassa, "Refus Global," In *Surrealism and Quebec Literature*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 80.

<sup>52</sup> Smart, *Les femmes*, 102.

tinder that was already set to catch fire. He found most of his future comrades at École de Meuble, where he worked as a professor. Atypical for its time, École de Meuble accepted only male students. The female members of the group, as well as some of the men, attended École des Beaux-Arts instead, and a few attended both institutions. Both schools, but especially Beaux-Arts, had a reputation for discouraging true artistic discovery: “students were allowed to do nothing but copy ancient drawings and sculptures and were forbidden to express their own creativity.”<sup>53</sup> Because of this, the students took it upon themselves to learn about and experience modern art outside the classroom.

Is the fact that half the signatories of *Refus global* were female proof that Borduas supported equality for women? This depends on who you ask. In various accounts, his treatment of women is described as offensive, other times, inclusive, so that it becomes difficult to parse out the truth. On the positive front, everyone agrees that Borduas was an excellent mentor, and that his teachings were incredibly important for their development as people and artists. The female Automatists have many fond memories of Borduas. For example, Sullivan recalls visiting his studio for the first time: “We stayed until the wee small hours of the morning, and when we left we were ecstatic. We knew we had found the person who would open up to us the world we had been searching for.”<sup>54</sup> Not only were many of the signatories for *Refus Global* were female, but Francoise Sullivan even contributed a text to the appendix,

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<sup>53</sup> Patricia Smart, “A Community of Feeling,” In *The Beaver: Exploring Canada’s History* 78, no. 6 (December 1, 1998).

<sup>54</sup> Smart, “A Community of Feeling.”

suggesting a kind of equality rare for the time period. In her epilogue to *Les femmes du refus global*, Smart writes, “Cette égalité entre femmes et hommes doit donc être reconnue comme une des contributions importantes de l’automatisme à la culture contemporaine” [this equality between men and women should be recognized as one of the most important contributions of Automatism to contemporary culture.]”<sup>55</sup> Yet in a roundtable on *Refus Global*, Smart herself questions this gender parity as presented to her in interviews: “I had a few doubts about that, you know—we’re talking 1940s here, we’re talking Quebec, where, much as we know there’s a strong Quebec woman, we also know there was a stereotype of the maternal role and so on.”<sup>56</sup> In their interviews with Smart, most of the women had the impulse to protect Borduas from criticism, even many years after his passing.

Despite the women’s protection, Borduas displayed a condescending attitude towards them through his actions. In his early writings, Borduas omits the seven women who signed *Refus Global* from his accounts, completely erasing their participation in the manifesto.<sup>57</sup> According to Claude Gauvreau and Thérèse Renaud, Borduas initially did not even want any of the women to sign (Renaud: “Borduas avait un peu hésité à faire signer les femmes).”<sup>58</sup> He stated that this was because he

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<sup>55</sup> Smart, *Les femmes*, 295.

<sup>56</sup> Robbie Schwartzwald, and others. “The Legacy of Refus Global : A Round Table Discussion Held at the Biennial Meeting of the American Council for Quebec Studies, Charleston SC, November 1998.” (Québec Studies 27, 1999), 4.

<sup>57</sup> Smart, 92.

<sup>58</sup> Gilles Dupuis and Thérèse Renaud, “Entretien avec Thérèse Renaud,” (*Francofonie*, no. 37 1999), 127. Thérèse Renaud is also referred to by her married name, Thérèse Leduc and elsewhere as Thérèse Renaud-Leduc. Since the first is the most common, that is what I will use to refer to her. Elsewhere in the text, she is either Renaud or Thérèse, in order to differentiate her from her sisters.

did not want them to face public criticism, though Gauvreau also took it to mean that he did not respect their independence.<sup>59</sup> Generally, the women who are recognized for their participation in the Automatist movement are those who defied his initial wishes and signed *Refus Global*: Madeleine Arbour, Muriel Guilbault, Marcelle Ferron, Thérèse Renaud, Louise Renaud, Françoise Riopelle, and Françoise Sullivan. Other women like Suzanne Meloche and Rita Letendre, who did not sign but made important contributions to the movement, are left out of most official accounts.

The problem extended far beyond Borduas, though; the way the Automatist movement was portrayed as a whole by scholars has tended to efface women's contributions. Smart points out that art historians and critics have placed emphasis on painters, excluding most of the women who pursued other, often more ephemeral art forms, "il regnait une certaine hierarchie, privilegiant la peinture sur les autres arts, et les hommes sur les femmes [a certain hierarchy reigns, privileging painting over other arts, and men over women.]."<sup>60</sup> Many of the women were drawn to practices with a fleeting nature and explicitly, actively not thinking of their work as something that would ever be archived, as Thérèse Renaud points out, "We weren't attached to things, we weren't interested in leaving traces."<sup>61</sup> Moreover, female artists were generally not included in the early Automatist art exhibitions, though they organized them for the men in Montreal, New York, and Paris.<sup>62</sup> This model presented the men

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<sup>59</sup> Smart, 92-3.

<sup>60</sup> Smart, *Les femmes*, 93.

<sup>61</sup> Ray Ellenwood, Afterword to *The Sands of Dream*, 39.

<sup>62</sup> Smart, 93.

as the legitimate artists and faces of the movement, while the women were relegated to behind-the-scenes roles. This was further complicated by the fact that the majority of the women were romantically involved with the male artists—Madeleine Arbour with Pierre Gauvreau, Suzanne Meloche with Marcel Barbeau, Thérèse Renaud with Fernand Leduc, Françoise Sullivan with Paterson Ewen, Françoise Riopelle with Jean-Paul Riopelle, and Muriel Guibault with Claude Gauvreau (though it is unclear if this was an actual relationship or a one-sided attraction on Gauvreau's part), creating the impression that they were just the wives or girlfriends of artists rather than artists in the same milieu. Even more troubling, some of the men showed open disdain for the art forms their wives practiced: in an article for *Maclean's* in 1957, Jean-Paul Riopelle states that he hates dance, and that, "He has never watched his wife dance although she herself practises four hours daily in a studio."<sup>63</sup> It appears that most often, the women were not taken seriously as creatives by anyone except other women. Like Mme Gauvreau, men saw them as a means to an end, providing spaces for others to showcase their talents to the world.

Today, *Refus Global* is one of the most celebrated countercultural documents in Quebec's history, but at the time, there were serious social and economic consequences for those who signed. All of the signatories describe *Refus Global* as a mark in time, a delineation of a clear Before and After. Signing was akin to declaring

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<sup>63</sup> Jones, Catherine. "The Native Genius We've Never Discovered." (*Maclean's*: Toronto, Toronto, Canada: Maclean Pub. Co, 1957), 33. The whole article is rather revealing about their marriage dynamic; Jean-Paul comes off as far more interested in cars and the circus than his wife and children, while Jones describes Françoise as a domestic goddess; making her own clothes, cooking all their meals, and handling all the responsibilities of the house in addition to her dance career.

war; there was no going back. The doors of the metro car shut behind you, for good. After the publication of *Refus Global*, Borduas' life fell apart. He lost his job at École de Meuble, then returned home from a trip to Toronto to an empty house, only to realize that Gabrielle had left him and taken their three kids, as well as all of their furniture.<sup>64</sup> After recovering from a severe illness, he went into self-exile first in New York, then finally Paris, where he would live until his death by heart attack in 1960. The women also suffered consequences from signing, especially Sullivan, whose father was a friend of Duplessis. She recalls, "Les répercussions ont été terribles pour moi."<sup>65</sup> However, aside from Guibault, who committed suicide in 1952 after several attempts, the women of *Refus Global* appeared to have a more positive overall experience post-publication, and unlike Borduas, most of them chose to remain in Montreal.<sup>66</sup> Sullivan, the most successful of the group, went on to have a long and celebrated career in modern dance, among other artistic pursuits. But all of the women continued to engage with different forms of art at varying levels. Arbour became a set designer for TV shows, Ferron was a painter and made large installations with stained glass (her creations adorn one of the Montreal metro stops), Thérèse Renaud published eight books in several genres, Louise Renaud became a painter and dancer, and Françoise Riopelle a dancer and choreographer. Unlike

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<sup>64</sup> François Marc-Gagnon, "Paul-Émile Borduas: Life & Work," Toronto: Art Canada Institute, 2014, <https://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/paul-emile-borduas/biography/>.

<sup>65</sup> Émond, "Françoise Sullivan : portrait d'une géante discrète."

<sup>66</sup> This is not to say that the women didn't encounter consequences and discrimination as a result of their participation, but they were not looked on as ringleaders like Borduas was.

Borduas, most of them lived long lives into their 80s and 90s (Sullivan is still alive at 102).

### **A Family Affair : Navigating the demands of art and the home**

Some scholars have lamented the fact that almost all the Automatist women eventually became mothers and wives in a way that seemed inevitable, creating a binary between the domestic sphere and the creative one. Although almost all of the female Automatists managed to continue practicing their art as mothers, they were judged much more harshly for this than their male counterparts. As Smart notes, “il n’y avait guère de modèles pour une jeune femme cherchant à conjuguer maternité et carrière artistique [there were hardly any models for a young woman looking to combine motherhood and an artistic career].”<sup>67</sup> The narrow definition of femininity was rooted in Quebec’s Catholic Francophone culture, which upheld mothers as symbols of the French nation in the 19th and early 20th centuries, while also subjugating them to patriarchal control. Smart explains, in reference to author Claire Martin’s writing about her childhood of the 1920s: “The home, the parish, and the convent reinforce the contemptuous and guilt-inducing attitudes to women which underlie male domination.”<sup>68</sup> Even by the 1940s, the situation for women had not improved much. *Refus Global* was directly criticizing “Un petit peuple serré de près aux soutanes restées les seules dépositaires de la foi, du savoir, de la vérité et de la

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<sup>67</sup> Smart, *Les femmes*, 182.

<sup>68</sup> Patricia, Smart, *Writing Herself into Being : Quebec Women's Autobiographical Writings from Marie de l'Incarnation to Nelly Arcan*, (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017), 243.

richesse nationale.”<sup>69</sup> Rejecting the legitimacy of the Catholic church at the time allowed the female Automatists to also reject the gender roles that they enforced, even if the male Automatists did not always support this rejection.

In *Babies for the Nation*, Denyse Baillargeon highlights the grim reality that, due to a combination of factors, Quebec had one of the highest infant mortality rates in the Western world until 1930, despite the fact that, “This was the period – and not only in Quebec – when Catholic doctrine decreed that in a difficult birth the life of the child must take precedence over that of the mother.”<sup>70</sup> Quebecoise women were asked to give up everything for their children, including their own lives. Baillargeon describes how “doctors... attributed mortality rates to the ignorance of mothers rather than material want and poverty. Such discourses placed responsibility for the health of French Québec infants squarely in the hands of Québec mothers.”<sup>71</sup> By 1948, the infant mortality rate had greatly decreased due to improvements in access to healthcare and economic resources, but the women were still inheritors of years of scapegoating. If they survived childbirth, they were expected to remain in the home, devoting their lives to their children and husband. Women who rebelled against traditional gender roles were judged not only as bad mothers, but bad citizens.

To look at this issue from another angle: several post-*Refus Global* artworks have focused on how the choice some women made to pursue transgressive politics

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<sup>69</sup>Borduas, *Refus global*, 5.

<sup>70</sup> Denyse, Baillargeon, *Babies for the Nation: The Medicalization of Motherhood in Quebec, 1910–1970*, (Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2009), 243.

<sup>71</sup> Sasha, Mullally, “Babies for the Nation: The Medicalization of Motherhood in Quebec, 1910–1970 by Denyse Baillargeon (Review).” (*Labour / Le Travail* 71, 2013), 249.

and art instead of domestic duties impacted their children. Manon Barbeau's documentary *Les Enfants de Refus global* portrays the struggles that adult children of the Automatists faced, including abandonment, displacement, abuse, and serious mental health problems. Barbeau herself is the daughter of Suzanne Meloche and Marcel Barbeau, and uses her film to search for memories of her mother. This search would extend to a second generation; Barbeau's daughter, Anaïs Barbeau-Lavalette, wrote a novel, *La Femme qui fuit* (2015), that tells the fictionalized story of how her grandmother, Suzanne Meloche, abandoned Manon to participate in Les Automatistes and later the American civil rights movement. We learn from Barbeau's documentary that the Automatist attitude towards raising children was generally very hands-off, in direct opposition to the norms of the time, allowing children freedom but denying them safety. Borduas himself was of the opinion that children were all-knowing beings ruined by exposure to society, and therefore the best way to raise them was to simply remove the parents and allow them to raise themselves.<sup>72</sup> The two female signatories interviewed in the documentary—Madeleine Arbour, who had two kids, and Marcelle Ferron, who raised three girls as a single mother—present rather positive parent-child relationships.<sup>73</sup> However, their adult children are missing from the documentary, creating a lack of balance in the accounts. The interviews of the other adult children are rather somber. When asked what it was like to be the child of

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<sup>72</sup> Manon Barbeau, dir. *Les enfants de Refus Global*, 1998, National Film Board of Canada, [https://www.onf.ca/film/enfants\\_de\\_refus\\_global/](https://www.onf.ca/film/enfants_de_refus_global/).

<sup>73</sup> Jacques Lanctôt, "La rebelle lumineuse," *Le journal de Montréal*, 29 octobre 2016, <https://www.journaldemontreal.com/2016/10/29/la-rebelle-lumineuse>.

Francoise and Jean-Paul Riopelle, their daughter Yseult responds “Miserable.”

Barbeau then asks her if she thinks children took a backseat to her parents’ aspirations, to which she replies, “Oh yes, absolutely.”

All of the Automatist parents, as described by their children, seem to fit the term ‘art monster,’ as defined by Jenny Offill and expanded upon by Lauren Elkin in *Art Monsters: Unruly Bodies in Feminist Art*. An art monster is someone who chooses art over everything else in life, particularly domestic tasks and childrearing.<sup>74</sup> Yet interestingly, in opposition to social norms of the time, the adult children interviewed place responsibility for their care (or lack thereof) equally on both parents. They also generally show sympathy for their mothers and fathers, often linked to the caliber of artistic accomplishment of their parents. They see their parents as geniuses who changed the world, giving meaning to their difficult childhoods. Most of their children would also go on to pursue some form of art—painting, filmmaking, writing, or acting. Still, it’s clear from the interviews that their upbringings affected them emotionally; Renee Borduas tears up in her interview, and Katerine Mosseau tries to quickly pass over memories of her parents fighting on the floor, her time in foster homes, and the suicide of her aunt, Muriel Guilbault. Barbeau tries to press Mosseau about the problems with being a child with “giants for parents,” but she is quick to defend them, saying that she was fortunate to have them in her life.<sup>75</sup> The general consensus from the interviewees seems to be that their

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<sup>74</sup> Jenny Offill, *Dept. of Speculation*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014.

<sup>75</sup> Barbeau, *Les enfants de Refus Global*.

childhoods were painful, and their parents did not do a good job balancing the requirements of childcare with the pursuit of art. At the same time, they do not place the blame for this on their parents, and certainly not the mothers in particular.

So, to offer a question applicable to both the Automatist women and their contemporaries: Can a woman be both an artist and a mother? A look at the lives of the signatories reveals that this is the wrong question to ask. The real question for these women, who were constantly both is: was it worth it? Their children, at least in *Les enfants*, seem to say yes. They acknowledge that there was a terrible cost, but they are grateful for a more liberated Quebec, and to have been exposed to many ideas and art forms at a young age. The interviewees feel that if their parents had been more present with them, they would not have been able to accomplish so much. They do not absolve their parents for being ‘art monsters,’ but also do not condemn them. The act of signing *Refus Global* and pursuing one’s artistic passions fully are seen as valid, if heartbreaking, choices by their offspring. These choices are human, untethered from gendered or religious expectations. Both the female and male signatories genuinely loved their children. After all, it was Paul-Émile Borduas who once told a friend that he had planted three trees at his home in Saint-Hilaire. Three trees, one for each of his children: Janine, Renee, and Paulo.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Le Musée des beaux-arts de Mont-Saint-Hilaire, “Paul-Émile Borduas: La vie familiale,” 2014, [https://mbamsh.com/expositionsvirtuelles/paulemileborduas/espace\\_art\\_vie\\_famille-place\\_art\\_life\\_family-fra.html](https://mbamsh.com/expositionsvirtuelles/paulemileborduas/espace_art_vie_famille-place_art_life_family-fra.html).

*We bid goodbye to the art show and get back on the train. Staying in the same time period, we cross town to visit one of the Automatists at home. From the window outside we can see this new domestic scene: a young woman in a dark black dress with thin straps stands looking over the pages of a manuscript, while her daughter and husband fill out something (possibly a crossword) together. An artistic household, filled with paint tubes, canvases, books. The woman puts down the manuscript, and walks to the door. She opens it, and smiling, motions for us to come inside.*

### **III. La vie en zigzag**

#### **Thérèse Renaud, Surrealism, and Experimental Memoir**

*Il faut briser toutes les conventions, libérer l'expression de toutes les contraintes*

—Thérèse Renaud, *Une mémoire déchirée*<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> The quote reads: “Il faut briser toutes les conventions, libérer l'expression de toutes les contraintes.” Thérèse Renaud, *Une mémoire déchirée*, (Montréal: Hurtubise HMH, 1978), 105.

In order to see the influence of the female Automatists on their later counterparts in the feminist lesbian network, we must turn to the woman whose major artistic focus was language: Thérèse Renaud. Thérèse was the middle sister of three, Louise the eldest, and Jeanne the baby of the family. Her sisters were also involved with the Automatists and Louise was also a signatory of *Refus global* (Jeanne was too young and also out of the country at the time), but they practiced dancing and painting instead of writing. Thérèse is the author of eight books including poetry, prose, and memoirs, only one of which, *Les sables du rêve*, has been translated into English. Published in 1946 when Renaud was 18, *Les sables du rêve* is generally credited as both the first Quebecois surrealist text and the first Automatist book of poetry. The title is a direct reference to a line in André Breton's book, *Les États généraux* (1943) "il y aura toujours une pelle au vent dans les sables du rêve [in the sands of dream there will always be a shovel in the wind]," signifying her surrealist influences to readers from the outset. Renaud herself has stated in interviews that the process of selecting poems for the collection was mostly arbitrary, as was their pairing with drawings by Jean-Paul Mosseau.<sup>78</sup> The drawings were not intended to illustrate the images in the poems, but to add an additional layer of interpretation. As Andres Bourassa writes in his history of Quebecois surrealism, "*Les Sables du reve* is situated in a universe of contrasts (tiny giant, snaketic, eye-nostril, water-dye, and bush-woman)...The dream-like techniques of collage and superimposition are most evident

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<sup>78</sup> Ellenwood, *The Sands of Dream*, 39.

in the first poems, which read like surrealist canvases.”<sup>79</sup> Collage as literary technique would become extremely influential in Quebecois art circles, as writers drew on whatever material they could find in their environment—advertisements, snippets of radio, cartoons, grocery lists, song lyrics—to reconstruct meaning.<sup>80</sup>

Renaud also helped usher in a poetic aspect to the Automatist project. Rose Marie Arbour writes, “Thérèse Renaud fut une des femmes qui, au début de la formation du groupe des automatistes, fut importante pour la transformation du langage poétique dans le mouvement automatiste en voie.”<sup>81</sup> Incorporating poetic language consisted not only of crafting and reading poems, but also in the poetic tone Borduas employs in *Refus Global*, which was unique amongst artist manifestos in both form and content. Borduas adopts a poetic voice in many places: “peur bleue – peur rouge – peur blanche : maillon de notre chaîne.”<sup>82</sup> He also explicitly connects their work to Verlaine, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud: “Des consciences s’éclairent au contact vivifiant des poètes maudits : ces hommes qui, sans être des monstres, osent exprimer haut et net ce que les plus malheureux d’entre nous étouffent tout bas dans la honte de soi.”<sup>83</sup> Years after *Refus Global*, Renaud credits Rimbaud, Mallarmé and Lautréamont in her autobiography, *Une mémoire déchirée*. Towards the end of *Refus*

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<sup>79</sup> Breton qtd. in André Bourassa, “Refus Global.” In *Surrealism and Quebec Literature* (Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2015), 70.

<sup>80</sup> Régine Robin, whose quote opens this chapter, made particular use of this technique in *La Québécoise*, her most famous work.

<sup>81</sup> Rose Marie Arbour, “Le cercle des automatistes et la différence des femmes,” *Études françaises* 34, no. 2-3 (1998), 166.

<sup>82</sup> Borduas, *Refus global*, 10.

<sup>83</sup> Borduas, 8.

*Global*, Borduas notes, “Ce trésor est la réserve poétique.”<sup>84</sup> His embrace of poetry was unusual in the genre of manifesto, especially a political one, though not unheard of in the surrealist manifestos. Renaud played an important role in legitimizing surrealist poetry as an artistic and political outlet for the group.

Aside from Breton, Renaud’s other major influence was a female French surrealist: “the more immediate model for Renaud’s text was not in fact Breton but fellow surrealist prodigy Gisèle Prassinos. A copy of the Turkish-born Prassinos’s collection of poems *La sauterelle arthritique* had been gifted to Renaud by her sister Louise.”<sup>85</sup> As with Breton, Renaud makes reference to Prassinos in her poems: “je me retrouverai aussi grande qu’une sauterelle.”<sup>86</sup> Like Renaud, Prassinos was very young (fourteen) when she became involved with the surrealists and started writing short stories and poems. Like Renaud, she found herself caught between cultures—Prassinos came from a Greco-Italian family that moved from Turkey to France, while Renaud lived between Paris and Montreal. Like Renaud, her work is credited with a kind of proto-feminism, identifying gendered roles before cohesive political language existed on the subject. As Bonnie Ruberg writes in her introduction to the English translation of *La sauterelle arthritique*, “these texts themselves return again and again to gender as a center concern—gender and agency, gender and the body, gender as the

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<sup>84</sup>Borduas, 25.

<sup>85</sup>Adam Lauder, “Automatisme Beyond Borders: Thérèse Renaud, Françoise Sullivan, Rita Letendre,” *Bordercrossings Magazine*, March 2023, <https://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/automatisme-beyond-borders>.

<sup>86</sup>Thérèse Renaud, *Les songes d’une funambule*, (Ottawa: Écrits des Forges, 2001), 17.

absurd, the ecstatic destruction of gender.”<sup>87</sup> Without ever using the word feminist, Renaud also exhibits a feminist perspective in her writing, seeing the world as highly gendered and unjust. As Ellenwood states in the afterword of his translation of *Les sables du rêve*, Renaud was “an elder sister to a coming generation of feminist writers in Quebec who would not accept their cramped quarters, who would seek new forms and new languages to express their non-submission.”<sup>88</sup> Renaud and Fernand’s Parisian library contained many classic authors such as Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Violette Leduc, and Anaïs Nin, as well as future Quebecois feminist writers like Suzanne Lamy, suggesting that Renaud possessed a sustained interest in feminist discourse.<sup>89</sup> In *Une mémoire déchirée* she writes, «J’aurais aimé être un garçon. Ma condition de fille me pesait. Les garçons, eux, sont beaucoup plus à l’aise dans leurs actions. Ils peuvent s’exprimer librement, être indépendants, avoir des droits sur nous [I would’ve liked to be a boy. My female condition weighed me down. Boys are a lot more at ease in their actions. They can express themselves freely, be independent, have rights over us].»<sup>90</sup> In her memoir, the adjective she most often attaches to “fille” or “femme” is *pauvre*. Later, in an interview, she observes, “j’ai toujours refusé d’être identifiée à mon mari [I always refused to be identified with my husband].”<sup>91</sup> In *Les sables du rêve*, we also see hints of rebelling against gender

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<sup>87</sup> Bonnie Ruberg, Introduction to *The Arthritic Grasshopper: collected stories, 1934-1944* by Gisèle Prassinos, (Cambridge, MA: Wakefield Press, 2017), xv.

<sup>88</sup> Ellenwood, *The Sands of Dream*, 40.

<sup>89</sup> Gilles Lapointe. “Catalogue général de la bibliothèque Leduc-Renaud,” March 2007, [https://api-gestion.crilcq.org/fichiers/pdfs/Cataloguegeneraldelabliothèque\\_20210709132557.pdf](https://api-gestion.crilcq.org/fichiers/pdfs/Cataloguegeneraldelabliothèque_20210709132557.pdf).

<sup>90</sup> Renaud, *Une mémoire déchirée*, 8.

<sup>91</sup> Gilles Dupuis and Thérèse Renaud, “Entretien avec Thérèse Renaud,” 107.

expectations. She writes, “When I was little I was told to smell flowers so I bit them to inhale them better”<sup>92</sup> This line takes a seemingly innocuous instruction for young women: “to smell flowers” and subverts it, “so I bit them.” Her deliberate misunderstanding of this advice paints a portrait of Renaud (or the speaker) as a rebellious little girl, destroying an object of beauty in order to fully possess it. Like Prassinos, she is engaging in challenging the gendered rules of decorum.

Renaud’s poetry is sensual in a way that playfully underscores gender and sexuality. But as with the girl biting flowers, this femininity is entwined with contradictions and difficulties. There is feminine sexual imagery throughout *Les sables du rêve*—a woman inside an oyster shell, a melting cat, a dress made of lily petals, “the burning caress of the moon.”<sup>93</sup> Beauty in her poems is contrasted with images that provoke disgust or pain, such as when the speaker opens her wardrobe and finds a naked woman covered in thorns; she cannot be touched.<sup>94</sup> Elsewhere, the work relies on the interplay between masculinity and femininity. The lines: “[my husband] likes snakes and always wears one for a necktie / He is handsome and the hair growing down his neck is a horse’s mane” mix formal wear with animal imagery and stereotypical masculinity with long hair.<sup>95</sup> The poem anticipates the Quebecois artist Mimi Parent’s surrealist work “Masculin féminin” in 1959. The artwork used as a poster for E.R.O.S. (Exposition Internationale du surréalisme in Paris) features a tie

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<sup>92</sup> Thérèse Renaud, *Les sables du rêve*, (Montréal: Cahiers de la file indienne, 1946), 11.

<sup>93</sup> Renaud, *Les sables du rêve*, 12.

<sup>94</sup> Renaud, *Les songes d’une funambule*, 28.

<sup>95</sup> Renaud, *Les sables du rêve*, 12.

fashioned out of Parent's own hair and a pearl hairpin. The chestnut hair tie that flows down a man's suit looks indeed, much like a horse's mane. With *Les sables du rêve*, Renaud established herself as a promising young talent in the Quebecois literary world, rather than the silent muse or 'femme enfant' (child woman) revered by the surrealist movement. Yet after her initial momentum, it would be decades before Renaud would publish again, her personal timeline jagged, and out of step with her contemporaries. The timeline is filled with ruptures, stops, and starts, that ultimately altered her idea of a linear life. She wrote her story in the way it unfolded to her, in a kind of queer temporality, sometimes anticipating future occurrences, other times left purposefully incomplete.

Renaud's autobiography, *Une mémoire déchirée*, came out in 1978, when many of the feminist and lesbian women were beginning to start their own salons and consciousness-raising groups. It was her second work since *Les sables du rêve*, marking a return to writing after a long pause while she pursued acting, raised her daughter, and struggled with alcoholism. After years living in Paris, a relocation to Montreal ignited Renaud's desire to write about her past. It took her several years to locate a publisher for the book, which finally found a home at Éditions Hurtubise.<sup>96</sup> *Une mémoire déchirée* was far ahead of its time, experimental in unique and imaginative ways that went beyond its structure. As the title suggests, the narrative is composed of short fragments and auto-interviews, techniques that feel relatively contemporary, as in Renee Gladman's 2024 book *My lesbian novel*. The interview

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<sup>96</sup>Renaud, *Une mémoire déchirée*, 108.

structure allows space for self reflection, but also reminds the reader of the external world surrounding the book-object and the constructed nature of the text.

Additionally, many of the Automatists who appear in Renaud's book are renamed, transformed into figures in a chess game such as Letour, Lecavalier, Leroy (le roi), Latour, Lefeoul (le fou), creating a kind of roman à clef for knowing readers. This strategy creates a playful distance from the real-life inspirations that softens her criticisms of the group. Borduas, as you might guess, is Lempereur.

While her memoir has not been widely reviewed, the text is noteworthy for its candor in discussing her alcoholism, marital difficulties, loneliness, and depression, as well as its non-traditional, nonlinear form, that Renaud refers to as a "en zigzag." As Smart writes, "une variété de procédés formels —rêve, fragmentation, dialogues, ou avancée «en zigzag»... traduisent les hésitations, l'autocensure et la non-linéarité d'une vie de femme. [a variety of formal methods—dream, fragmentation, dialogues, or progressing 'in zig zag'... translate the hesitations, self-censorship, and non-linearity in a woman's life]." <sup>97</sup> I propose *en zigzag* as a heuristic for reading *Une mémoire déchirée*, and also for understanding Renaud's life as a whole. Her work is best conceived as one large, continuous anthology, where time does not operate in a linear manner, and the same themes return repeatedly, haunting the text. Renaud frequently returned to the subject of her early years with the Automatists and her move to Paris. The last book published before she passed away, *Un passé recomposé*:

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<sup>97</sup> Patricia Smart, "'Mémoires d'une jeune fille qui refuse de se ranger : *Une mémoire déchirée*, de Thérèse Renaud," *Voix et Images* 22, no. 1 (1996), 19.

*Deux automatistes à Paris* (2004) was a memoir of her and Fernand's time in Paris, covering the years 1946-1953, reworking some of her memories from *Une mémoire déchirée*, as suggested by the "re-" in "recomposé." A review of *Un passé recomposé* in *Le Devoir* remarks, "Depuis son séjour à Paris de 1946 à 1953, l'automatiste Thérèse Renaud n'avait pas changé," explaining further that she maintains her sense of anger and indignation about injustice in the world.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, Renaud was never truly finished (re)arranging her words. Her 2001 book of poetry, *Les Songes d'une funambule* includes all the original poems from *Les sables du rêve*, followed by what she calls "Variations ludiques," or playful rewrites of the three poems.<sup>99</sup> There is some evidence of personal growth in these rewrites—notably, they are less racist than the originals. The "song of the tar baby" has transformed into the innocuous "song of the poet," and there are no repetitions of the original slurs directed towards Black and Chinese people.<sup>100</sup> Had Renaud realized these were not appropriate words for a white Canadian woman to use, or was she simply tired of them? There are also more questions in the new versions, such as "mots (maux?)," as though Renaud is reflecting on her writing process and interrogating herself.<sup>101</sup> However, other lines, such as "j'ai renfermé la coquille d'huitre" are kept exactly the same, suggesting she

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<sup>98</sup> John Porter, "Thérèse Renaud (1927-2005) - Hommage à une femme entière," *Le Devoir*, 28 déc. 2005, <https://www.ledevoir.com/opinion/idees/98514/therese-renaud-1927-2005-hommage-a-une-femme-entiere>.

<sup>99</sup> Renaud, *Les songes d'une funambule*, 31.

<sup>100</sup> In my research I have not found much explanation for Renaud's word choices, which although a product of their time are undeniably racist and not something that would likely be printed today. Lacking much evidence, I will not guess about her intent or purpose, leaving readers to draw their own conclusions, but the fact that the original poems were reprinted with no disclaimers or footnotes is unfortunate.

<sup>101</sup> Renaud, 34.

finds contemporary resonances with the image.<sup>102</sup> In this way, like translations, her writing is never truly finished or closed, open to new transformations that disrupt normative temporality.

Aside from the zig zag, there is another meaningful non-linear shape in Renaud's writing—the spiral. Smart notes that as Renaud returns to previous memories in her writing, she adds additional layers of meaning: “sa structure profonde n'est pas celle d'un cercle répétitif, mais plutôt d'un approfondissement progressif, sorte de retour en spirale vers les vérités [her profound structure is not a repetitive circle, but rather a gradual deepening, a sort of spiraling return towards truth].”<sup>103</sup> Her use of the spiral structure in the text is no accident; the shape is significant to the Quebecois literary community in several ways. Most evidently, *Spirale Magazine* is a French-language journal of Quebecois arts and culture, co-founded in 1979 by the feminist writer France Théoret. *Spirale* is still around today, containing work by the new generation of Quebecoise feminist writers such as Chloé Savoie-Bernard. The spiral was also a symbol favored by many of the women in the network (inspired by the work of Louise Bourgeois, Mary Daly, and Francoise Sullivan's kinetic 1969 sculpture, “Spirale”), but especially by Nicole Brossard. Brossard is another writer whose body of work also rejects linearity, although hers is more linked to queerness than Renaud's. Spirals appear in Brossard's prose, poetry, and fiction as an embodiment of her philosophy, and as a kind of feminine power.

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<sup>102</sup> Renaud, *Les songes d'une funambule*, 14.

<sup>103</sup> Smart, ““Mémoires d'une jeune fille,” 20-21.

She is interested in, as she puts it, “creating a spiral opening toward a new meaning,” a way out of patriarchal forms and language.<sup>104</sup> Renaud too, was seeking an opening toward new meaning, and the spiral was appealing as an unconventional form for a narrative.

Unlike other parts of the narrative, where words seem to transform easily into a cohesive whole, Renaud has trouble finding the right language to write about her struggles with depression. Early on, she mentions a “tristesse sans nom,” a sadness without name.<sup>105</sup> The depression appears to be connected to a strong feeling of displacement—she is alienated in Paris, but confident she does not wish to return to Quebec. This predicament creates in her the sensation of swimming, or perhaps drowning, in a disconnection from reality: “J’aime notre enfant, j’aime mon mari, mais tout cela nage dans une profonde irréalité.”<sup>106</sup> She imagines depression as a tunnel she is trapped inside, then calls it her “interior desert,” choosing to present it as a landscape.<sup>107</sup> A few pages later she describes this desert in detail, written in the form of a poem featuring images of dryness, thirst, and burning. All the lines end in ellipses, so that they both resist conclusion and flow into one another, a strategy she uses a few times in *Les sables du rêve* as well. The first phrase of this set begins with “Cette sensation de sécheresse...” and the following seven lines switch between “Ce” “Cet” and “Cette.” This repetition emphasizes the repetitive, dull nature of chronic

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<sup>104</sup>Nicole Brossard, Judith Roof, and Melissa Bailar. “An Interview with Nicole Brossard.” *ASAP/Journal* 1, no. 2 (2016): 247.

<sup>105</sup> Renaud, *Une mémoire déchirée*, 29.

<sup>106</sup> Renaud, 129.

<sup>107</sup> Renaud, 142.

depression. Renaud uses repetition throughout the text, mainly in moments of agitation or fear. She uses it to describe her unhappy adolescence, “je gratte et je cherche...je crie et je hurle” or as a painful accusation, “Comment peut-elle?”<sup>108</sup> When describing her depression, it has an almost echo-like effect, appearing repeatedly but slightly different each time.

Renaud also compares depression to an evasive horizon, a void of time and space, an unreachable destination (“l’horizon n’existe que le néant de toute chose... un horizon fait de souvenirs”).<sup>109</sup> The horizon became something of a motif for Renaud, as shown by the title of her book, *L’horizon déployé* (2005), that was published posthumously, as well as appearing prominently in one of her poems in *Les Songes d’une funambule* (2001) that begins, “Horizon mon pays/ce grand désert” and ends “la face inaccessible/de l’horizon étale.”<sup>110</sup> These themes of desert and horizon would later be central to Nicole Brossard’s masterpiece, *Le désert mauve*. Both women were drawn to the desert as a space-time metaphor perhaps because the landscape was so alien to them, nothing like Montreal or Paris. Both women saw it as an empty, endless space where time could bend, a place of unimaginable sun and heat, as opposed to the snow and rain they were familiar with.

The similar themes threaded through Renaud and Brossard’s writing (desert and horizon), as well as their use of the spiral as a non-traditional structure for writing, were no mere coincidence. The women were familiar with one another

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<sup>108</sup> Renaud, *Les sables du rêve*, 9, 22.

<sup>109</sup> Renaud, *Les songes d’une funambule*, 144-5.

<sup>110</sup> Renaud, 67.

(perhaps unsurprising, as the Quebecois literary scene is small). According to the inventory, Renaud kept three books written and edited by Brossard in her Paris literary collection. One of them, *Baroque d'aube*, is inscribed by Brossard: "Pour Thérèse. Amicalement dans la continuité des questions et du récit pour inscrire notre présence de magie et de paroles ouvertes."<sup>111</sup> Renaud's surrealist and feminist influences are still felt in Quebecois literature today. Her body of work highlights the unexpected route of the many female artists and art monsters; instead of a life revolving around kids, home, or a partner, her path winds, reverses, detours, stops altogether, and curls into itself in the search for meaning and the new. Renaud's courage in breaking from literary expectations, although painful for her, was an important first step in creating the environment where the network could emerge, and female artists could experience liberation through their writing.

## Legacy

My aim in this chapter was not to provide a history of the Automatists or in-depth portraits of all the women involved with *Refus Global*—these have already been expertly covered by Ray Ellenwood's *Egregore* (1992) and Patricia Smart's *Les femmes du Refus Global* (1998). Instead, building on their scholarship, I would like to draw a direct line from the female members of the Automatists to the lesbian and feminist artists living in Montreal during the 1980s and 90s. One of the most important contributions of the female Automatists, according to Smart: "Les œuvres

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<sup>111</sup> Gilles Lapointe, "Catalogue général de la bibliothèque Leduc-Renaud," 65, 66.

créées par les femmes durant les années automatistes révèlent une relation au corps, à la nature, et à l'érotisme qui semble justifier la croyance à une 'spécificité féminine' dans l'art des femmes" [The works created by the women during the Automatist years reveal a relation to the body, to nature, and to eroticism that seems to justify the belief in a 'feminine specificity' in women's art].<sup>112</sup> These themes, a feminine relationship to the body, nature, and eroticism (in a departure from Renaud, a lesbian eroticism), also define almost all the texts published in the 1980s and 90s. The "feminine specificity" was not so much about essentialism and female bodies as it was about how their socializing and experiences as women in society influenced the art produced. Though much of the work the Automatists made was abstract, the women developed their own artistic point of view distinct from the Automatist men. Rather than artwork specifically broadly about the experience of being female, they created universal artworks from a feminine perspective. For example, Françoise Sullivan highlighted natural elements such as snow using her body in dance performances, while Thérèse Renaud wrote surrealist poems celebrating the feminine erotic. The men, in contrast, mainly worked with large scale paintings, blocks of color, and abstractionism. Their work was often imposing, and physically took up a large space. Just as the Quebecois had put their own spin on surrealism, so too did the women make Automatism their own.

Another contribution of the Automatists that was unrelated to gender was that *Refus Global*, in both its form and content, threaded together art and politics in a way

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<sup>112</sup> Smart, *Les femmes*, 295.

that had not been done before in Quebec. *Refus Global* as a document argues that politics should be beautiful, and that art should be political. Instead of drawing on anti-religious, anti-authoritarian beliefs, the women of the network in the 80s and 90s would imbue their art with queer and feminist political ideas circulating through North America at the time. Both the Automatists and the women of the network used art and politics to compliment one another, and the dual strands were necessary for their respective groups. Art provided a way to express complex and intangible ideas in a new form, and to embody some of the principles they lived by (for the Automatists, automatic writing/painting directly from the subconscious, for the feminists, it was creating works together, engaging with translation, and manipulating language, and for both it was collaboration). In terms of structure, the Automatists had a somewhat fragmented hierarchy; although they claimed to be equals, it was clear that Borduas was their leader. The network had its lodestars like Brossard, but was in much the same way fragmented and horizontal in terms of power.

Not only were the Automatists interested in art and politics in equal measure, but collectively they were involved in different types of art including painting, dance, photography, music, stained glass, sculpture, poetry, and theater, among others. Today, their work might be described as interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary, hybrid, or collaborative. The group often paired two pieces of art together in innovative ways, such as Jean-Paul Mousseau's drawings that accompanied Renaud's poems in *Les sables du rêve*. This also included the transformation of the art of one discipline into another, a predecessor to Brossard and Daphne Marlatt's 'transformances.' For

example, at the 1948 Automatist Festival, Sullivan performed a dance based on Thérèse's poems.<sup>113</sup> Marcel Barbeau was inspired by and named one of his paintings after Sullivan's essay, *On Dance and Hope*.<sup>114</sup> Sullivan's famous modern dance piece, *Danse dans la neige*, was turned into stills when it was photographed by Maurice Perron and video when it was filmed by Jean-Paul Riopelle.<sup>115</sup> In this way, the ephemeral, live performance migrated into two other mediums, caught in the eye of the camera, changing its context and reception. The Montreal Museum of Art describes Sullivan as an artistic shapeshifter, "a pioneer in Quebec for her exceptional ability to switch from one discipline to another, be it from painting to performance, or from sculpture to photography."<sup>116</sup> This formal restlessness, stemming from the desire to find a shape in which an idea or feeling can best be expressed, is very typical of Quebecois modern art. Annie Gérin goes even further in her biography of Sullivan, "In a few instances, Sullivan's ease in crossing from one medium to another translated into interdisciplinarity; in these cases she made works that do not belong to dance, sculpture, conceptual art, or painting but rather create entirely new relations between them."<sup>117</sup> These new relations formed between seemingly disconnected

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<sup>113</sup> Penelope Rosemont, Editor, *Surrealist Women, an International Anthology*, London: The Athlone Press, 1998, 208.

<sup>114</sup> Enright, Robert. "Marcel Barbeau: The Colour of Change," Winnipeg: Bordercrossings Magazine, May 2010, <https://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/marcel-barbeau-the-colour-of-change>.

<sup>115</sup> The video footage has unfortunately since been lost.

<sup>116</sup> Stéphane Aquin and Florence-Agathe Dubé-Moreau, "Françoise Sullivan: 'I let rhythms flow,'" *Montreal Museum of Fine Arts*, February 2024, <https://www.mbam.qc.ca/en/exhibitions/francoise-sullivan/>.

<sup>117</sup> Annie Gérin, "Francoise Sullivan: Significance and Critical Issues," *Art Canada Institute*, 2018, <https://www.aci-iac.ca/art-books/francoise-sullivan/significance-and-critical-issues/>.

mediums were one of the most substantial contributions the Automatists made to future Quebecois artists.

#### **IV. Future Past**

*By this point, we've worked up an appetite, so we get back onto the metro and travel a few years ahead in time, to 1954. We get off and go into a local cafe for some espresso and pastries. Inside the cafe are more Automatists, along with students, musicians, recent immigrants, and the down-and-out. Someone strums a guitar, and a girl sings a Quebecois folk song to the music over the sounds of people talking. No one seems to be in any rush. They linger over cigarettes, books, and conversations. There is an amazing energy about the place, like at any moment something new and exciting could happen.*

The above scene was drawn from Jean Palardy's 1954 episode of the TV show *On the Spot*, titled "Artist in Montreal."<sup>118</sup> I was struck by the resonances between the Automatists in the episode six years after the publication of *Refus Global* and feminist artists of the 1980s and 90s. "Artist in Montreal" focuses on a cafe called L'Échourie (meaning the harbour) run by a Hungarian painter and frequented by Automatists.<sup>119</sup> The host tells us that the owner of L'Échourie, Georges, is a generous

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<sup>118</sup> Jean Palardy, dir., "Artist in Montreal," *On the Spot*, National Film Board of Canada, video, 1954, [https://www.nfb.ca/collection/spot-television-series/collection1/artist\\_in\\_monreal/](https://www.nfb.ca/collection/spot-television-series/collection1/artist_in_monreal/).

<sup>119</sup> L'Échourie was located at 54 Ave des Pins.

patron of the arts, giving young people meals on credit, employing them, and filling the walls of the cafe and its cellar with their artwork. L'Échourie is modeled after European intellectual cafe culture, serving as a kind of Quebecois version of Les Deux Magots. It recalls another meeting place decades later, a beloved Montreal hamburger joint called La Paryse. La Paryse was located in the Latin Quarter on Ontario and Sanguinet, and named for its owner, Paryse Taillefer. From 1980 until 2012, Taillefer ran the snack bar with her partner in love and life, Sylvie Lamarche.<sup>120</sup> Taillefer was described as a “féministe affichée” —an outspoken feminist, for her vocal support of female artists.<sup>121</sup> The spot was known for its inexpensive but excellent burgers, bright green neon sign, colorful interior, and welcoming atmosphere. Just as with L'Échourie, the place was a safe harbour, and many queer people worked at La Paryse or felt safe eating there. Taillefer referred to herself as a “mama hen,” mentoring young queer people who she met at the restaurant and encouraging them to pursue art. The *On the Spot* host observes, “You have a very lively crowd here” to which Georges responds smiling, “It’s a lot of fun.”<sup>122</sup> This echoes Taillefer’s observation in an interview: “When I think of Montreal in the 1980s there was so much effervescence.”<sup>123</sup> This is why I find it helpful to look at

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<sup>120</sup>Philippe Rezzonico, “La Paryse, une recette gagnante,” Montréal: *La Presse*, November 6, 2008, <https://www.lapresse.ca/societe/dossiers/amener-les-enfants-au-resto/200811/6/01-3683-la-paryse-une-recette-gagnante.php>.

<sup>121</sup>Isabelle Paré, “Un insatiable appétit pour l’art,” Montréal: *Le Devoir*, Sept. 14, 2012, <https://www.ledevoir.com/culture/arts-visuels/359204/un-insatiable-appetit-pour-l-art>.

<sup>122</sup> Palardy, “Artist in Montreal.”

<sup>123</sup> Ian Harrison, “Why La Paryse Made One of Montreal’s Best Burgers for 32 Years,” *Eater*, April 14, 2025, <https://montreal.eater.com/2015/4/14/8405973/paryse-taillefer-montreal-burger-restaurant>.

history through the lens of hidden spaces and underground geographies. The existence of places like L'Échourie and La Paryse, along with Muriel Guilbault's living room, and Madame Gauvreau's literary salons, coupled with the kindness and generosity of local business owners and patrons, has allowed generations of young artists in Montreal to meet, connect, and develop bonds within their community. Sometimes they bonded over shared frustrations with religion and politics, sometimes it was frustrations about gender or sexual discrimination. Unfortunately, these kinds of spaces are rapidly disappearing due to the rising cost of rent, the prevalence of short-term rental companies, and gentrification.

The lesson I take from all this: if we want to have cities with thriving, exciting art scenes, more work must be done to protect spaces like L'Échourie and La Paryse and their modern equivalents (Librairie L'Eugélonne, Pulp Bookstore, and Casa del Popolo, to name a few). Work must also be done to support marginalized artists of every kind including women, people of color, immigrants, and queer people. The female Automatists were able to accomplish a lot over the span of their lifetimes, but could have done so much more without oppression from society and sometimes their fellow Automatists. Guilbault might have lived longer if she had access to excellent mental health care. Thérèse might not have felt the need to leave Quebec entirely for Paris. Meloche might not have had to choose between her children and art if she had free childcare. Francoise Riopelle would not have had to live with a husband who openly mocked her profession. Ultimately, all of the women could have received the

praise they deserved for their work as Automatists, instead of having to repeatedly justify their contributions to the movement and to *Refus Global*.

## **Chapter Two- Composing a Network: Feminist and Lesbian Translations and Collaborations**

We might then have to drag theory back, to bring theory back to life.

—Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>124</sup>Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 1st ed. (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2017), 10.

## **I. La théorie, un dimanche**

*Sunday. People are sitting in church right now, listening to the low hum of sermons. Children are restlessly kicking their feet in the pews, stomachs are growling. But in Nicole Brossard's home in Outremont, a group of six women sit around an ornate table, laughing and drinking wine. They are mostly, but not all, lesbians. The majority wear sweaters, and they are surrounded by a canopy of large, leafy plants. Above them is a crystal chandelier that the women keep knocking into when they stand up. Brossard goes to the kitchen to pour them tea from her bright red kettle, more green plants in the background. One of the women introduces an article she has brought about gender pay disparity. The others listen carefully, then respond with their own reflections. Their choice to meet on Sunday is intentional, a way of consecrating the act of reading and writing. These passionate gatherings often last from noon until midnight.<sup>125</sup>*

In this partially imagined scene, we look into the window at the well-known salon captured in the book, *La théorie, un dimanche* (1988). Starting in 1983, Brossard began inviting a diverse group of women into the intimate space of her home to talk about writing, feminism, lesbianism, and revolution. Brossard was no stranger to collaboration, it should be noted, having worked previously on the literary magazine

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<sup>125</sup> This scene is inspired by Dorothy Hénault's 1986 documentary, *Firewords*.

*La Barre de Jour*, but this was one her first forays into working solely with other women. She married young and gave birth to a daughter, but by 1966 had divorced her husband, cut her hair short, began publicly identifying as a lesbian, and got involved in feminist activism in Montreal. During this time, she began to redirect her life so that it was focused around spending more time with women. By hosting the Sunday salons in her home, she created a material space for radical feminist thought that had not previously existed in Montreal. Not only did this change the lives of the women she invited, but it changed Brossard's own life forever: "Between my readings and encounters, discussions and gatherings with women, how to describe the irreversible transformation at work in me."<sup>126</sup>

### **The Feminist Salon, the People's University**

Beginning in the 17th century, the first salons were informal gatherings in the homes of the educated elite where guests engaged in discourse on topics chosen by the hostess, or salonnière. Catherine de Vivonne held the first known salon in France, and the trend soon spread to England, Germany, and Austria. With Brossard as the modern salonnière, *La Théorie* brought the intellectual space of salons to 1980s Quebec, along with its feminist possibilities, just as Mme Gauvreau had done in her time.<sup>127</sup> Scholars such as Dena Goodman and Evelyn Gordon Bodek have theorized

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<sup>126</sup> Nicole Brossard, Anne-Marie Wheeler, and Susan Rudy, *Fluid Arguments : Essays Written in French and English*, (Toronto, Ont: Mercury Press, 2005), 132.

<sup>127</sup> To avoid confusion, I will refer to the collective of women as the *La Théorie* group and their book as *La théorie*.

the salon historically as a site of resistance and activism for bourgeois women lacking rights, as well as Jewish women who were barred from many areas of public life. In the 18th century, as Bodek writes: “the salon was really an informal university for women—a place where they could exchange ideas, avail themselves of some of the best minds of their time, receive and give criticism, read their own works and hear the works of others.”<sup>128</sup> The La Théorie women had access to more human rights than the women participating in 18th century salons, but otherwise, the aim of these gatherings remained almost identical. Although women in the 1980s had access to education and universities, they still identified the need for a space outside of academia to theorize. Lisa Robertson writes, “academia was emphatically not the site for a feminist intervention of theory in 1980s Quebec, as Louky Bersianik emphasizes: ‘feminism was met with only a demeaning misogynist refusal of its claims, terms, and necessity.’”<sup>129</sup> In 1989, after Marc Lépine shot 14 women at École Polytechnique in Montreal while yelling, “I hate feminists,” there was also an unspoken understanding that it could be dangerous, even fatal, to be a woman taking up space in an educational setting. Lépine was not a student at École Polytechnique, and in fact had been rejected from the school twice. Yet by choosing École Polytechnique as his target, he ensured that many women would no longer feel safe in a college setting. As

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<sup>128</sup> Evelyn Gordon Bodek, “Salonières and Bluestockings: Educated Obsolescence and Germinating Feminism.” *Feminist Studies* 3.3/4 (Spring-Summer 1976), 185.

<sup>129</sup> Louky Bersianik, et al. *Theory, a Sunday*. (New York: Belladonna Press, 2013), 17. The misogynist nature of academia at the time is accurate as described, but it’s also true that many of the women were professors, college students, or otherwise involved in academia, and often relied on funding from universities to host conferences and speakers, or publish feminist books. The women may have rejected academia on the surface, but much of the network developed due to connections made through universities.

Canadian filmmaker Brenda Longfellow explained, the tragedy was “a shocking rupture in our understanding of the world.”<sup>130</sup> The Polytechnique Massacre transformed the way Canadians thought about safety in their country and how residents thought about safety within Montreal. Where once there had been pressure to leave the home as a site of oppression and domestic violence, women now turned back to the domestic sphere as a literal “safe space” for gender discourse to take place, a refuge from the homophobia and sexism in upper education. In the wider feminist movement, this rejection of academia allowed for greater participation from poor and working class women who often felt alienated or excluded by academic discussions. Women like Jovette Marchessault, who grew up working in a textile factory, and Marie-Claire Blais, who wrote extensively about her experience with poverty, represented a new kind of feminist intellectual and writer emerging in Quebec.<sup>131</sup>

### « Solitaire et solidaire »

Over thirty years after publication, *La théorie* remains a huge influence for Quebecois feminists and writers, as well as Anglophone Canadian writers. What is it that makes this slim text endure? My first guess is how well it combines the themes I am interested in exploring—shrinking the gaps between art and theory, translating the

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<sup>130</sup> Brenda Longfellow and Julianne Pidduck, “Introduction: Audiovisual Responses to the Polytechnique Massacre.” *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 22, no. 1 (2013), 3.

<sup>131</sup> Clay Risen, “Marie-Claire Blais, Acclaimed French-Canadian Novelist, Dies at 82.” *The New York Times*, December 7, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/07/books/marie-claire-blais-dead.html>.

female experience, experimental writing undertaken literally as a series of experiments, and a philosophy emphasizing close connection that simultaneously embraces a sense of individuality. The book is not a collaboratively authored manifesto, unlike earlier American feminist texts such as “The Combahee River Collective Statement,” “The Redstockings Manifesto,” or “The Black Women’s Manifesto” by the Third World Women’s Alliance. Instead, each participant wrote her own theoretical essay, accompanied by a piece of original prose and/or poetry. Their form combines values of collectivity and community with a more traditional Western sense of individualism. While Quebec did have a history of these types of collective feminist texts, they were generally found in the theater—plays such as *La Nef des Sorcières* and *Si Cendrillon pouvait mourir!* feature monologues written by different authors for each character, rather than a Greek chorus. In literature, however, this collective-yet-individual form was new.

The La Théorie group’s philosophy is exemplified by a statement member Louise Dupré made in an interview: “Je reviens à cette belle formule de Claire Lejeune dans *L’Atelier*, ‘solitaire et solidaire’” [I return to Claire Lejeune’s beautiful formula in *L’Atelier*: ‘solitary and in solidarity’].<sup>132</sup> The women believed in a form of collectivity that did not efface the importance of the individual. Or as Gail Scott put it in her book *Permanent Revolution*: “a woman might express her unique presence, without bowing this way + that.”<sup>133</sup> *Solitaire et solidaire* also mirrors the process

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<sup>132</sup> K. Lambert, “Les pratiques de la théorie : créer à l’université, entretien avec Louise Dupré et Martine Delvaux.” *Spirale*, (270), 29.

<sup>133</sup> Gail Scott, *Permanent Revolution : Essays*, (Chicago: Book\*hug Press, 2021), 74.

used by the Automatists. The Automatists may have signed off together on *Refus Global*, but most of the participants, including the women, contributed individually in ways that highlighted their unique artistic skills. This way of thinking feels particularly Quebecois—an ability to work alone while aligning oneself with a larger (revolutionary) cause, and the need to pair this manifesto with art.

However, even if the women did not write together, they did collectively think together. Their process of feminist consciousness-raising was an additive one, not dissimilar to translation. Rather than attempting to replace previous ideas (in the parlance of translation theory: the target language replacing the source language), their discussions and texts almost always alluded to and engaged in debate with other writings and strands of thinking. For example, Scott's essay in *La théorie, un dimanche* makes reference to Hamlet, Virginia Woolf, Jean-Paul Sartre, Greek mythology, Marcel Proust, the Russian artist Popova, Jacques Lacan, Scarlett O'Hara, and Ozymandias.<sup>134</sup> The women were often able to find spaces of common ground, but disagreement was an expected part of their creative process. Types of women present at the salons included lesbians, bisexuals, straight women, single mothers, partnered mothers, women without children, Francophones, Anglophones, poets, and novelists. They were tasked with “translating” their experiences for one another in order to reach a common understanding (if not a consensus). Notably, although diverse in other senses, all of the women were white, a fact which hints at the

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<sup>134</sup> Louky Bersianik, Nicole Brossard, Louise Cotnoir, Louise Dupré, Gail Scott et France Théoret, *La Théorie, un Dimanche*, (Montréal : Editions du Remue-ménage, 1988).

limitations of their gathering. Years later, some of the women lamented their failure at racial critique. As we shall see, although the participants were skilled at identifying the ways in which they themselves were excluded, they were less able to see the ways they might be excluding others.

### **Test Kitchen for Revolution**

Robertson writes in the introduction to the English version of *Theory: a Sunday*, published in 2013 by the feminist poetry collective belladonna\*: “In France and Québec, theory was not only an institutional discourse but a manual and testing ground for political revolution.”<sup>135</sup> Here, she is referencing both the revolutionary call for independence in Quebec as well as the sexual revolution taking place around the world. There was a rush to adapt American and French Marxist and feminist teachings for the Quebecois context. For the women of the network, this meant bringing language concerns to the forefront (for example, the gendered nature of the French language and the dominance of male universals in French and English), and highlighting the history of colonization within Quebec.<sup>136</sup>

Translation was central to the women’s conception of theory, and they were often considering the role that language plays in determining one’s reality. The history and landscape of Montreal invited multilingual crossings and daily translation as a regular part of life, while also discouraging these crossings through geographic

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<sup>135</sup> Louky Bersianik, et al. *Theory, a Sunday*. (New York: Belladonna Press, 2013),15.

<sup>136</sup> Unfortunately, this generally did not address the colonization/genocide of First Nations peoples in Quebec.

segregation. In 1984, some of the women started to work on the bilingual journal *Tessera*, while others were translating American feminist texts in order to make them accessible to the group.<sup>137</sup> As writers, there was demand for their work in other languages, which provided opportunities to work alongside translators. Barbara Godard (a *Tessera* co-founder), who translated La Théorie members Brossard and Bersianik, and introduced their work to Anglophone audiences, would become one of the central figures in the Canadian feminist school of translation, along with Luise von Flotow and Sherry Simon.

## II. The *Tessera* Years

[T]his is the magic of fragments—the way that poem breaks off leads into a thought that can't ever be apprehended. There is the space where a thought would be, but which you can't get hold of. I love that space.

—Anne Carson, The Art of Poetry No. 88, *The Paris Review*<sup>138</sup>

*Tessera*, from the feminine Latin noun meaning fragment, was a bilingual journal of feminist prose, criticism, and theory founded by four women: Kathy Mezei, Barbara Godard, Daphne Marlatt, and Gail Scott. Mezei studied Canadian literature and translation and taught at Simon Fraser University, while Godard specialized in feminist criticism, film, translation studies, and French literature at York University.

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<sup>137</sup> While the journal uses “bilingual” as a self descriptor and French and English make up the majority of each issue, it also branched out to include other languages. Spanish, Italian, Chinese, and others could be found in *Tessera*.

<sup>138</sup> Interview with Will Aitken, “Anne Carson, The Art of Poetry No. 88.” *The Paris Review*, Issue 171 Fall 2004, <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5420/the-art-of-poetry-no-88-anne-carson>.

Daphne Marlatt was a poet and novelist living in Vancouver, and Scott was an experimental writer and journalist who had relocated to Montreal from Ottawa. In addition to their differing positionalities and perspectives, the women were physically far apart from one another. They therefore quickly developed geographical specialties for finding contributors and distribution—Mezei covered British Columbia, Marlatt the prairies, Godard handled Toronto, and Scott was responsible for Montreal. Their lack of a centralized headquarters, however, would become a greater challenge for *Tessera* as the journal grew in size and the women attempted to negotiate a long-distance feminist collective without a physical home.

When she first met the other women at a feminist literary theory conference in 1981, Mezei expressed her desire to create a new journal that could fill gaps in current publishing. There was great interest in her idea, but it would take several years and many discussions for it to become a reality. All of the women agreed that the journal should be feminist in nature and offer critical perspectives. However, in their early conversations, many of the central tensions that drove *Tessera* were established: namely, whether *Tessera* would be a journal of fiction or theory, and whether English or French would dominate. Scott was a fierce advocate of both fiction and French from the beginning. She was insistent that the journal include creative writing as well as theory, drawing on her experiences with the La Théorie salons. All the women in the editorial collective had specific roles, and it was clear in looking through their letters that Scott was *Tessera*'s main provocatrice. In one letter she writes: "We should use *Tessera* to say for once what we really want to say (we're

censored in so many areas)” and in another, states, “PS I guess my bottom line is let’s make it new and exciting or why bother?”<sup>139</sup> It wasn’t that the other women weren’t interested in fiction, simply that it was easier to get institutional funding for a more academic, theoretical journal. *Tessera* never became that conventional journal, noting later in their call for papers, “academic discourse is discouraged,” and instead offering readers something else—an experimental text composed of fragments from many genres, languages, and mediums.

As a result of living in Montreal at this time, Scott was very connected to political discourse surrounding language. She championed the need for Francophone voices and a greater understanding of the differences between Francophone and Anglophone feminist theory at the time. In one letter, she wrote: “It seems at every conference, colloque, women from Quebec and Canada...walk around each other in circles and finally start communicating only when it’s time to go home.”<sup>140</sup> The other women agreed, and Scott became responsible for locating French submissions for every issue, introducing many Canadian readers to Quebecoise writers such as Nicole Brossard, France Théoret, and Louise Cotnoir. The language politics of a French/English journal were complicated. French was frequently relegated to secondary importance, as the women tried to please their majority Anglophone readers. They worried in their correspondence that readers were scared off by French language covers, and many of the English-speaking readers found that *Tessera*’s

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<sup>139</sup> Correspondence between Gail Scott and Kathy Mezei. Tessera Archives, Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, Translation Workshop, 2001-029/001(15), York University, Toronto, Canada.

<sup>140</sup> Correspondence between Gail Scott and Kathy Mezei. Tessera Archives.

emphasis on French theory made the journal too “elitist” for them.<sup>141</sup> It appeared that Scott, and to a lesser extent Godard, who sometimes lived in Montreal, were solely responsible for advocating for and reminding the group of their responsibility to Francophone feminists. Nevertheless, over time *Tessera* generated some of the most important conversations between Francophone and Anglophone feminists in Canada.

Just as with the La Théorie salons, translation was a major concern of *Tessera* right from its inception. For example, the inaugural issue included a piece by Evelyn Voldeng, translated by Frances Morgan entitled “Translata/Translatus.” This piece introduced *Tessera*’s unique focus: not only offering writing in translation but also critical reflections on the act of translation. The sixth volume of *Tessera* would cement this even further with the theme, “Translating Women.” The reasons for this interest in translation were manifold: perhaps most importantly, the journal widened the size of their audience by publishing in multiple languages. All of the founders possessed personal connections to translation; Godard was a literary translator, Mezei specialized in translation studies, Marlatt engaged in “transformances” with Brossard, and Scott was constantly translating as a part of daily life in Quebec. Additionally, the women used translation as a metaphor for what their writing was doing to convey the (previously unheard) female experience. Godard, in her talk “Translator as Ventriloquist,” quoted Marguerite Duras, stating, “Men don’t translate. They begin from a theoretical platform that is already in place, already celebrated. The writing of

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<sup>141</sup> Correspondence between Gail Scott and Kathy Mezei. *Tessera* Archives, Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, Translation Workshop, 2001-029/001(15), York University, Toronto, Canada.

women is really translated from the unknown, like a new way of communicating rather than an already formed language.”<sup>142</sup> This concept of the “unknown” was also described by Brossard’s term *l’inédit*, which she defined as the unsaid or unspoken. In order to become legible in patriarchal society, women had to invent new language to write their stories. Women were constantly translating their own lives and experiences for a society where maleness was the dominant language.

Interestingly, although *Tessera* was founded in 1984, many criticisms of the journal and disagreements amongst the editorial board resonate with conversations still taking place today. Readers and some contributors expressed a distaste for female narratives that occasionally veered into gender essentialism. The first example of this was Mezei’s (and others’) distaste for female narratives that relied too much on shared assumptions of biology; in other words, essentialist feminist writing. Mezei wrote, “I get tired of bodies, menstruation, and childbirth.”<sup>143</sup> A mother herself, she did not mean she was fatigued by these experiences, but that they were overused by feminist writers. Readers were also sick of submissions that tried to do the same with theory, as one reader wrote: “that very overt neofeminine/biological determinism that puts me off in the works of Irigaray, Cixous, and (to a lesser extent) Kristeva.”<sup>144</sup> As

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<sup>142</sup> Barbara Godard, unpublished talk “Translator as Ventriloquist.” Barbara Godard Archives. 2010-044/005, (10), 2002-039/009 (23) Translation Conference, Montreal 1984, Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, York University, Toronto, Canada.

<sup>143</sup> Kathy Mezei in a letter to Godard, Marlatt, and Scott. *Tessera* Archives, File: 2001-029/001(15) - Translation Workshop, Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, York University, Toronto, Canada.

<sup>144</sup> Correspondence between unnamed reader and *Tessera* Collective. *Tessera* Archives, Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, 2000-055/001(01) - Submissions, editorial correspondence, grant applications, issue #6, York University, Toronto, Canada.

expressed earlier in relation to *écriture féminine*, Cixous has been largely misread as excluding men from the writing practice. Yet from 1984 to the pink pussy hats of 2017, it's true that many involved with the feminist political project have been quick to rely on anatomical metonymy in order to create a shared sense of "sisterhood." Godard edited a collection titled *Gynocritics: Feminist Approaches to Canadian and Quebec Women's Writing*, gyno- from the Greek meaning either woman or ovary. This dual meaning gets at the problem with relying on body parts for solidarity; you inevitably exclude groups as some cisgender women do not have ovaries, and all trans women do not. Gender deconstructionists and intersex activists have shown us how quickly biologically-based solidarity falls apart because there is no single defining quality, even on the chromosomal level, that unites all women.

The other critique of *Tessera* relates to an issue with the La Théorie group I have already mentioned: a lack of racial diversity. The board was aware of this, and the concern appeared several times in early meetings.<sup>145</sup> It was suggested that the group seek submissions from women like Dionne Brand, Lillian Allen, Joy Kogawa, and Simiti Namjoshi—none of whom were from Quebec. Anne-Marie Alonzo, an Egyptian poet of Palestinian, Syrian, and Maltesian descent living in Montreal, was to my knowledge one of the only *Tessera* contributors of color ever from Quebec. Jovette Marchessault agreed to write for *Tessera* early on and then backed out, for reasons unknown. In their editorial communications, there seemed to be some

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<sup>145</sup> Tessera Archives, Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, Translation Workshop, 2001-029/001(15), York University, Toronto, Canada.

confusion amongst the collective as to why the journal was not getting more submissions from women of color. This was a self-perpetuating problem—why would women of color want to submit to a journal run by white women, that published mostly white women? These women of color were more likely submitting their writing to somewhere like *Fireweed*, a journal with special issues such as “Native Women,” “Awakening Thunder: Asian Canadian Women,” and a “Women of Color” issue, featuring an editorial collective run by prominent Canadian feminists of color like Makeda Silvera, Dionne Brand, Ayanna Black, and Afua Cooper.<sup>146</sup> *Tessera*’s themes, while capacious and interesting, were not as welcoming and specific as “Native Women.” This is not to say that *Fireweed*’s special issues did not have problems and perhaps encouraged tokenism in different ways, but it’s important to state that when the women asked why they weren’t receiving more submissions from Canadian feminists of color, the answer is obvious from the perspective of our current attunement to such issues.

### **Fiction-Théorique // Fiction Theory**

*Tessera* is one venue where the women of the network developed one of their guiding ideas: fiction-théorique, whose meaning (and spelling) is multiple and hard to pin down.<sup>147</sup> The origins of fiction-théorique are generally attributed to Brossard’s book

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<sup>146</sup> Huda Hassan, “*Fireweed*’s revolutionary Women of Colour issue lit a path for feminist publishing 40 years ago,” *CBC*, June 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/arts/fireweed-women-of-colour-issue-40-year-anniversary-1.6866028>.

<sup>147</sup> Also referred to as *théorique*, *fiction-théorique*, *fiction-theory*, and *fiction/theory*. The language that a given writer chooses for the term is important, as it may signify their political or personal outlook on its meaning. I will use alternating names in this chapter.

*L'Amèr* (in English, *These Our Mothers*), but the phrase was vague enough to remain open to reuse and reinterpretation for decades. Brossard's version of fiction-théorique argues that reality is a fiction constructed by language, and that by examining and remaking language, one could remake reality.<sup>148</sup> This definition inherently ties into the feminist project of remaking patriarchal language. In Brossard's view, fiction theory would replace the dishonest claims of a patriarchal society that certain behaviors were natural or innate, just as her linguistic inventions would replace sexist language and contest assumed male universality. Fiction theory was one way Brossard imagined women translating their experiences into language in order to make them legible.

Outside of Brossard's definition, each woman interpreted fiction-theory through her own political/cultural lens. For Scott, occupying a space between Francophone and Anglophone discourse, fiction theory is similar to what we might now call auto-theory: "not theory about fiction, but rather a reflexive doubling back over the poetic texture of the text."<sup>149</sup> For Godard, who studied semiotics, the term was about deconstructing and disrupting the symbolic order: "Fiction theory: a narrative, usually self-mirroring, which exposes, defamiliarizes and/or subverts the fictional and gender codes determining the re-presentation of women in literature and

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<sup>148</sup> Eva Karpinski and Elena Basile, *Translation, Semiotics, and Feminism: Selected Writings of Barbara Godard*. (Taylor and Francis, 2021), 913.

<sup>149</sup> Scott, *Permanent Revolution*, 74. She also made a distinction between English and French versions of the term, placing a lot of weight on the fact that in French, *théorique* was an adjective, not a noun (translating as theoretical fiction rather than fiction theory). She believed this, along with the fact that the term had existed for longer in the Francophone world, led to Quebecoise writers moving past the need for theory as a centerpiece.

in this way contributes to feminist theory.”<sup>150</sup> Marlatt has a similar definition to Brossard that also ties in with the idea of gender as socially constructed: “a corrective lens which helps us see through the fiction we’ve been conditioned to take for the real, fictions which have not only constructed woman’s ‘place’ in patriarchal society but have constructed the very ‘nature’ of woman.”<sup>151</sup> The women never agreed on a single meaning of fiction theory, which is evidenced in a roundtable *Tessera* published on the topic, which offered different perspectives and correspondence about the term. This was both positive and negative; it allowed the term to remain mutable, but perhaps prevented it from reaching a wider audience due to the lack of a cohesive definition.

Along with *écriture au féminin*, the use of fiction-théorique as both a central theoretical concept emerging from collective conversations and an artistic practice is one of the unifying factors of the network, particularly for the La Théorie and *Tessera* groups. Fiction-théorique establishes feminist and lesbian experimental writing coming out of Quebec during the 80s and 90s as distinct from experimental writing originating from the United States and France during the same time period. This is critical because it demonstrates that the network was a separate entity worthy of naming, studying, and celebrating on par with other feminist literary movements such as *écriture féminine* in France or black lesbian writing from the United States. And while many of these women and their contributions to literature are studied within

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<sup>150</sup> Barbara Godard, et al. “Theorizing Fiction Theory.” *Tessera* 3 (Burnaby, 1986), 10.

<sup>151</sup> Godard et al., “Theorizing Fiction Theory,” 9.

Francophone Canada and occasionally Canada at large, they are still largely unknown within the United States. Fiction-théorique is one of the network's most enduring ideas, and one ripe for reinvention and reimagination.

### **III. Rebelles et Infidèles : Trois Femmes**

I opened this chapter with the La Théorie group and *Tessera* because they serve as a microcosm for the larger feminist lesbian Montreal network. The translational exchanges these women took part in were part of a broader conversation in Montreal at the time. Whether in salons, consciousness-raising groups, classes, conferences, political activism, or writers' collectives, women were coming together to learn from one another. These groups, like José Esteban Muñoz's queer futurity, gesture at an asymptotic utopia. Like Muñoz, I believe any attempt at creating utopia can be a transformative one. Danielle Dutton, in her book *Prairie, Dresses, Art, Other* (2024), writes about "not trying to overcome the 'obstacle' of translation but hoping to be changed by the effort."<sup>152</sup> All translators know: translation changes the translator. The women of the network possessed this same attitude, emphasizing personal transformation over the transformation of a source text. This is not to say that they were not extremely skilled translators, only that the women were often inventing language as they went along, drawing lines and spirals, where before there was only blank space.

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<sup>152</sup> Danielle Dutton, *Prairie, Dresses, Art, Other*. (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2024), 92.

I will now turn to three profiles of women within the Montreal lesbian feminist network to serve as case studies. Before I begin though, I wish to briefly explain my choices—why these specific women? Firstly, it was impossible to write about all the women involved with the network, so I needed to choose a few I felt were representative. I wanted a diverse sampling of women from different backgrounds working in separate fields with unique artistic practices. Most of the women within the network identified as Francophone, so it was important to provide a counterpoint from an Anglophone perspective. Scott offered this, as an Anglophone who moved to Montreal and made it her permanent home in 1967. To me, Scott embodies the meaning of the word solidarity; she settled in a city where she was a linguistic minority and practiced French until she was able to take part in literary salons and feminist consciousness-raising groups, campaigning for Quebecois independence. She put herself far out of her comfort zone, and this willingness to be uncomfortable is what gives her writing such power.

I also thought it was important to provide a non-white perspective on the network, given the absence of women of color from many of these groups. This was more difficult than I anticipated. Many of the celebrated Canadian writers of color at the time like Dionne Brand and M. NourbeSe Philip were Anglophones who lived outside Quebec. Most prominent Quebecoise feminist writers and artists at the time were white, and those who weren't, like Anne Marie-Alonzo or Diane Obomsawin, did not explicitly identify with the feminist movement and in fact often tried to separate themselves from it in interviews (certainly worth exploring for its own

reasons). I was drawn to the Indigenous, mixed-race playwright Jovette Marchessault because of her uncompromising and strange feminist theater. Marchessault was very close with her grandmother, who was of Indigenous descent, and incorporated aspects of Indigenous spirituality and storytelling into her work. To give a sense of how rare publications by Indigenous women were and still are in the province, consider the example of Virginia Pésémapéo Bordeleau's novel *Ourse Bleue*, the first French-language novel written by an Indigenous woman ever published in Quebec at the late date of 2007.<sup>153</sup> Of course, Marchessault is not noteworthy only because she is Indigenous; as you will see, her wide-ranging, playful body of work about flying cows, medieval lesbians, witches, and wet hens was remarkable and groundbreaking for its time and still today.

Julie Doucet is a generation younger than most of the women in the network, and became a very successful graphic novelist. Her work has rarely been analyzed in relation to other Quebecoise artists, an oversight I hope to correct. At first glance she appears to be an outsider with little in common with Brossard, Scott, and Marchessault. Yet as I will demonstrate, she shares many of their themes, anxieties, and strategies, including a translational way of understanding the world, close attention to language, (de)construction of the "I" and an interest in Quebecois separatism. Doucet's images perform what many of the other women in the network did with words, paintings, films, and sculptures. Her auto-fictional comics offer a radical, experimental revisioning of womanhood. I make a case for Doucet's

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<sup>153</sup> Virginia Pésémapéo Bordeleau, *Ourse Bleue*, Montréal: Éditions de la Pleine Lune, 2007.

inclusion in the network, ultimately embracing an interdisciplinary approach that includes visual art, prose, theater, and translation as forms of writing.

### **“Obsessed with Languages”<sup>154</sup>**

#### **Julie Doucet**

“[Doucet’s] work can perhaps be viewed as work in translation, even when written originally in English.”<sup>155</sup>

—Anne Elizabeth Moore, *Sweet Little Cunt*

*I meet up with Julie Doucet at a cozy Persian cafe called Le Petit Byblos. I let the Montreal residents suggest where to meet for interviews, and it has yet to steer me wrong. The menu for Petit Byblos charms me right away. Each course is framed as a chapter of a book (Première Chapitre = le petit déjeuner, and so on up until the epilogue). The English version of the menu is the same, except with more spelling errors, my favorite being a passage using “angles” to mean “angels.” Beautiful paintings from fifteenth century Persia accompany all of the pages. I don’t know if Doucet picked the cafe for its visual and literary references, but it certainly fits in with her interests.*

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<sup>154</sup>Taken from Doucet’s statement, “I’m obsessed with languages.” Julie Doucet in conversation with the author, Montreal, September 13, 2023.

<sup>155</sup> Anne Elizabeth Moore, *Sweet Little Cunt: The Graphic Work of Julie Doucet*, (Minneapolis: Uncivilized Books, 2018), 35.

Things are going well for Doucet; after years in Berlin, she's returned to her hometown, Montreal, put out her first new graphic novel in years (*Time Zone J*) and won the prestigious French Angoulême prize. Despite all of her success, she remains humble and soft-spoken. She complains to me that people are only interested in her comics and not her large body of other work, which includes collages and cut-up poems. Later, when I spoke with Scott, she echoed much the same sentiment about fans preferring her earlier books, *My Paris* and *Heroine*. I have to admit that I am one of these fans—I am, after all, writing a dissertation about the 1980s and 90s. While I appreciate Doucet's collage poetry and mini-zines, it's her comic *Dirty Plotte* that I've always found the most compelling. In my opinion, *Dirty Plotte* represents Doucet at her best—grotesque feminist imagery full of fluids, violence, and droll cultural commentary that provides an honest, if not literal, look into the life of a young woman living a bohemian lifestyle.

The connection between feminist and queer writing in Montreal during the 1980s and 90s and underground comics is stronger than one might expect, given the comics scene is often portrayed as a boys club. Brossard's early experimental novel *French Kiss* (1974) features comics by *La Barre du Jour* cover artist Bernard Tanguay embedded within the text, and she would continue to use drawings, symbols, and photography throughout her career. Political cartoons and comics featured in lesbian and feminist periodicals at the time such as the Montreal magazine *La Vie En Rose*. Feminist critic Suzanne Lamy was one of the graphic novelist Doucet's earliest and most important mentors, and Doucet would also go on to illustrate the cover of

*Tessera*. She pops up (albeit with name misspelled!) in Scott's book *Permanent Revolution* as an example of Quebecois artists who moved to New York: "Having already ca 1980 left Anglo- for Franco-Québec, to go to NY was to follow in the traces of several other Montréal creators over time (artist Moyra Davey, cartoonist Julie Doucette, Leonard Cohen)."<sup>156</sup> Like many of the Francophone women in the network, Doucet was imbibing French culture through musicians like Jacques Dutronc and reading literature and comics (or bandes dessinées/BDs) from France. Women in the network were hungry for new forms and language, so a turn towards the visual was a natural fit. As discussed in Chapter 1, Quebec's legacy of women in Surrealist, Dadaist, and Automatist art carved out a space for female visual artists. The physical artifact of *Refus Global* was today what many would call an artist book. Paintings, drawings, and photography were always considered an important part of the Quebecois avant-garde and radical left art. In many ways, when Quebecoise artists like Rita Letendre and Mimi Parent put down their paint brushes, Doucet picked them up.

Doucet is credited with inspiring a new generation of feminist cartoonists, but her own inspiration as a female cartoonist mostly came from Diane Obomsawin, or "Obom" as she is generally referred to, a slightly older, queer Abenaki artist from Quebec best known for her 2014 graphic novel entitled *J'aime les filles* and a short film adaptation by the same name. Part memoir, part cultural document featuring interviews with women who identify as lesbians from around the world, *J'aime les*

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<sup>156</sup> Scott, *Permanent Revolution*, 47.

*filles* is a short yet powerful tome. During the 90s, Obom worked at La Paryse, the aforementioned hamburger joint that served as patron and employer for many gay and lesbian artists of the time. Doucet explains to me that she was too intimidated in the 90s to speak to Obom much, and ironically, Obom later admitted she felt much the same way about Doucet. Doucet tells me she was pretty lonely as a woman in the comics scene. In the 90s, when people asked her if she was a feminist, she refused the label, even though *Dirty Plotte* was a self-described “fanzine féministe.” She was one of the guys, watching Tarantino movies and drawing raunchy comics with gory, over-the-top violence.<sup>157</sup> But she was always writing from an unusual female perspective, for instance, by depicting menstruation as a Godzilla-like monster. Doucet reflects that her adolescent reluctance to identify herself as a feminist was a self-protective lie. Nowadays, she embraces feminism as a political philosophy that guides her work, and has always guided it to some extent, even when she refused the label.

Doucet is both a polyglot and an auto-translator, a fact often ignored in analyses of her art. She wrote her early zines in two languages as a matter of necessity, alternating comics in French and English in order to reach the widest possible audience. Though French was her first language, her success as a graphic novelist can be attributed largely to her decision to write comics in English for the Canadian publisher Drawn and Quarterly. Compared to many other female Quebecoise cartoonists who write in French such as Obom, Julie Delporte, Sylvie Rancourt, and Cathon, Doucet is much more well known outside Canada. Even so,

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<sup>157</sup> Julie Doucet in conversation with the author, Montreal, September 13, 2023.

she refuses to commit to English as her language of choice. After years of writing in English and French, she switched primarily to English, wrote a series of fanzines in German, quit comics for a decade, and came back with an English-language graphic novel—*Time Zone J* in 2022, which she then translated into French and released the following year as *Suicide Total*. At the same time, she was producing cut-up poetry zines, mostly written in French.

Scholars have long struggled to articulate the way Doucet employs English and French in her comics, using clumsy and offensive phrases such as “linguistic promiscuity,” (Doucet grimaces as I repeat this phrase to her) “stilted English,” and “English with a French accent.”<sup>158</sup> Doucet is well aware of this assessment, and perhaps even plays into it, as she stated in one interview: “people loved my funny French way of writing in English.”<sup>159</sup> Aside from appealing to Anglophone audiences, her speech patterns are also indicative of a larger need to code-switch and to occupy multiple linguistic and cultural worlds. As scholar Mira Falardeau writes:

Doucet’s peculiarity was to belong to the English-speaking underground world as she claimed from the start, even if she was French-speaking. Her choice to write her dialogues in English, giving a kind of ‘French accent’ to her texts, was accompanied by a dual loyalty she herself maintained between two worlds: the American alternative comics and the French ones.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>158</sup>Frederik Byrn Køhlert, “The Plotte Thickens: Julie Doucet’s Mini-Comics Revisited.” *The Montreal Review of Books*, (February 2014), <https://mtlreviewofbooks.ca/reviews/fantastic-plotte/>.

<sup>159</sup> “Interview with Julie Doucet!” *LADYGUNN*, (April 2010), <https://www.ladygunn.com/people/interview-with-julie-doucet/>.

<sup>160</sup> Mira Falardeau, “Julie Doucet, between order and disorder.” *Cuadernos del Centro de Estudios en Diseño y Comunicación. Ensayos*, no. 89 (2020), 30.

Interestingly, in this passage Falardeau removes Doucet's Quebecois heritage from the equation entirely. It's true that Doucet lists American underground comics and French BDs as major influences on her writing, but this misses the rather obvious point that she grew up in a culture with two official languages entwined in complicated and rapidly shifting power dynamics. When considering the history of Quebec, we see Doucet's use of language in a different light; the "French-accented" English that international audiences find so "funny" is more than an endearing quirk. In reality, it's borne from the painful acquisition of language during a time of crisis and discrimination.

### **La guerre des langues**

Surprisingly, relatively few critics have bothered to delve into Doucet's background in order to see how it might have influenced her relationship to language and art more broadly. Looking into her past quickly reveals that Doucet has a fraught relationship with bilingualism. For a long time, she tells me, her mind was a struggle between English and French. She grew up in a very different, very divided Quebec.<sup>161</sup> At that time, bilingualism was understood as an undesirable attribute, and teaching a child a second language was thought to confuse them. English dominated Quebec during her childhood; she remembers when all the stop signs were in English (whereas now most Quebecois stop signs are written in French or both as is legally required). Growing up in the suburbs of Montreal, she says that even visiting the corner store elicited

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<sup>161</sup> Julie Doucet in conversation with the author, September 13, 2023.

hostility from adults; people would not respond to her if she spoke to them in French. She mentions a documentary set in New Brunswick about French speakers trying to start their own school. There was a scene in the documentary with a man yelling about “these Francophones” in English with utter contempt, in his eyes a look of complete hatred, something that she never forgot. Given all this, it makes sense that Doucet’s relationship to her native tongue and foreign languages is the inverse of many artists. She admits in several interviews that she becomes “self-conscious” writing in French, whereas German and English represent freedom to her. It’s much more common for adults to feel self-conscious writing in a second or third language, but for Doucet, who was punished for speaking French as a child, the ability to escape a language historically associated with shame is liberatory.

There is another factor that likely contributes to Doucet’s self-consciousness in French: linguistic insecurity. This phenomenon often affects people in colonized countries whose version of the colonizer’s adopted language is seen as less than, or incorrect in the eyes of the colonizer. As Scott aptly puts it in *Permanent Revolution*, linguistic insecurity is rooted in “the disdain of the Euro-French for the French spoken here,” here being Quebec.<sup>162</sup> The idea that Quebecois French was inferior actually originates from Anglophones in the province, and then was later taken up by those from France as well. It’s also worth noting that there is very much still a current, widespread belief amongst French-speaking people that Quebecois French and its accent are non-normative. Thus, the association Doucet makes between other

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<sup>162</sup> Scott, *Permanent Revolution*, 41.

languages and freedom springs from this denigration of Quebecois French. When she writes in *joual*, Quebecois slang, the decision to do so is even more meaningful, an act of resistance against dominant French narratives about who is allowed to speak the language.

In light of all this, a translational lens is useful for understanding Doucet's creative process and defining more clearly what is meant by "English with a French accent." For starters, there are many Englishes and Frenchs around the world, but Doucet is mostly caught between Canadian English/American English and Quebecois French, which differs from Parisian, metropolitan French (though this does not make it less "correct"). As translators of English and French are well aware, French is a verb-heavy language, whereas English places more emphasis on nouns. French, especially when written, also tends to be a lot more verbose than English, and therefore the translation process into English typically involves whittling down the text.<sup>163</sup> When Doucet translates her comics, she reletters all of the comics by hand to account for this difference. French is also a Romance language with roots in Latin, whereas English is a Germanic language that also borrows from Latin and French. This results in different sentence structure and word position. What critics call Doucet's French "accent," I would describe as a combination of Quebecois argot and French syntax and spelling added to English words. It is her way of retaining a strong

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<sup>163</sup> For example, French speakers would write "Le frère de Julie" where English speakers can simply write "Julie's brother."

sense of her Francophone and Quebecois identity, even when writing for a global Anglophone audience.

In the pages of her early *Dirty Plotte* zines, collected in the anthology *Fantastic Plotte*, the sentences feel slightly off to the monolingual English speaker. For instance, she writes: “few months ago I found in the garbages an aquarium” in place of the more conventional English, “a few months ago I found an aquarium in the garbage.”<sup>164</sup> The reader can glean the complete meaning from the original phrase, but her unusual syntax tips us off that she is coming from a multilingual point of view. Another example, in one of her self-translations, she changes “on va leur faire regretter d’être nés!” to “they will be sorry of being born! We will take care of that,” when it might have also been translated simply as “we will make them regret ever being born!”<sup>165</sup> Again, Doucet’s meaning is evident in both versions, but she tends to try and preserve French mannerisms in her English translations, as well as the wordiness associated with French. Other examples in *Dirty Plotte* include: “come to see” vs “come see,” and “bazooka is my best one” instead of “bazooka is the best one” or “bazooka is my favorite.”<sup>166</sup> She also employs French spelling in English sentences, adding an -e on the end of words with the suffix -ism, such as “sexisme,” or adding an extra “n” to prisoner so that it appears closer to the French prisonnier. This slightly-offness signals to readers of either language that we are crossing

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<sup>164</sup>Julie Doucet, cover of *Dirty Plotte* #8, April 1989 in *Fantastic Plotte*, Montréal: L'Oie de Cravan, 2014.

<sup>165</sup>Julie Doucet, “julie in the ocean” comic in *Fantastic Plotte*, Montréal: L'Oie de Cravan, 2014.

<sup>166</sup>Julie Doucet, Untitled comic, 1989 in *Fantastic Plotte*, Montréal: L'Oie de Cravan, 2014.

linguistic borders in her work, and that Doucet inhabits a liminal space between the two languages.

Doucet also employs Quebecois slang throughout her comics. She uses expressions like “chuis,” a shortened form of “je suis,” common in Quebec, but considered improper by those from France. In one stunning example, the character version of Julie exclaims: “FUCK OFF TABERNAK PIS VIVE LE QUÉBEC LIBRE!”<sup>167</sup> To deconstruct this a little, we begin with an English phrase (fuck off), then transition to the joul word tabernak, which originates from the term for tabernacle, an epithet that relies on the rejection or desecration of the province’s Catholic rule. Tabernak serves as an intensifier to the previous clause and could also be interpreted as repeating the English “fuck,” translating roughly as “holy fuck.” The next word, “pis,” is also joul, a contracted form of “et puis.” Finally, we have the expression “vive le Québec libre,” advocating for Quebecois sovereignty. We would be hard pressed to find a better example of Quebecois identity on the page. Even in one of her early comics originally written in English, Doucet chose the title *Ciboire de criss!* a Quebecois expression referring to the Catholic wafer box. Perhaps most important, the title of her zine “dirty plotte” is a play on the Quebecois slang word for vagina (the equivalent of cunt in English), something she overtly explains to the readers in one of her very first comics. A sexy pen and ink version of Doucet in fishnets points to a map where Quebec is clearly marked. As Anne Elizabeth Moore notes, “Doucet establishes in the strip a firm barrier; to comprehend her work, US

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<sup>167</sup>Julie Doucet, *Maxiplotte*, France: L’Association, 2021.

comics readers must assimilate a Quebecois word. Doucet demands we recognize her homeland.”<sup>168</sup> Doucet does multiple things here at once; she stakes a claim for her feminist identity (there will be no slut-shaming here!), while also playing a pedagogical role for her non-Quebecois readers.

Doucet’s use of Quebecois slang and French syntax and spelling demonstrate her way of asserting a cohesive sense of self, especially during a time when Quebec was contemplating sovereignty. She mentions in an interview in *Sweet Little Cunt* that there is an unpublished *Dirty Plotte* comic about Quebecois sovereignty. The comic is based on the Quebecois policy of not allowing citizens to purchase alcohol until after 8pm on election day. In the comic, Julie the character, deeply passionate about her love of beer, exits a store after being refused alcohol shouting “FREE QUEBEC!!!”<sup>169</sup> This is typical Doucetesque humor, often used to downplay serious issues like abortion and assault. Yet the fact that she created the comic in the first place shows it was on her mind, and her decision never to publish it indicates the controversial nature of calling for Quebec separatism, even in jest.

There’s an equally revealing scene in the *Dirty Plotte* comic, “An English Lesson,” where the character Julie attempts to improve her English by taking lessons from a guy at a bar who may or may not be trying to sleep with her.<sup>170</sup> She starts out speaking intentionally non-standardized English: “maybe I will have 75 year old I will can speak not so bad in English,” using the verb “to have” as a way of imitating

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<sup>168</sup>Moore, *Sweet Little Cunt*, 39.

<sup>169</sup>Moore, 210.

<sup>170</sup> Doucet, *Fantastic Plotte*.

the French convention of employing *avoir* in relation to describing one's age. Julie begins the lesson in earnest, but slowly becomes too drunk to even speak, blacking out. At the end of the strip, she tells the guy "I've forgotten everything," which could be a play on the Quebecois motto "Je me souviens" [I remember]. The more Julie practices English, the further from her own consciousness she gets, until her memory erases English entirely. She suggests that her one true language is French mixed with English (leaning more heavily on the French), rather than English *or* French. For her, the mixture itself constitutes a language, complete and contained, but one that is unofficial and unaccepted.

Aside from a similar relationship to languages and translation, Doucet also is connected to the women of the network through feminist art. I asked her about the cover she drew for *Tessera*. Her comic, a reprint of "julie la terreur se meurt" appeared on the 1996 cover of *Tessera* Vol. 20, an issue with the theme "bilingual feminism." I pull out a copy to show her, and she waves me away, saying she doesn't remember doing it and wasn't even living in Montreal at the time. "If someone asked me to do it and said it was for a Montreal feminist magazine I would've just done it, no question."<sup>171</sup> This destroys my fantasy that she might have rubbed elbows with Scott, Marchessault, or Brossard. One thing is still true, however—she was a student of the celebrated Francophone feminist writer and critic Suzanne Lamy. Lamy, who was the author of books like *D'elles* and *Quand je lis, je m'invente*, tragically died of cancer in 1987. I know Lamy was Doucet's teacher because there was a retrospective

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<sup>171</sup> Julie Doucet in conversation with the author, September 13, 2023.

of Doucet's work in France after she won the Angoulême prize. In the exhibit, beside her old drawings and zines, is a college essay she wrote with penciled-in comments from Lamy. When I ask about her former teacher, Doucet's face lights up. "Suzanne was always smiling because she was always so happy to be there," she tells me.<sup>172</sup> She says Lamy was kind and thoughtful, encouraging her to make comics. Lamy's class was on feminist literature, and the students read authors such as Luce Irigaray, writers that the women in the network were also reading at that time. Thus, even if she was not always aware of it, Doucet was part of the same intertext woven from generations of female artists.

Ultimately, it matters less whether Doucet intentionally participated in a multilingual feminist art scene in Montreal, and more that she displays the characteristics of its members, such as living in-between and through languages and writing in a way that reflected this, translating her own writing and creating in three languages, including her Quebecois identity in her comics, and making work that encompassed many classic feminist and queer themes such as the body, sexuality, power struggles, and the subconscious. It's also clear from the number of contemporary artists influenced by her work (Juliette Collet, Simone Baumann, and Sara Herbert, to name a few) that she did contribute to a feminist auto-biographical/-fictional comics scene. Graphic novels are often overlooked in explorations of artistic and literary scenes, but I would argue that both parts, "graphic" and "novel" merit inclusion. Just because Doucet chose to make auto-fiction in comic form instead of

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<sup>172</sup>Julie Doucet in conversation with the author, September 13, 2023.

novels or plays does not mean that her work is any less meaningful or complex than those of the other women in the network. She is a product of the specific cultural, social, and political heritage of Quebec, and continues that legacy in her work today.

« Qu'est-ce que tu deviens? »

**Gail Scott**

“‘Bonjour, qu'est-ce que tu deviens?’ Kissing me warmly on both cheeks. French people always say that. What are you becoming?’”<sup>173</sup>

—Gail Scott, *Heroine*

*Gail Scott suggests we convene at a dive called Taverne du Pelican, not what I was expecting from a 78-year old woman. When I get there, it turns out to be a friendly neighborhood bar. I wouldn't exactly call it a dive, but they do have cheap drinks, free matchbooks, and a popcorn machine. I grab a bag of popcorn for us to share and sip my cider while Scott tells me about Montreal during the 1980s. She recognizes it as naïveté now, but at the time, she explains, “it really looked for a while like Quebec might secede and they would have a socialist utopia.”<sup>174</sup> I try to imagine this world, instead of the quasi-fascist CAQ state in power now. It feels impossible, but so did Francophone empowerment at the time, something that is taken for granted today.*

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<sup>173</sup> Gail Scott, *Heroine*, Toronto: Coach House Press, 1987, 101.

<sup>174</sup> Gail Scott in conversation with the author, Montreal, September 16, 2023.

*We are sitting outside, and the sweet smell of her wine is seducing guêpes over to our table. The guêpes have followed me everywhere in Montreal on this unseasonably warm fall, and I am terrified of getting stung. Scott, however, is unconcerned and laughs at my suggestion that we move away from them. She says she has never heard of a guêpe stinging anyone in Montreal. I watch the faces of the other people on the terrace as she says this. They are not convinced. I'm not either, but I don't want to be rude, so I stay on the terrace praying the guêpes will not sting me, trying to think of this as a performance exercise in sitting with discomfort, something Marina Abramović might've done in the 1980s.*

Like Doucet, Scott speaks English with French words sprinkled in—"following the piste" and so on. Her French has no doubt improved since the documentary *Les terribles vivantes/Firewords* (1986), where you can see her visibly struggling to speak with Brossard and Bersianik in French with a thick Anglophone accent. It's not that her French is bad, it's just that she doesn't yet have a good enough grasp on the language yet to speak rapidly (as Brossard and Bersianik do) about complex theoretical ideas like l'inédit and fiction théorique. This disorientation, or humbling, is an experience I relate to, and we talk about this feeling. We both believe there is something positive to be gained from placing yourself in uncomfortable situations (such as sitting at a table swarming with wasps) in order to destabilize your perceptions.

Scott tells me language is vital to her, and to Quebec.<sup>175</sup> The fight for independence, she explains, was really a fight about language. Everything here is about language. Living in Montreal, she says, forces people to pay attention to diction, and to visually assess people, making assumptions about which language to speak to address them in before they ever open their mouth—something that, as you might guess, often goes awry. She explains that Anglo-Canadians often can't take the mixture of languages and leave, but Americans handle it better. "Americans like you," she tells me with a smile.<sup>176</sup>

### **Breaking Language**

Scott's first and arguably most accessible novel, *Heroine*, was first published in 1987. The book is a kind of auto-fiction—a young woman's reflections on her relationships and travels through Montreal during a time of revolutionary upheaval. *Heroine* was critically well-received when it came out, except, Scott notes wryly, by a certain feminist Anglophone writer from Montreal whom she will not name. This woman claimed the book was "unreadable." She was in the minority however, and *Heroine* went on to become a cult classic, reissued by Coach House in 2019 with a new foreword by the poet Eileen Myles. The book is still popular in 2026 with groups like the Women on the Run Book Club in Montreal, who are hosting a Q+A and discussion with Scott about *Heroine* at Librairie St. Henri this coming September.

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<sup>175</sup> Gail Scott in conversation with the author, September 16, 2023.

<sup>176</sup> Gail Scott in conversation with the author, September 16, 2023.

In *Heroine*, Scott describes the province of Quebec at a time when sovereignty seemed like a genuine possibility. Montreal was very segregated, divided along language and class lines:

From the slums of St. Henri (mostly French) we raised our heads to look at the mansions climbing up Westmount Mountain (mostly English). Between the two, separating the oppressed from the oppressors, a huge chasm that the Canadian Pacific Railway trains run through...I said excitedly, leaning forward from the waist, and stretching my hand in a stagelike gesture: 'And there you have the history of Canada in a nutshell.'<sup>177</sup>

Like Doucet, Scott notes the extremity of daily prejudice experienced by Francophones after the Quiet Revolution and the push for independence that followed. She recalls working at her job for a Montreal newspaper, where she overheard male coworkers at the water cooler saying they were going to castrate the Francophones campaigning for independence. She was forced to hide her political views at work, remaining silent to avoid conflict. Privately, however, she was protesting for independence, learning French, and supporting the efforts of her Francophone friends.

Critics often place Scott's writing within Francophone traditions, such as Jane Rule in her review of Scott's book *Spare Parts*: "She has been influenced by Nicole Brossard and France Théoret, to whom this book is dedicated, and has more in common with these feminists and their counterparts in France..., than with English-Canadian writers Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, and Marian Engel."<sup>178</sup> This, of

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<sup>177</sup> Scott, *Heroine*, 124.

<sup>178</sup> Jane Rule, "Review of *Spare Parts*," *The Globe and Mail* (Toronto, Ont: May 15, 1982), E15. I would also like to note this is one of the few times in my research that the phrase "English-Canadian" has appeared. Although Anglo-Canadian, Anglophone, and English-Canadian exist as terms the most popular version is simply "Canadian," implying that English-Canadian is the norm.

course, comes as no shock to anyone who knows Scott; she aligns herself with these traditions on purpose, as an act of solidarity. This “breaking,” and the mixture of French and English is employed for political effect, as translation theorist Sherry Simon points out: “‘Scott ‘chooses to write in *one* mixed language that reflects her double consciousness.’”<sup>179</sup> Lines such as: “She’s mumbling to herself in English against the cacophony of French. Her words sound like a bad cartoon (looney tune, he thinks)” and “Now the jukebox is playing Willie Nelson in québécois” recall Simon’s constant feeling of being in translation, equated to madness (“looney tune”), similar to Régine Robin’s “schizophrenic city” and discord (“against the cacophony”).<sup>180</sup> The two languages, it seems, are at war (much like how Doucet describes her bilingual consciousness), and to live between them as the heroine requires fearlessness and constant code-switching. It’s as if she’s saying: here language gives up its façades. Here, language falls apart so that we can remake it anew.

Along with other New Narrative authors, Scott is interested in experimenting with ways to invent new structures on the page. In *Heroine* she writes, “Sometimes I even change the syntax because there’s a relationship between THEIR language and THEIR laws. You can’t have one without the other.”<sup>181</sup> She tells me her objective was to resist expectations of sentences, and ultimately to resist narrative itself.<sup>182</sup> This parallels Irigaray’s directive that women must “Overthrow syntax by suspending its

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<sup>179</sup> Sherry Simon, *Translating Montreal: Episodes in the Life of a Divided City*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 128; Emphasis in the original.

<sup>180</sup> Scott, *Heroine*, 159, 170.

<sup>181</sup> Scott, *Heroine*, 58-9.

<sup>182</sup> Gail Scott in conversation with the author, September 16, 2023.

eternally teleological order, by snipping the wires, cutting the current, breaking the circuits, switching the connections, by modifying continuity, alternation, frequency, intensity.”<sup>183</sup> I ask her why she replaces the word “and” with a “+” in her writing, and she explains that the idea was to make sentences more mathematical. This mathematical way of thinking about sentences reminds me of how the French experimental writing collective Oulipo conceives of writing. As Lamprini Papathanasi writes in their summary of the group, “Their main purpose was to investigate and explore how mathematics could benefit literature composition, experimenting with a new writing style and renewing the process of creation.”<sup>184</sup> Scott’s writing threads together elements of all these traditions—Quebécois avant-garde writing, *écriture féminine*(e), Oulipo, and New Narrative’s queer experimental writing.

*Back at the bar...*

*I am not sure exactly what I want to get out of this meeting with Scott. I suspect—even though I have been proven wrong almost every time (to the point that it feels somewhat childish)—that when I meet an author I admire we will develop a close correspondence or friendship. I want the kind of intellectual email exchange between*

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<sup>183</sup>Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, tr. Gillian Gill. (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1985), 142.

<sup>184</sup> Lamprini Papathanasi, “OuLiPo: Mathematics in Literature,” *Arcadia*, (June 19, 2022), <https://www.byarcadia.org/post/oulipo-mathematics-in-literature>.

*Kathy Acker and Mackenzie Wark that became I'm Very into You (2015). Well, they also had sex, so maybe not exactly that kind. Scott's emails to me are detailed and friendly, but she is not interested in long conversations, and I can't help but feel a bit disappointed. I am writing about friendships that sustained these women for years, that irrevocably changed the paths of their writing and theoretical work. Scott has said as much in interviews: "I would not be the writer I am today, had I not been involved with La Théorie, un dimanche.. [the meetings] taught me so much about writing, generosity, and solidarity."<sup>185</sup> I am writing about this precisely because I lack those relationships in my own life. I do not have a local community of other queer, female, and non-binary writers I can turn to for advice or inspiration. Instead of telling me the magic solution, Scott turns the tables and asks me how to find community in today's world; she claims to find it as hard as I do. I don't have any answers for her, and I think she's disappointed by this, just as I was disappointed by her. Scott is not the feminist savior or mentor I envisioned when I contacted her. Still, sometimes it's good to have one's expectations challenged.*

*She is teaching me, I think, something about sitting with discomfort. Heroine ends with the ambiguous sentence fragment:*

*She—*

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<sup>185</sup> Gail Scott interview with H. Felix Chau Bradley. "Gathering Language." *The Montreal Review of Books*, July 2021, <https://mtlreviewofbooks.ca/reviews/permanent-revolution/>.

*Scott herself is like that. She interested in abandoning the happy ending, the closed parenthesis ( the period .*

*+ greeting the unexpected with open arms*

## **Tu Crées ou Tu Crèves**

**Jovette Marchessault**

“[J]e voudrais retrouver une langue oubliée, une langue de fête, une langue pour nous célébrer, une langue pour nous aimer.”<sup>186</sup>

—Jovette Marchessault in *Femmes et Littérature*

*At first, all we see are barn animals. A white duck, some chickens milling about. Slowly, the camera pans back until we see a woman standing amongst the animals, sunflowers and a farmhouse behind her. She is tan, tall, butch, with short cropped hair, wearing a white vest over her red-striped shirt and blue pants, along with Indigenous jewelry. She begins talking to us about her work, about growing up poor, being self-taught, about her love of animals, her grandmother, and what she calls her “femmes telluriques.” In the next frame we see that she is now seated at a picnic*

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<sup>186</sup> Jean Royer, *Femmes et littérature : entretiens sur la création*, (Montréal: Édition de l'Hexagone, 1990), 91; Translation: I want to recover a forgotten language, a festive language, a language to celebrate ourselves, a language to love ourselves.

*table, surrounded by a turquoise mug, a pinecone, pen and paper, and a seashell. Later, she is hard at work on her typewriter, her bookshelves lined with fresh tomatoes and bird feathers. On her writing desk, her raw materials: a copy of Anaïs Nin's journal, a bumper sticker that says "Sappho," the skull of an unknown animal. Next, she is back outside gardening, kneeling in the dirt picking lettuces. The film gives us the sense that this, too, is writing. For Marchessault, art is a holistic belief system integrated into every aspect of her life, and everything we see her do—flying a kite, petting a calico cat, feeding apples to a horse, watching the sun set—is a part of her art practice.<sup>187</sup>*

Like Scott, Marchessault is a Quebecoise writer experiencing a renaissance. In February 2024, Librairie L'Eugélonne offered a series of events centered around the reissue of her *Lesbian Triptych* series by University of Montreal Press. Unfortunately, Marchessault passed away in 2012, and I never got the opportunity to speak with her. I have tried my best through interviews, videos, and her writing, to reconstruct an image of Marchessault that encompasses all of her different sides and the important contributions she made to the Montreal feminist lesbian network.

Marchessault was prolific, and her body of work incredibly varied: in addition to writing novels and plays, she made sculptures, masks, and paintings too numerous to do justice to here. There was almost no subject her writing did not touch—nature, the cosmos, aliens, animals, lesbianism, spirituality, history, Catholicism, vampires.

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<sup>187</sup>This scene is based on Dorothy Hénault's 1986 documentary, *Firewords*.

In short, she was someone who managed a delicate balance of making art that challenged institutions while still managing to receive validation from institutions like the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec. An outsider, but a celebrated one. Like Brossard, she drew inspiration from the state of California and Americans like Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, as well as the Canadian writers Gabrielle Roy and Anne Hébert, painter Emily Carr, and French literary figures like Violette Leduc, Simone de Beauvoir, Anaïs Nin, and Jean Genet.

Though Marchessault was not a participant in the La Théorie group or a contributor to *Tessera*, she was still involved socially with the women behind them. For example, she writes about attending the Women's Salon in New York accompanied by three members of the La Théorie group—Théoret, Cotnoir, and Scott.<sup>188</sup> She was also actively involved with alternatives to La Théorie and *Tessera*. In *Saga of the Wet Hens* she writes about drawing inspiration from literary salons, especially those in France and America. Her work was performed at an interdisciplinary salon, as feminist art critic Gloria Orenstein recalls, “Another inter-arts salon that I remember fondly was a salon we gave for Jovette Marchessault...we brought together literature, theatre, and art on an international scale.”<sup>189</sup> These gatherings and female connections were especially important to Marchessault as an antidote to the dangers of isolation. She writes of the, “Isolation that devours the imagination. The isolation that has killed so many women writers.”<sup>190</sup> For

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<sup>188</sup> Jovette Marchessault, *Saga of the Wet Hens: A Play*. (Talonbooks, 1983), 7-8.

<sup>189</sup> Jill Fields, “Re-Centering: Theory and Practice.” *Entering the Picture*, (Routledge, 2012), 191.

<sup>190</sup> Marchessault, *Saga of the Wet Hens*, 5.

Marchessault, this is a life or death issue, and she frequently mentions feeling suicidal or being saved by her relationships with women, be they in literature or in person. In her monologue, *A Lesbian Chronicle From Medieval Quebec*, the character explains, “the women gave me sanctuary and nourishment as though I was their equal. I read, like a starving person, all the books they lent me. I discovered the world and I reconciled myself with language, painting, and sculpture.”<sup>191</sup> The bodily urgency here is palpable; she is starving, lacking nourishment. Marchessault would often use terms like thirst and hunger to underscore her physical need for connection with women and to create art. Satiety, for her, could only be achieved through community, love, and artistic expression.

### **L’intertexte**

More than any other member of the network, Marchessault appreciated the feminist intertext—she reveled in creating a dialogue with female historical figures. She identified with many forgotten women, sometimes to a point where the line between self and other was blurred. For instance, Marchessault’s relationship with Violette Leduc is more than a mere gesture of sisterly solidarity. She states in an interview, “Et si tu me demandais qui est Violette Leduc je te dirai que c’est moi,” “Je l’admire et je me sens proche d’elle,” “Parfois, quand j’écoute le texte de la pièce, je ne sais plus si c’est d’elle ou de moi.”<sup>192</sup> This last quote, about being unable to differentiate

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<sup>191</sup> Susan G. Cole, *Outspoken : A Canadian Collection of Lesbian Scenes and Monologues*. (Playwrights Canada Press: 2009), 32.

<sup>192</sup> Royer, 91-93.

between Leduc and herself, suggests the destabilization of her own identity as part of her quest to find acceptance with other writers. We can gather, then, that in the attributes Marchessault provides about Leduc in the promotional materials for her play *La terre est trop courte*, many could equally apply to herself: “femme laide, bâtarde, obsédée sexuelle, voyeuse, sado-masochiste, paranoïaque, pleureuse chronique, assoiffée de luxe” [ugly woman, bastard girl, sexually obsessed, voyeur, sado-masochist, paranoid, chronic crier, thirsty for luxury].<sup>193</sup>

Leduc also shows up in Marchessault’s play *Anaïs, dans la queue de la comète*: “Connaissez-vous l’œuvre de Violette Leduc? Jadis sa mort m’a frappé en plein cœur... Parce qu’elle a osé ouvertement parler de la sexualité, les critiques l’ont réduite en poussière ou ignorée” [Are you familiar with the works of Violette Leduc? Her death long ago hit me hard...Because she dared to openly speak about sexuality, critics either reduced her to nothing or ignored her].<sup>194</sup> Marchessault mentions many other female and queer writers in *Anaïs*, including Sappho, Anna Kavan, Carson McCullers, Virginia Woolfe, and Djuna Barnes, but *Anaïs* is the only writer who serves as a character in the play.

One strategy Marchessault particularly liked to employ with the intertext was lifting certain passages straight from her collaborators, allowing them to “speak.” For example, in *Anaïs*, she reproduces unaltered excerpts from *Anaïs*’ diaries. This was

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<sup>193</sup> Promotional flyer for *La Terre est trop courte*, *Violette Leduc* by Jovette Marchessault. Théâtrothèque, University of Montreal, Jovette Marchessault Collection. *La Terre est trop courte*, *Violette Leduc* ; Centre du Théâtre d’Aujourd’hui (CTDA), 1992.

<sup>194</sup> Marchessault, *Anaïs*, 18.

not Kathy Acker's plagiarism as the feminist appropriation of male works, but rather intended to be a tribute. Unlike Acker's works, all of the borrowed passages are properly attributed, carefully cited at the end of the play. In light of the permeable barrier Marchessault saw between herself and these women, she may have not even thought of it as using their work, but rather as an extension of her own writing. Critics generally appreciated this strategy, as in this review of *Anaïs*:

People, places and events pass before us in profusion but the play's constant center is Anaïs writing her Journal. For Nin, the Journal is an inner voyage, an ecstatic sexual experience, an act of defiance against men, a quest for knowledge and illumination...*Anaïs, dans la queue de la [comète]* is a beautifully written play, a lyrical tribute to Nin's spirit and to her writing. It is also a daring work in its form, language and subject.<sup>195</sup>

Marchessault also threads herself into *l'intertexte* by reproducing personal epistolary exchanges in her plays, such as those between her and the writer Gloria Orenstein. These exchanges provide the audience with an intimate look into her interior world, while also making the crude material of her life into art.

### **Langue/ language / gender/ genre**

Although Marchessault was not a translator and mainly wrote in one language (French), language politics in Quebec still shaped her writing. In *Saga of the Wet Hens*, she makes the astute and still-relevant observation that in Quebecois French, "the obsession with purity had created a language that was shrinking from within."<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup>Jane Moss, "Anaïs, Dans La Queue de La Comète." *The French Review* 60, no. 5, (American Association of Teachers of French, 1987), 729.

<sup>196</sup> Marchessault, *Saga of the Wet Hens*, 8.

In the *Anaïs* tableau titled “PUBLISH OR PERISH,” there is a scene where Otto Rank begs Anaïs to retranslate his books, complaining about the poor quality of their French translations (“ils ont été traduits de l’allemand mais si mal, si grossièrement...”).<sup>197</sup> She refuses, saying she needs to focus on her own work. This rebuttal fits with more antiquated views of translation, that the act is not creative or art within itself, and that a writer will not find it satisfying. Yet overall, Marchessault definitely appreciated the art of translation—she dedicated *Anaïs* to Linda Gaboriau, who was, among other things, the English language translator of her books *Saga of Wet Hens* and *The Magnificent Voyage of Emily Carr*, and like Brossard, she worked closely with her English translators.

Throughout *Anaïs*, Marchessault transgresses linguistic barriers in order to upset gender norms. In the heat of passion, June Miller exclaims to Anaïs: “Je veux te faire un enfant!”<sup>198</sup> This phrase is carefully constructed; instead of June saying she wants to have sex with Anaïs or make love to her, she reappropriates the masculine expression about putting a baby in someone. In doing so, Marchessault queers the phrase, resisting traditional expectations of who can initiate reproductive sex. There is also some interesting queering involving gender in the tableau “Conversation Avec les Mouches,” where Nin’s mother appears, embodied as Antonin Artaud. Artaud is dressed as a woman, sporting traditional Spanish female funeral garments. The text makes clear that this is not simply drag by referring to Artaud as “elle,” implying that

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<sup>197</sup> Marchessault, *Anaïs*, 102.

<sup>198</sup> Marchessault, *Anaïs*, 64.

there has been a complete transformation. The stage directions tell the reader that Artaud is female with pronouns and feminine gender agreement such as “Méprisante,” “elle rit,” and “elle ferme les yeux.”<sup>199</sup> Anaïs, according to the stage directions, understands Artaud as her mother, indicated in phrases such as “toujours sans la regarder.”<sup>200</sup> In the next scene, June takes on the role of Otto Rank and serves as Anaïs’ psychoanalyst. Like Artaud, she is cross-dressing, wearing a man’s suit. However, interestingly, June is still referred to in stage directions as “elle,”; here the transformation is not complete. There are several possible explanations for this difference: perhaps because Anaïs and June are much closer, Anaïs is still able to sense something of her true nature. Perhaps there is something about June’s character that resists masculinity. Perhaps Marchessault is indicating a kind of reverse penis envy here—men want to be women more intensely than women want to be men. Whatever the reason, Marchessault, like Scott, was interested in feminist experiments with language, and using pronouns and agreement to rewrite the French language’s patriarchal rules.

Marchessault is a writer whose work feels, to me, at once both far ahead and far behind her own time. Far ahead because much of it was visionary and advanced beyond what most playwrights in Montreal were doing at the time in terms of her use of language, sexuality, and satire. Far behind because she was very interested in the historical intertext and thinking about her ancestors—literary and otherwise. She was

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<sup>199</sup>Marchessault, *Anaïs*, 152, 151, 154.

<sup>200</sup>Marchessault, *Anaïs*, 151.

interested in ancient ways of being and the beginnings of our universe—not a topic many writers today have taken up. By adding in real historical figures to her plays she manages to give them what Walter Benjamin would call afterlives. Her stories are retellings and translations about the lives of other maligned and marginalized women. She lets them speak for themselves, yet also speaks with and through them by emphasizing and complementing their voices. Leduc and Nin represent for her, she tells us, different parts of herself, of her essence. The slippage she experiences between bodies, genders, and time is part of a radical language act that transcends the writing on the page.

## **Conclusion**

Doucet, Scott, and Marchessault are only a few of the dozens of women who made up the Montreal lesbian feminist network. Their art is linked through a number of common attributes—wordplay, genderbending, linguistic experiments informed by Quebecois culture, and an interest in visual art. The women all drew on real experiences to make their art but ended up ultimately crafting feminist fictions. At the same time, of course, Doucet, Scott, and Marchessault, are very distinct from one another. I wonder what Marchessault would make of Doucet's cartoon women with penises and talking hot dogs, and how Doucet would react to watching one of Marchessault's cosmic, psychedelic plays. I like to picture all of these women sitting around Brossard's table, enjoying each other's company, appreciating their unique Montreals.

Brossard was undeniably the heart of this network, the originator and instigator of many of its most important literary contributions. There's a saying about the American art rock band the Velvet Underground—everyone who bought one of their records went out and started making music. I would posit the same is true for Brossard; all the women who heard her speak, bought her books, read her work in translation, or participated in her salons were inspired to go out and create their own art. Whether they are aware of it or not, Brossard's legacy connects to almost all feminist artists in Montreal. I hope I've shown a fraction of the kinds of work they created in this chapter, and demonstrated they were not, as translators are often accused of being, copycats. Rather, expanding on Brossard's ideas, they forged ahead with their own interpretations of what it meant to be a woman, a mother, a lesbian. Since Brossard is a central locus of a network, she is the sole subject of my final chapter. For now though, I wish to end on this fictive image of Doucet, Scott, and Marchessault breaking bread together. Three fearless, talented creators. This chapter is my toast to them.

### **Chapter Three- Beyond the Herizon: Nicole Brossard and Inter/national Feminist Solidarity**

*Écrire je suis une femme* est plein de conséquences.

—Nicole Brossard, *L'amèr ou Le chapitre effrité*<sup>201</sup>

je veux écrire  
comme Brossard, comme Marchessault,  
comme Wittig, comme Lorde  
je veux être une lesbienne d'écriture.

—Marie-Claude Garneau, *Sappho*<sup>202</sup>

*You are dreaming. When you open your eyes, you are far away from the freezing streets of Montreal, around 2,500 miles southwest. You realize that you are stranded on the side of the road in the Arizona desert. It's admittedly a strange place to begin a narrative that will eventually lead back to Montreal, but it is where our story originates, the source of everything for you as a reader and myself as the author of this text. The desert sky is a light purple, signaling the end of the day colliding with the cool night. The color at the edge of the sky is hard to name... lilac...? lavender? No, the word finally comes to you: mauve.*

*It's warmer than Canada, but a cool wind blows swirls of dust along the road. All around you are gigantic rock formations and tall saguaros cloaked in shadow.*

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<sup>201</sup> Nicole Brossard, *L'amèr ou le chapitre effrité*, Montréal: l'Hexagone, 1988, 53.

<sup>202</sup> Marie-Claude Garneau postface to *Sappho* by Marie-Ève Milot et Marie-Claude St-Laurent, Montréal: Éditions Remue-Ménage, 2022, 31.

*Suddenly, you hear a noise. There's something approaching in the distance. As it comes nearer, you make out the shape of a car. Up close, you can see it's a sleek white Ford Meteor with a convertible top. At the wheel is a fifteen year-old girl named Mélanie. She is drinking Coke out of a glass bottle and smoking a cigarette. Wordlessly, she motions for you to get in. You're hesitant, but you see it's about to be pitch black out here, and you don't want to be alone with the coyotes and mountain lions and who knows what else. Moreover, if you don't get in, there's no story. There must be movement, or the narrative will die here, in the desert. So you open the door and sit down. Before you even have time to buckle your seatbelt, Mélanie presses down hard on the gas. You take off at full speed towards the melting horizon.*

*From the highway, you can make out the glowing, dusty neon lights of a motel. Mélanie pulls into the parking lot and comes to an abrupt stop. The sign reads: Red Arrow Motel. You take note of two prickly pear cacti and an agave plant serving as decoration, as well as a bar and a swimming pool to one side. It's not exactly a trendy vacation spot, this place. You'd have to know it was here as it's off the beaten path.*

*"Watch out for Longman," Mélanie warns you, and you're not sure what she means. "Who is Longman?" you try to ask, but when you turn around, you see that she has vanished. You're left alone in the parking lot, unsure what to do. But then the door to the front office opens, and a woman steps outside to greet you. She is older, with short brown hair and glasses. She looks familiar—you recognize her from the*

*previous chapter, from the gatherings at her house. Her name is Nicole Brossard. She invites you inside her motel. There's not a lot of time, and she has so much to tell you.*

### **Snow to desert sands: the making of Nicole Brossard**

Nicole Brossard was born into a French-Canadian family in 1943. From the outset, she was a rebellious child, or as she puts it rather humorously in *Fluid Arguments*: “I introduced myself to this world irreverently, that is, ass first.”<sup>203</sup> She grew up on Rue Garnier in the Notre Dame de Grace neighborhood of Montreal, though she has lived in the wealthy Francophone suburb of Outremont now for decades.<sup>204</sup> Brossard’s mother was susceptible to much of the propaganda at the time; she valorized Anglophones, and considered speaking English to be an important part of progressing in social status. This attitude was evident in the rest of the family as well; her husband worked as an accountant for an English-speaking collection agency.<sup>205</sup> While her sister accepted her parents’ beliefs about language, Brossard rejected them, remaining proud of her French roots. She also rejected the rules of the Catholic church at the time: “Social life was structured around the religious calendar. Pleasure led directly to hell,” although she did think some of the nuns at her school were cute.<sup>206</sup> The Quiet Revolution would prove meaningful for the province but also for Brossard’s life, allowing her to experience a more liberated adolescence in Montreal. As mentioned

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<sup>203</sup> Brossard, Wheeler, and Rudy, *Fluid Arguments*, 119.

<sup>204</sup> Coincidentally, the other end of Rue Garnier in the Plateau was where I stayed during one of my many research trips to Montreal.

<sup>205</sup> Brossard, Wheeler, and Rudy, 121.

<sup>206</sup> Brossard, Wheeler, and Rudy, 119.

in the previous chapter, although she had always been aware of her same-sex desire, she married a man, Robert Soubliere, in 1966 and gave birth to a daughter named Julie, before ultimately divorcing him and coming out as a lesbian. Her life path both mirrored and nurtured the development of the lesbian feminist network in Montreal; she was an early adopter of centering women, language, community, and art in her life, and she also assisted many women in having their own breakthroughs with her literary salons and through her writing. I believe it was her ability to describe what she called l'inédit that led to her early success. Because of her background as a poet and her fixation on language and translation, she was able to put words to feelings that many women at the time were having, but did not know how to express. She tapped into a larger political consciousness, but was always insistent that this consciousness could not be separated from art.

Brossard's first poetry collection, *Aube à la saison*, was published in 1965, around the same time she also co-founded the literary journal, *La Barre du jour*. She became one of Quebec's most prolific authors, and went on to publish over 40 works in different genres including essay, poetry, prose, and theater (and is still publishing new work today). She is the winner of many prestigious prizes, including the Governor General's Award for Poetry and the Prix Athanase-David, and so respected in Canada her name is sometimes used as an adjective: Brossardian.<sup>207</sup> Her work has been translated into French, Spanish, German, English, and others. She appears at

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<sup>207</sup> Mary Meriam, "Nicole Brossard: Interview with the Lesbian-Feminist French Canadian Poet," *Ms. Magazine*, March 12, 2013.

international literary festivals and conferences all over the world, including Europe and South America. In the United States, however, she is not well known compared to other Canadian feminist authors such as Atwood or Scott. The lack of knowledge might be related to the difficulty of her texts, which are extremely demanding of the reader, but it is more likely due to the fact that she is a Francophone writer. While Canadians were reading American texts in translation or translating and distributing them on their own, American feminists often only read in English. Canadian and British texts circulated amongst them, and French in translation such as de Beauvoir and Cixous, but French Canadian texts were not a priority, or even an interest for many. Brossard did have intellectual relationships with many American women and women on both sides crossed the border to expand their communities, but her contributions to North American feminism have not been credited enough on the U.S. side. Working on my dissertation, most Americans I met had never heard of Brossard, and if they had, it was because they had some special connection to Canada or grew up near the border, in Detroit. It's a shame her writing hasn't become more popular in the United States, because her enthusiasm for translation is directly relevant to America. Like Canada, America is a land made up of Indigenous languages, immigrant languages, and languages of the Californian and Texan borders, like Spanish, or the new Spanglish dialect of Miami. Our national linguistic texture is complex and ever-evolving, and while Chicana feminists like Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrie Moraga directed attention to this, it should be more at the forefront of

feminist and queer discourse. As we will see later, language was a central piece of gender debates in the United States during the 1980s and 90s.

Originally published in 1987 and then republished in English by Coach House Press in 1991, *Le désert mauve* is considered to be both Brossard's most popular and most accessible work. Thus, it makes sense that this text was my personal entry point into her oeuvre and into the Montreal lesbian feminist network as a whole. Though it does not have much of a plot to speak of, *Le désert mauve* is a meta novel, a stunning matryoshka doll of a book with layers of stories nestled inside stories. To read Brossard is in many ways similar to encountering the asymptote (often used as a symbol of translation); she is always circling something, approaching but never quite touching the object of her writing. She is tracing the edges of a form that is never fully revealed, and this mystery has made her work compelling to millions of fans throughout the world. *Le désert mauve* is written as a triptych, a popular form for Montreal authors of the time, especially female ones. In the 1950s and 60s, the three part structure was often favored by Quebecois writers.<sup>208</sup> The form was then later playfully appropriated by many feminist authors, such as Jovette Marchessault's *Tryptique lesbien* (Les éditions de la pleine lune, 1980) and Louky Bersianik's sci-fi classic *L'Euguélionne: roman triptyque* (La Presse, 1976). Where once symbolically the three pieces might have stood in for the Catholic Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, they grew to signify (for Marchessault in particular) the Neopagan

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<sup>208</sup> See: Gabrielle Roy, *La Petite Poule d'Eau* (1950) and *La Montagne secrète* (1961), Anne Hébert, *Les Chambres de bois* (1958).

Maid, Mother, and Crone. In the first section of *Mauve Desert*, we have Laure Angstelle's novella about a teenage girl named Mélanie whose mother, Kathy Kerouac, works at the Red Arrow Motel in the Arizona desert with her lover, Lorna Myher. Mélanie spends her time driving her mother's Meteor around, reflecting on civilization, reality, desire, and other weighty, abstract concepts. At one point she mentions traveling to New Mexico to visit her cousin Grazie, but this journey is not her main goal or purpose in driving. Eventually she returns to the Red Arrow Motel, where an unexpected tragedy occurs. A geologist staying at the motel, Angela Parkins, is shot and killed by a mysterious visitor named Longman, who bears many similarities to J. Robert Oppenheimer. The reader cannot attribute this murder definitively to homophobia, as Brossard has subtly constructed a world where almost everyone is queer or queer coded, including Angela Parkins, Kathy, Lorna, Mélanie, and even Longman, who seems to harbor a repressed homosexuality.<sup>209</sup>

The second part of the narrative is centered around a Quebecoise translator from Montreal named Maude Laures who becomes obsessed with translating Mélanie's (and Angstelle's) story, presumably from French into English, an act the reader is asked to imagine because the entire book is written solely in French. As Alice Parker observes, because of this, "there is neither an original nor a target language."<sup>210</sup> The second section of the novel, "A Book to Translate" consists of

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<sup>209</sup> "Longman... would have liked to touch that other body, caress its powerful torso, thighs, hard buttocks... Yes, wrestling body-to-body with other men would have been intoxicating" Brossard, *Mauve Desert*, Toronto: Coach House, 1991, 35.

<sup>210</sup> Alice Parker, "The Mauve Horizon of Nicole Brossard," *Quebec Studies* 10, (1990), 110.

Laures' translator notes on all the characters and places in the book. The title's directive "to translate" lets the reader know that the book will be translated, must be translated. The last section of the book is titled "Mauve, the horizon" and is composed of Laures' new "translation" of the text. Through the triptych form, the reader is encouraged to be an active participant in meaning-making, able to compare the source and target texts, as Laures' changes to the narrative are elucidated. The reader is organically invited to revisit earlier passages from the text and see how they do or do not fit with their translations. *Le désert mauve* is not a translation itself, but rather a literary simulation of the experience. The result is a complex meditation on the intricacies of translation and language, and our (in)ability to understand one another.

### **In the Desert of Grief**

Nous sommes dans le désert où la mort rôde indéniablement.

—Nicole Brossard, Mauve Motel website<sup>211</sup>

While the primary context for *Mauve Desert* is the rich history of Quebecoise feminist organizing, language politics, and the need to articulate lesbian desire on the

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<sup>211</sup> Simon Dumas and Nicole Brossard. "La beauté, la nuit, écran, corps, tatouages," *The Parallel Universes of the Mauve Motel: Some Epistolary Exchanges between Simon Dumas and Nicole Brossard*, A Rhizome Publication, 2016, <https://mauvemotel.net/103a/>.

page, there is also a much simpler explanation behind the text: a daughter's grief. Though rarely discussed in reviews and criticism surrounding the text, Brossard has stated that the book was initially prompted by the sudden death of her father from a heart attack in 1982.<sup>212</sup> Even though she prioritized filling her life with other women, Brossard was very close to her father, and his death had a huge impact on her work: "The opening line of Nicole Brossard's *Domaine d'écriture* speaks of the effect of her father's death on her writing: 'Rien ne pouvait plus s'écrire' [Nothing could be written anymore]."<sup>213</sup> She experienced a prolonged period of depression so intense that she was sure she would never write again. But what she thought was the end of her career would actually become the inspiration for her most celebrated work. She writes, "I lived in a state of unspeakable sadness... Somewhere in me fear, heat, and thirst were preparing the setting for *Mauve Desert*."<sup>214</sup> Fear, heat, and thirst show up prominently in *Mauve Desert*, itself a story implicitly and explicitly about death ("memories for digging into words without defiling graves," "Horizontally, the book resembled a tombstone").<sup>215</sup> While the dissociation she describes enabled Brossard to get through one of the darkest periods of her life, eventually, the way back to writing and to breaking out of her isolation was to work collectively with other women in her life and in the network. For her, this reconnection came in the form of a passion for translation.

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<sup>212</sup> Brossard, Wheeler, and Rudy, 140.

<sup>213</sup> Karen McPherson, *Archaeologies of an Uncertain Future : Recent Generations of Canadian Women Writing*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 33.

<sup>214</sup> Brossard, Wheeler, and Rudy, 140.

<sup>215</sup> Brossard, *Mauve Desert*, 46, 51.

Brossard's growing interest in translation as a political practice coincided with the period in which she was first mourning the loss of her father. On the one hand, this interest in translation can be thought of as a distraction from grief, but equally, as a direct response to it. Grief often alienates the person who has lost someone, and forces them to "translate" their emotions for others in order to try and be understood. As poet James Crews writes in his book *Turning toward Grief: Reflections on Life, Loss, and Appreciation*, "Because of its textured, complex nature, there is something about grief that can't be captured by everyday language."<sup>216</sup> Grief and depression, as Thérèse Renaud reminds us, are often by nature, untranslatable affects. Brossard's task (her translator's task, if you will), was to move from an experience that defied language toward something she could put down on paper for others. There was also a shift from her feelings of numbness and disassociation ("for four years I was unable to comprehend what was happening to me. I remember a panel discussion in Quebec City where my texts were being discussed. I remember getting up twenty times to splash cold water on my face") towards a more embodied sense of self.<sup>217</sup> This led Brossard to develop an understanding of translation as a profoundly embodied process rather than a solely mental one, echoing others who were writing feminist translation theory.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> James Crews, *Turning toward Grief: Reflections on Life, Loss, and Appreciation*, Broadleaf Books, 2026, 2-3.

<sup>217</sup> Brossard, Wheeler, and Rudy, 140.

<sup>218</sup> This is not to say that Brossard was the originator of embodied translation as a practice or theory, but that she differentiated herself from many translation theorists of the time by taking this position. As we will see later, this resulted in an understanding of translation focused on the sensual and erotic.

During the time when Brossard started hosting the La Théorie salons at her home, many other women in the network were also thinking about the politics of language and translation. She states in an interview: “my fascination for translation and for being someone else in another language, has been there or been shaped mostly around the early 1980s. Especially if I think that I started writing *Mauve Desert* in 1983-84.”<sup>219</sup> The salons offered an opportunity to connect with other feminists and think through the theoretical concepts that provided the basis of her novel and several *Tessera* articles. For Brossard, the experience of being a translated author also drove her curiosity and respect for the process. In a French interview, she notes, “J’ai beaucoup regardé travailler mes traductrices, et j’étais intéressée par les paragraphes soulignés de différentes couleurs, les notes dans les marges. Il y a donc le passage d’une langue à l’autre, mais aussi le fait que notre identité se construit avec la langue, quelle que soit notre expérience.”<sup>220</sup> Living in a multilingual city like Montreal, coupled with her strong connections to translators like Godard and Anglophones like Scott, resulted in a lifelong entanglement with the theory and practice of translation. Her personal quest to better understand translation ran parallel to a shift in national attitudes towards translation at this time. Translation studies as a discipline was beginning to be taken more seriously, thanks to the Canadian school of translation, which involved writers and thinkers including Luise Von Flotow, Sherry

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<sup>219</sup>Jonathan Ball, “‘The Landscape of Possible Thoughts’: An Interview with Nicole Brossard.” *Writing the Wrong Way*, Sept. 25, 2007, <https://www.jonathanball.com/nicole-brossard-the-idea-of-a-landscape-interview/>.

<sup>220</sup> Josée Lapointe, “Nicole Brossard en sept questions,” *La Presse*, 18 nov. 2010, <https://www.lapresse.ca/arts/livres/201011/18/01-4343837-nicole-brossard-en-sept-questions.php>.

Simon, and Barbara Godard who were exploring the various strategies of feminist translators in Canada, and theorizing translation as a unique form of reading and writing. Brossard was doing much the same thing as these practitioners, except in fiction. As a writer of fiction, she was able to achieve what many of these theorists could not—she made translation come alive in exciting ways that made the book so beloved by readers. In keeping with the ideals of the network, she was able to achieve outside the domains of academia, with a book written in plain, if mysterious, language.

### **To fly in the language**

*Mauve Desert* is all about translation, which is to say, all about language. Drawing on Lucy Ives' definition of the "weak" novel, the book, "indicates, toys with, mocks, anxiously dissects, or otherwise explores language itself and the problems of literary form."<sup>221</sup> From the first sentence, "the desert is indescribable" (which also appears on the final page) to the very last, "I cannot get close to any you," Brossard highlights the large, potentially unbridgeable gap between language and personal experience. Man-made language in particular, Brossard argues, fails to describe women's realities, which necessitates the creation of new language. And although she gives us possible alternatives (such as *auther* in the English version), a major theme in *Mauve Desert* is the consistent failure of language and ultimately of translation to portray

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<sup>221</sup>Lucy Ives, "The Weak Novel: an inappropriate, indispensable form," *The Baffler*, November 30, 2022, <https://thebaffler.com/latest/the-weak-novel-ives>.

another's reality, and even to portray one's own reality. Feminist neologisms may help, but they are not enough to overcome the structural problems of language itself. Mélanie's final phrase, "I cannot get close to any you" holds the reader at arms length, acknowledging a separation that cannot be overcome. The "you" she refers to is ambiguous. It could be Angela Parkins, who passed away in the preceding paragraph, making it impossible for anyone alive to remain close to her. Equally, "you" can and must mean the reader. In the French original, the sentence is "Je ne peux tutoyer personne." Appropriately, it is a difficult sentence to translate into English, making use of the French verb "tutoyer" which has no true English equivalent. Tutoyer refers to the ability of a speaker to use the informal "tu" pronoun, meaning you, in French, as opposed to the formal "vous" form. To address someone using "tu" is usually a linguistic means to be close to that person, and thus De Lotbinière-Harwood's translation of "close to any you" fits.<sup>222</sup> Brossard's preoccupation with language is evident in her specific word choices, and De Lotbinière-Harwood has tried hard to retain this specificity in the English translation.

The car's movement serves as the text's principal metaphor for translation, carrying Mélanie across the desert, the same way that Maude "carries" her story into another language. Francophone cultural scholar Chris Reyns-Chikuma's statement about Virginie Desportes' road-trip novel, *Apocalypse bébé*, could equally apply to *Mauve Desert*: "Cette traversée géographique et socio-spatiale implique aussi une

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<sup>222</sup> However, it's worth noting that in modern times, specifically in Quebec and Montreal, the use of the informal "tu" is much more widespread and no longer solely used to indicate familiarity, unlike in France.

traversée des langues.” [This socio-spatial and geographic crossing also implies a crossing of languages].<sup>223</sup> The geographic crossings in *Mauve Desert* at first appear to be minimal; a journey across one or two neighboring states in America, all of which initially present themselves as monolingual and favor English. But upon closer observation, two sections of the story take place in the United States, and one takes place in Quebec. The result is that, “The two protagonists of Le désert mauve, Mélanie and Maude, depict a transnational encounter between Anglophone North America and Francophone Québec.”<sup>224</sup> Mélanie already constitutes a crosscultural encounter by herself, a kind of origin ouroboros. Her last name is Kerouac, Brossard making an explicit reference to the writer Jack Kerouac who has Quebecois heritage, yet who is also firmly rooted in the literature and culture of the United States. We know Mélanie is not solely American because the accent aigu creating the “é” in her name also marks her as French speaking, or at least French-named. Brossard merges elements of Quebecois and American culture operating simultaneously in her identity.

Some have read this cultural crossing as a sign of Brossard’s anxiety about American culture and terms “invading” Quebec. The fear of cultural creep is a historic and common one within Quebec, especially amongst older and more conservative Francophones. According to Alice Parker, it’s also a fear that Brossard reportedly shared.<sup>225</sup> In the late 1800s and early 1900s, “Nationalist intellectuals

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<sup>223</sup> Chris Reyns-Chikuma, “Traversées des genres avec frictions et fusions dans Apocalypse bébé de Virginie Despentes”, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 17: 5 (2013), 552.

<sup>224</sup> Doris Eibl and Caroline Rosenthal, eds., *Space and Gender: Spaces of Difference in Canadian Women's Writing / Espaces de différence dans l'écriture canadienne au féminin*, Austria: Innsbruck University Press, 2009, 188.

<sup>225</sup> Alice Parker, “The Mauve Horizon of Nicole Brossard,” *Quebec Studies* 10, (1990), 111;

believed that French Canadian distinctiveness was threatened by the United States, and Americanization was a major issue of concern in Quebec...Americanization, it was argued, was a sly form of assimilation precisely because it relied on seemingly benign (i.e. cultural) means of propagation.”<sup>226</sup> Not much has changed in the public opinion since then, although it is a battle French-Canadians appear to have lost. Americanizations such as “checker” and “c’est le fun” are commonly used by Montreal youth, although in reality, these are not adoptions of Americanisms whole cloth, but rather *adaptations* into Franglais, much as Doucet does with her comics. Still, it is undeniable that American fashion, films, and TV have a large influence on Quebec. Brossard herself admitted to loving cities like San Francisco and romanticizing the United States, describing her “attachment to country-and-western music, to rock’n’roll, this fascination with black leather jackets, waitresses, cheap bars.”<sup>227</sup> Her curiosity and intrigue in the United States was behind other projects like the film *Some American Feminists*. Due to this professed attachment, I believe that, rather than a warning or anxiety-based text, by writing a novel of Quebecois/American encounters, Brossard wished to convey messages about the United States and the English language that were conflicted, but not necessarily negative.

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Parker references “Brossard’s perception that her ‘native’ language and culture are gravely threatened by *anglophonie* at home and constant encroachments from the U.S.” However, this assertion is not supported by any quotes, citations, or other proof that Brossard ever said anything like this, and I have been unable to find any examples of such in my own research.

<sup>226</sup> Damien-Claude Bélanger, “Conservative Crossroads: Anti-Americanism and Anti-modernism in French Canadian Intellectual Discourse, 1891–1945”, *London Journal of Canadian Studies*. 32(1), 2017.

<sup>227</sup> Brossard, Wheeler, and Rudy, 122.

In terms of linguistic borders, Mélanie travels not only through French, but also through half a dozen other languages, which Brossard signals to the reader mainly through the use of italics and quotation marks. In the original, English words are inconsistently italicized, often within the same sentence, so that it is difficult to discern why specific words were chosen: “*Of course Mélanie is night teen.*”<sup>228</sup> The misunderstandings or mishearings of certain English phrases like “night teen” instead of nineteen or “sand witches” instead of sandwiches mimic the ear of someone learning a new language, and they work to untether syllables from their familiar meanings, foreignizing English. Like translation scholar Venuti, Brossard favors the foreignization strategy over its alternative, domestication: “In its effort to do right abroad, this translation method [foreignization] must do wrong at home, deviating enough from native norms to stage an alien reading experience.”<sup>229</sup> *Mauve Desert* is nothing if not an “alien reading experience.” There are also untranslated, unitalicized French words hiding amongst the English such as “capricant,” perhaps as another form of foreignizing.<sup>230</sup> In the original, Brossard often combines English and French together in one sentence as a kind of Franglais: “Au retour, je roulai vite, *fast so fast*,” “*I had a dream*, flamboyant comme une ivresse,” “*fever, fever, forever* m’en aller,” stylistically similar to Doucet’s *Dirty Plotte*.<sup>231</sup> The combination mimics the speech

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<sup>228</sup> Brossard, *Le désert mauve*, 75.

<sup>229</sup> Lawrence Venuti, “The Translator’s Invisibility,” in *The Translation Studies Reader*, New York: Routledge, 1999, 20.

<sup>230</sup> Brossard, *Le désert mauve*, 45.

<sup>231</sup> Brossard, 58, 17, 53.

of Quebecois youth in spirit, with the italics or lack thereof visually communicating to the reader the borders of each language within the sentence.

Brossard also chooses to italicize Spanish words such as *ocotillo*, *mariposa*, *saguaro*, and *señita*, with the effect of emphasizing their presence in the text. Whether in the French or English version, this sets them apart and slows the reader down. By using italics, she highlights for the reader the history of Spanish colonization and missionaries in the Southwest, reminding us the desert is not a monolingual space, especially in the United States. The choice to highlight Spanish is also an ecological one; Brossard chooses “Spanish to be the language of the desert. In her translation, Maude Laures...adds more Spanish phrases to her text, and Japanese, too, to magnify the echo of nuclear destruction that resonates in l’homme long’s equations.”<sup>232</sup> Language is a metaphor for this destruction, “The exact calculation of languages that have ended up in space like an explosion.”<sup>233</sup> Japanese words in *Mauve Desert* are associated with dangerous events, like tsunamis, in contrast to the botanical applications of Spanish. The association of Japanese with peril simultaneously underscores the violence done by the Japanese to Americans in Pearl Harbor and as an imperial power, and also the violence done to Japan by America through the atomic bomb.

Aside from passing references to Spanish and Japanese, most scholarship on *Mauve Desert* misses other languages in the text—including the addition of

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<sup>232</sup>Beverly Curran, “Portraits of the Translator as an Artist.” *M/C Journal* 4, no. 4 (2001).

<sup>233</sup>Brossard, *Mauve Desert*, 138.

Latin/Italian, “*libera, memento*” and the potentially untranslatable phrase “*fata de fata*.”<sup>234</sup> *Fata de fata* is repeated several times in the text, indicating it was important to Brossard for the reader to notice. The phrase *fata de fata* does not have a clear meaning in any language besides Romanian, a language which, as far as I know, Brossard had no familiarity with.<sup>235</sup> As Mathias Verger explains, “que ce soit l’italien (*fata, fée*) ou le roumain (*fata, jeune fille*). En roumain, l’expression *fata de fata* signifie face à face.”<sup>236</sup> Yet if we eliminate the Romanian, we are left with the confusing Italian: fairy to fairy, or the nonsensical Latin: fate to/of fate, which additionally sounds phonetically like face to face in English. If it is meant to be Latin, a language which Brossard knew from Catholic school, this appears to be Laures’ attempt to add gravitas to the text, a kind of harmless mistake of the amateur translator.

Sanskrit also appears in the text; her villain Longman is fixated on reciting a poem in Sanskrit, a reference to Oppenheimer quoting the Bhagavad Gita. The language is mentioned multiple times by name, although there is no inclusion of the text of Sanskrit itself. Why Brossard makes this choice is unclear, when she bothers to write in and italicize so many other languages, but most likely it has to do with the antiquity of Sanskrit and its lack of common usage. In summary, although *Le désert mauve* is often described (including by Brossard) as a French-to-French translation,

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<sup>234</sup> Brossard, 223.

<sup>235</sup> Even in the unlikely event it is Romanian, the phrase is missing the diacritical marks.

<sup>236</sup> Mathias Verger, « Tromper la langue, doubler la traduction : traduction intralinguale et jeu de(s) mots dans *Le désert mauve* (1987) de Nicole Brossard », dans *Interfrancophonies*, no14, « La traduction intralinguale dans la francophonie » (Myriam Vien et Fernando Funari eds.), 2023, 35.

we have at least six languages present in total—ancient and modern, Romance, Germanic, Japonic, and Indo-Aryan.<sup>237</sup> By including these other languages in the book, Brossard is destabilizing French and English as the dominant cultural languages of North America, reminding us of colonization and the horrific deaths in Hiroshima. It is not about a struggle between French and English over which is superior; it's about noticing the (sometimes violent) traces of many languages within our lives and landscapes, and how they impact our understanding of the world. Just as texts are constantly being translated and moving into other languages, language itself is constantly evolving, something Brossard knew well as someone who was regularly contributing new language to the feminist lexicon.

## **II. Maude & Mélanie & Thelma & Louise : Echoes of Le désert mauve in North America**



[L']auto, c'est aussi le rêve, la mélancolie (Rebel without a cause), le voyage, la possibilité de l'ailleurs (Thelma & Louise).

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<sup>237</sup> Notably missing are Indigenous languages from Canada or the United States. Although words like Quebec have Indigenous roots, we do not get a purposeful, playful inclusion of these languages the way we do with the other linguistic examples.

—Brossard, Mauve Motel website<sup>238</sup>

You've always been crazy. This is just the first chance you've ever had to really  
express yourself.

—Louise to Thelma, *Thelma and Louise*<sup>239</sup>

In 1991, a year after *Mauve Desert*, the English version of *Le désert mauve* was published, another story involving close relationships between women, senseless violence, and driving a car through the Southwest was taking North America by storm—Ridley Scott's film, *Thelma and Louise*.<sup>240</sup> *Thelma and Louise* took the idea of women experiencing freedom in the desert and turned it into a Hollywood narrative starring Geena Davis and Susan Sarandon. Although controversial, it was a winning formula, leading to box office success and many Academy Award nominations, including the award for Best Screenplay. Callie Khouri, the film's first-time screenwriter, was not Canadian, and it's unlikely she was influenced by *Mauve Desert*. Brossard, on the other hand, has written about being inspired by Americana and road trip narratives of the American West in general, and also later by *Thelma*

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<sup>238</sup>Simon Dumas and Nicole Brossard, "L'auto, le motel, le cinéma un mariage," *The Parallel Universes of the Mauve Motel*, <https://mauvemotel.net/101a/>.

<sup>239</sup> *Thelma & Louise*. Dir. Ridley Scott. 1992. Culver City, CA: MGM/UA Home Video, 1992.

<sup>240</sup> Although the protagonists could not really be described as killers and the murder in *Thelma & Louise* is not premeditated, it's worth noting that other novels about female rage and vengeance were published around the same time. These include Helen Zahavi's *Dirty Weekend* (UK, 1991) and Virginie Despentes' *Baise-Moi* (France, 1993), both later made into films, indicating this was part of a larger, worldwide conversation.

and *Louise* itself.<sup>241</sup> Together, the two texts speak to larger cultural conversations about gender-based violence taking place in North America at the time, conversations that likely led the Toronto-based press Coach House to have Brossard's book translated for Anglophone readers.

In June 1991, *Time* magazine featured a photo of Davis and Sarandon on the cover, accompanied by the title, "Why *Thelma and Louise* Strikes a Nerve." Taken as a whole, the magazine illustrates how entwined language and gender debates were at the time. The feature on *Thelma and Louise* describes tension between the sexes writ large on the silver screen. Critic Richard Schickel writes, "These times...seem defined by off-balance relationships between men and women," and indicates how these relationships favor women by naming a number of recent films featuring what he refers to as femme fatales, such as *La Femme Nikita*.<sup>242</sup> Immediately preceding his cover story is an op-ed by Jesse Birnbaum, critiquing the appearance of neologisms in Webster's Dictionary. These include terms like *herstory* and *womyn*, which Birnbaum refers to as dreadful and execrable, respectively. He complains that "feminists...are saluted and placated, to the point where judgment is often skewed."<sup>243</sup> His comments highlight the way gender battles at the time were often fought in the semantic realm and illustrate the widespread backlash against terms like *auther*, which were gaining popularity in the North American feminist literary community.<sup>244</sup> Birnbaum's op-ed

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<sup>241</sup> Simon Dumas and Nicole Brossard, "L'auto, le motel, le cinéma un mariage."

<sup>242</sup> Richard Schickel, "Gender Bender Over *Thelma & Louise*," *Time Magazine*, June 1991, 53.

<sup>243</sup> Jesse Birnbaum. "Defining Women (and Others)," *Time Magazine*, June 1991, 51.

<sup>244</sup> Brossard, *Mauve Desert*, 53.

demonstrates that the linguistic discourse was not only happening in Canada, but all over the continent, and that attitudes over what men perceived to be newly “off-balance relationships between men and women” manifested as moral panic over language.

Legal and cultural changes in how gender-based violence was treated in society and the media, as well as resistance to those shifts, provided the social backdrop for the release of both *Thelma and Louise* and *Mauve Desert* in the 1990s. While first and second wave feminists had won many rights and protections for Western women, they still had not achieved gender parity in the 1990s. There was, however, a greater understanding that gender intersected with other facets of identity such as race, class, and sexuality. In 1991, Anita Hill testified to sexual harassment from Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas. Her character was attacked, and Thomas was ultimately appointed as a justice. Three years later, the 1994 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was passed in the United States, requiring harsher penalties for violence against women and dedicated funding towards prosecuting gender-based crimes. In Canada, there was a similar concern with gender-based violence, especially in Montreal, where the Ecole Polytechnique Massacre of 1989 prompted the government to establish December 6th, 1991 as a National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women. Indigenous women, who

were six times as likely to be murdered as any other group of women, also held a Women's Memorial March on the same day.<sup>245</sup>

This gender-based violence affected the women in Montreal, as well as the wider Canadian lesbian feminist network. A particularly tragic example was the brutal murder of the Vancouver-based feminist poet Pat Lowther by her husband Roy in 1975. Lowther's body was found dumped in a creek after Roy, jealous, it was conjectured, of her professional success, murdered her with a hammer.<sup>246</sup> Forty years old at the time of her death, an outspoken leftist, feminist, supporter of Quebecois sovereignty, and Chair of the League of Canadian Poets, Lowther did not live long enough to be able to participate in *Tessera*, the La Théorie salons, or many of the feminist literary conferences.<sup>247</sup> However, if she had, it's likely she would have been part of the wider network like her contemporaries in British Columbia, Mezei and Marlatt. Although during her short life she was unable to connect with many other feminist writers, Brossard and Marlatt were both finalists for the poetry prize created to honor her memory, The Pat Lowther Memorial Award, still given annually to the best female poet in Canada.

I mention Lowther's untimely death to underscore the fact that while Longman's murder of Angela Parkins in *Mauve Desert* is largely symbolic, a

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<sup>245</sup>Veronica Strong-Boag, "Women's Movements in Canada: 1985–present," *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, October 17, 2016, <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/womens-movements-in-canada-1985present>.

<sup>246</sup>Eve Lazarus, "Pat Lowther: Murder of a Poet," *Cold Case Canada Podcast*, September 10, 2021, <https://evelazarus.com/cold-case-canada-podcast/s2-e21-murder-of-a-poet/>. Roy Lowther was less well known and published than Pat.

<sup>247</sup>Chris Wiesenthal, "The Archives of Pat (and Roy) Lowther," *Journal of Canadian Studies* (Toronto) 40, no. 2 (2006): 38.

representation of Man's destructive capability with the atomic bomb, the murders of real women were no doubt also in the back of Brossard's mind. There's a reason that Mélanie and Kathy keep a revolver in the glove box and behind the bar. While there were some spaces in Montreal where women felt safe meeting together, such as lesbian bars, community centers, and their homes, many still experienced homophobic or sexist violence. Statistically, however, as with Lowther, the greatest dangers came not from strangers, but from those women were closest to. By the 1990s, women in North America were openly speaking out about domestic violence, rape, and murder committed by their family members, friends, religious leaders, and partners; these were no longer accepted as private matters. Part of ending the silence also involved the proliferation of art, including literature and film, that discussed the issue of gender-based violence directly. Art offered a space where women could both safely draw attention to violence against women (*Mauve Desert*) and enact revenge fantasies (*Thelma and Louise*).

Like *Mauve Desert*, the violence of language is very much central to *Thelma and Louise*. Film scholar Susan Kollin comments, "Men in the film are not taciturn but speak a great deal. Throughout the movie, they lie, they interrupt, they say insulting things, and they deliberately mislead the two women with their false talk. Men's speech in this Western is clearly not to be trusted."<sup>248</sup> The male characters in *Thelma and Louise* use language as a tool of violence, an extension of physical violence, resulting in the women's inability to have faith in men's speech. As the film

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<sup>248</sup> Susan Kollin, *Thelma and Louise*, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 2023, 75.

goes on, Thelma and Louise's turn into untranslatable subjects: "the women are transformed through a series of events in the film, they become even more indecipherable to the men in their lives,"<sup>249</sup> and there is "mutual misunderstanding and misrecognition between Thelma and Darryl."<sup>250</sup> Darryl cannot (and does not want to) get close to any Thelma, just as Mélanie "cannot get close to any you," and the same is true for Thelma towards Darryl. Even Jimmy, Louise's boyfriend and one of the only positive portrayals of men in the film, cannot reach Louise; "he and Louise cannot speak the same language."<sup>251</sup> The women's inability or unwillingness to assimilate and "speak" the same language as the male authorities they encounter leads to a breakdown in communication, and ultimately to their deaths. At the end of the film, when Thelma and Louise are expected to surrender, they choose another option that law enforcement does not anticipate, driving off a cliff and demonstrating the unresolved rift in understanding between the two parties.

*Mauve Desert* and *Thelma and Louise* both end somewhat ambiguously, suspending the reader/viewer in a liminal state where death is implied but not witnessed firsthand. Film scholar Lynda Hart writes,

*Thelma and Louise*....ends in a dreamlike sequence, the camera's eye caressing them as their Thunderbird gently floats above the canyon, then is arrested in midair, forever poised to penetrate the space that they are visually barred from entering. Their deaths are thus rendered as virtual but unrepresentable.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>249</sup> Marita Sturken, *Thelma & Louise*. London: BFI Film Classics, 2020, 32.

<sup>250</sup> Sturken, 32.

<sup>251</sup> Sturken, 32.

<sup>252</sup> Lynda Hart, "Til Death Do Us Part", Impossible Spaces in 'Thelma and Louise,'" *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 4, no. 3 (1994): 430.

Time freezes, and the scene refuses expectations of teleology. Similarly, Brossard writes, “She is dissolving...Angela is dissolving in the black and white of reality. What happened?... The customers didn’t see a thing. I didn’t see a thing.”<sup>253</sup> There is a mention of the chalk police outline around Angela’s body, but the reader does not get a description of her corpse. Overall, the effect is a very disembodied portrayal of death emphasizing absence, perhaps relating to Brossard’s disassociation over the death of her father. Like the Thunderbird suspended in flight over the canyon, Angela’s moment of death is unintelligible to those around her. And like the victims of America’s atom bombs, she is vaporized. Mélanie is left with only traces of her death in the landscape, “the road like a bloody profile.”<sup>254</sup> Ultimately, while *Mauve Desert* and *Thelma and Louise* can offer us other possibilities (a motel community full of queer women, two female bandits on the run who are often read as queer), neither can fully resolve this, visually or otherwise, with the patriarchal reality women were experiencing at the time. Through art that paid attention to language, Ridley, Khouri, and Brossard created alternative spaces for women, but these were interventions within a broader violent society. As with our imaginary métro and the La Théorie salons, these literary and cinematic deserts serve as a home for Muñoz’s queer futurity that the reader/viewer cannot quite touch. In *Mauve Desert* and *Thelma and Louise*, these ephemeral spaces are a glimpse, a glitch, a gesture of the always-arriving somewhere else that could be.

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<sup>253</sup> Brossard, *Mauve Desert*, 46.

<sup>254</sup> Brossard, 46.

## Afterlives

Like any great source text, *Mauve Desert* inspired many transformations by different artists and scholars. As Ania Wroblewski explains, the experience of reading the book is participatory: “*Le désert mauve* awakens readers’ desires to dream, play, and experiment.”<sup>255</sup> Brossard captured something in the book about the ineffable pleasures of translating, reading, and writing. Adaptations of the text include translations into German and Spanish, a CD-ROM game created by Adriene Jenik in 1997, an opera, an experimental video/art collaboration by Gabrielle HB and Charline Dally who call themselves “le désert mauve,” Simon Dumas’ *Mélanie* (Hexagone, 2013), *Géométries du Mauve Motel* (Hexagone, 2022), and his website [www.mauvemotel.net](http://www.mauvemotel.net), as well as countless dissertations about the book. I include myself amongst those who have been driven to create their own new works after reading *Le désert mauve*; it was the inspiration behind my novel *Prétend* (End of the Line Press, 2024), the story of a young, queer, female translator with Quebecois roots. After publication, I was approached by the UK-based press Moist Books to create an English-language “translation” of my English-language book for UK audiences, an English-to-English translation that mirrored Brossard’s work.

Brossard would reuse her own material by returning to the keywords in *Mauve Desert* (horizon, mauve, civilization, reality, light, dawn) throughout her

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<sup>255</sup>Ania Wroblewski, “Immersed in Desire: Visual Translations of Nicole Brossard’s *Le désert mauve*,” *Intermédiatités / Intermediality*, (Montréal, no. 42, September 2023), 3.

career, much as Renaud did with her early poems and life story. The theme of translation was also a continuous thread in Brossard's writing. Like the afterlives of *Mauve Desert*, she was always drawn to transforming her own writing into something else. Specifically, she would allow her words to first become a poem, then leave the page entirely and join a queer, embodied practice of feminism that was still fleeting, but more physical and grounded than the space of the novel. In the next part of this chapter, I would like to highlight her "transformances" of the poems "M A U V E" and "Character/Jeu de lettres" with fellow poet Daphne Marlatt, as expansions of translation to include artmaking with another feminist, lesbian writer. If *Mauve Desert* represented theory, then the transformations were theory in action. These poetic practices added a new dimension to the collectivized nature of écriture au féminin in the form of public speech. The transformations also represented the network extending outside the city of Montreal, and in the process, questioning the limits of language and the meaning of national and provincial borders.

### III. Transformancing

I don't open doors. I trespass limits. At my own risk, of course.

—Brossard, interview in *So to Speak*<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Peter O'Brien, ed., "So to speak : interviews with contemporary Canadian writers" Montreal: Vehicule Press, 1987, 134.

Brossard's nationalist sentiments are not for a geographic body of land but for a land  
of the body, one whose borderlines are written in ink.

—Clea Notar, in her introduction to an interview with Brossard<sup>257</sup>

In 1986, Brossard and fellow Canadian feminist writer Marlatt engaged in a bold experiment with language and writing. Both women were lesbians, poets, and shared an interest in the interplay of sexuality and language. Playing on the slippages between translation, transformation, and performance, these collaborations privileged the translation theory of the spirit over the letter of the language, stretching the bounds of what is traditionally defined as translation to something closer to metaphorical and cultural translation. The resulting chapbooks ("M A U V E" and "Character/ Jeu de lettres") allowed the reader to compare multiple versions and made the aesthetic and semiotic differences between them open and evident.<sup>258</sup> Although Marlatt and Brossard have often mistakenly been described as the originators of the project, it was actually commissioned by the poet Colin Browne as a joint collaboration between the English-language *Writing* literary journal and the French-language literary journal *La nouvelle barre du jour*.<sup>259</sup> Browne was the one who first used the word "transformance" in relation to the project, and it was then adopted by

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<sup>257</sup> Interview with Clea Notar in Peter O'Brien, ed., "So to speak : interviews with contemporary Canadian writers," 123.

<sup>258</sup> Nicole Brossard and Daphne Marlatt, "M A U V E" and "Character/Jeu de lettres" in *Salvage*, Red Deer, Alberta, Red Deer College Press, 1986, 95-110. Initially published in a limited-edition run as two separate print chapbooks.

<sup>259</sup> Alessandra Capperdoni, « Acts of Passage: Women Writing Translation in Canada, » *TTR*, volume 20, numéro 1, 1er semestre 2007, 268.

both Marlatt and Brossard. Performance adds multiple dimensions to literary translation, including the physical presence of the body, the audience, and the language/speech act. As Marlatt and Brossard moved each other's writing across languages, they openly challenged their audience by defining their art as a queer relationship. A challenge to the more conservative schools within translation studies, their transformances represent a feminist, queer, embodiment of what it meant to translate and be translated.

Marlatt described her translation of Brossard's poem M A U V E in chaotic, almost violent terms. She writes about "the erotic transgression of borders both cultural and linguistic, where meaning seeps through the poem from one brain to another."<sup>260</sup> This fluid, porous view of translation allowed for the free movement of words to triumph over territorial boundaries. The theme of boundaries also shows up in *Character/ Jeu de lettres* with the line "she has no character meaning/indissoluble boundaries."<sup>261</sup> Here, the borders are not fluid, but closed, limiting the identity of the subject. Marlatt defines this limitation as related to the rigidity of gender conventions in the English language, noting the "s/he...s plural in excess of he."<sup>262</sup> The "s plural" here stands in for women, an excess of man (perhaps a reference to Adam and Eve as well). Although the s is placed before the he in s/he, it is additive and optional. "He" is a complete word on its own, but the s needs to be attached to the "he" in order to

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<sup>260</sup>Daphne Marlatt, "Translating MAUVE: Reading Writing," *Tessera*, 6, 1989, 30.

<sup>261</sup>Nicole Brossard and Daphne Marlatt, "Character / Jeu de lettres," in *Salvage*, Red Deer, Alberta, Red Deer College Press, 1986, 105.

<sup>262</sup>Brossard and Daphne Marlatt, 105.

form “she.” Marlatt argues for her feminine subject to break out of these boundaries, so that by the end of the poem she, “does not belong, goes beyond/herself in excess of/longing to leap/right out of her skin.”<sup>263</sup> The subject is too much here, she is all excess of he, and there is the insinuation that boundaries cannot contain her. Her body provides a physical boundary, but she is longing to leave even that, and leap out of her corporeal form. Marlatt also suggests someone who transgresses boundaries will be an outcast, someone who “does not belong.” The sense of marginalization fits with her identity as a lesbian woman in the 1980s.

In Brossard’s version, the sentiment, but not the literal meaning, is carried into French. She writes, “elle est sans caractère signifiant/insoluble l/imite.”<sup>264</sup> Here, the theme of dissoluble boundaries is present again, with the “insoluble l/imite.” However, instead of the emphasis on “s” we have a concentration on the letter l. The l here is additive to “imite” to form a boundary, “limite.” Alone, the imite implies that the woman, the “elle” is imitating or mimicking men. Brossard makes this change because il/elle in French does not operate in the same way that s/he does in English. Because “l/imite” is the final word in the line, just as “boundaries” was in Marlatt’s, the reader crashes into these boundaries, creating the sense of an encounter with a visual border. Later in the poem, the subject, “va au-delà d’l-même/en l’excès du désir de l’élan sortir de sa peau.”<sup>265</sup> The “l” in “d’l-même” is handwritten here in cursive by Brossard, and serves as a stand-in for the French “elle” or she. Again, we

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<sup>263</sup>Brossard and Marlatt, 105.

<sup>264</sup>Brossard and Marlatt, 109.

<sup>265</sup>Brossard and Marlatt, 108.

see the subject wanting to go outside of herself, to transgress a border, although her longing has become “*désir*,” a more sexual descriptor, and “*sortir*” replaces leaping as a softened version, perhaps. Instead of Marlatt’s rather straightforward “does not belong,” Brossard offers us the more perplexing “*n’a de dieu, n’a de lieu*.”<sup>266</sup> This cryptic phrase appears to be a reference to “*ni dieu, ni lieu*,” a Quebecois and older French expression, literally meaning, no god, no place. The female subject in Brossard’s poem certainly does not belong, but it is more extreme than that; she is also a religious outcast with nowhere to settle.

In their discussions of the transgression of borders, Marlatt and Brossard express much the same idea as contemporary Swedish translator and poet Johannes Göransson about the semantic possibilities created by translation, and especially by experimental translations. Göransson writes, “Translation questions the very idea of a nationally coherent literature, opening up multiplicity within the supposed linguistic boundaries of the national literature. The foreign exists within and across these boundaries.”<sup>267</sup> This estrangement is, of course, part of the reason translation is so often denigrated and devalued in our culture. In the case of Canada, the amount of French and English translations betrayed the fact that there was no “authentic” Canadian literature. There are also French words with Indigenous roots, Americanisms popular in French, English words with French roots, and so on, so that even the idea of an uncontaminated, border-controlled national language is not

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<sup>266</sup>Brossard and Marlatt, “Character / Jeu de lettres,” 108.

<sup>267</sup>Johannes Göransson, *Transgressive Circulation: Essays on Translation*, Blacksburg, Virginia: Noemi Press, Inc., 2018, 12.

possible. Marlatt writes about “the erotic transgression of borders,” while Göransson, concludes that, within translation, “there is...a great pleasure in flooding borders, troubling boundaries, contaminating systems.”<sup>268</sup> For both Marlatt and Brossard, the transgression of borders through translation was both a political stance against those borders and the pursuit of a more intimate, pleasurable way of connecting.

Aside from the semantics of the poems themselves, the way the poems are ordered within the chapbooks is also significant to consider when reading and interpreting them. As scholar Alessandra Capperdoni writes:

While in both ‘MAUVE’ and ‘Character/Jeu de lettres’ the ‘original’ precedes the ‘translation,’ the sequence of the two languages engenders a linguistic reverberation which re-constitutes a *différent* meaning. This translational act subverts the normative relationship between producer (authenticity) and re-producer (copy and secondary) by unhinging ‘reality’ from its self-invisible and referential status. Indeed, language spills over the borders of the real in MAUVE’s poetic acts, and it illuminates the interrelationship (and multiple significations) of the senses and meaning formation (*le sens*), reality and the virtual, language and fiction.<sup>269</sup>

It makes sense that part of Marlatt and Brossard’s aim would be to transform “the normative relationship between producer (authenticity) and re-producer (copy and secondary).” This relationship is also a hierarchy, where the original is always privileged as pure and better, while the re-production, and the re-producer (i.e. the translator) are seen as lesser, as imitations. Brossard was often concerned with upending these types of relationships with her readers as well; she worked hard to devalue her authority as an author in order to give more power to her readers. She

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<sup>268</sup> Göransson, *Transgressive Circulation*, 12.

<sup>269</sup> Capperdoni, «Acts of Passage,» 269.

was also known for working very closely with the translators of her work, especially English and German versions, and supporting the translators in any decisions they made. She was committed to using her status as a writer to change power imbalances she saw within the literary world.

Capperdoni also references the way that “language spills over the borders of the real” in the poems, once again highlighting the transgression of boundaries. Here, language is able to accomplish what reality cannot. Though there are, as I have mentioned, moments of borders, both poems end without a period, floating in white space. The lack of an ending visually suggests to the reader an ongoing, transitory nature to the text. Language in the poems does not move into a final, fixed state, but instead opens up new meanings of words and travels back and forth, infinitely. The meanings of the two poems do not perfectly mirror one another, and cannot, because of untranslatable words within both English and French. Rather, they have moments of connection, moments of touching, but then pull apart again. Likewise, the characters in the text cannot even be confined to the normative typewriter alphabet. Both Marlatt and Brossard use their own handwriting, adding another layer of meaning, as well as intimacy for the reader. There is something incredibly personal about handwriting, and it breaks the reader's expectation of the distance between themselves and the writer. Capperdoni saw this as a way Marlatt and Brossard sought to denaturalize and destabilize language for the reader: “The ‘lettering’ of the poems, revolving around *s* in English and *l* in French yet seeping into each other, makes visible not only the constructed nature of language but the slippages, reverberations,

movements across, and displacement that both produce and betray meaning.”<sup>270</sup> In their poems, the borders of English and French dissolve.

### **Writing Sex, Writing the Body**

Interestingly, although there is dissolution and dissociation occurring in the poems, Brossard and Marlatt’s collaborations also perform the sensual role of the body into translation. The national body, never a material body to begin with, dissipates, so that the lover’s body can come into focus. As Brossard’s translator De Lotbinière-Harwood states: “Feminist translations and performances—along with the discourse they produce—foreground issues of gender in a way men’s do not. They purposefully employ the reclaimed female body to anchor a search for authentic voice through subversion of codes.”<sup>271</sup> Brossard, Marlatt, and the women in the feminist Canadian school of translation insisted that the female or feminist translator could possess a desiring body, an erotic body, and a body oriented towards the text. I’ve previously mentioned that both poems reference skin, but other lines reference the body even more directly. Marlatt writes: “biting through the traces left/across her body writing/you.”<sup>272</sup> The biting is potentially sexual, but undeniably intimate. Biting requires the mouth (relating to translation) to come close to the skin of another, and to break the barrier of the skin through force. The metaphor of biting appears twice in

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<sup>270</sup> Capperdoni, «Acts of Passage,» 271.

<sup>271</sup> Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood, *Re-belle et infidèle / The Body Bilingual: La traduction comme pratique de réécriture au féminin*, Montréal: Éditions du Remue-Ménage, 1991, 161.

<sup>272</sup> Brossard and Marlatt, “Character / Jeu de lettres,” 102.

the text, once slightly before this, as the speaker instructs, “take hold, bite into.” Even before that, we have “shin(tooth),” hinting at a bite. We know there is a connection between the shin and the tooth from the way they are placed closely together, the tooth slightly tucked away by parentheses. But Marlatt keeps us in suspension of the actual violence until the instruction to bite, followed by the description of the subject biting. Then right after the words “across her body” we have “writing/you.” The third to second person adds to the intimacy of the lines, and the use of “writing” here has an erotic tone here.

Brossard’s version is very different, but shares the same relation to writing, translation, and sexual desires. She writes: “perce la (dent)elle/tu saisis, mords-y.”<sup>273</sup> The “perce” could mean bite, although the literal meaning is closer to pierce or break through (as in a boundary). Then she does a clever wordplay with (dent)elle to parallel Marlatt’s shin(tooth). Dentelle means lace, which the reader might associate with traditional femininity or lingerie. But she has grouped the “dent” by itself, so that the word is split into two words meaning: “tooth” and “she.” Then she follows with a similar command to Marlatt’s: “mords-y,” instructing the reader to bite. We do not see the word for bite repeated in her poem, instead replaced with “couper court,” to cut short. But the body is present in the same manner as in Marlatt’s, “en travers de son corps écrivant/toi.” Both poems end with the word “you” placed by itself on a single line, and both combine images of body and the act of writing/writing another woman as a sensual act.

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<sup>273</sup> Brossard and Marlatt, “Character / Jeu de lettres,” 108.

Many translators believe that the body plays a central role in their craft. Translator Amanda Labarca writes that her work “physically affected her, it has worked its way into her flesh and blood in the same way that other translations had become integral part of her organism.”<sup>274</sup> Labarca describes the experience of translation as one of transgressing bodily barriers and transforming her “organism.” Labarca’s statement is embodied in the staged act of the performance, which allows Brossard and Marlatt to underscore the erotic and sensual aspects of translation:

If absolute semantic propriety were the ideal, then machine translation could replace the body of the translator. In ‘Mauve’ and ‘Character/Jeu de lettres,’ a kind of visual and aural fidelity moves in, an attentiveness to the physique of words. A sensual slant is crucial when the source text in question is experimental itself, engaged intently with the materiality of language.<sup>275</sup>

In Marlatt and Brossard’s poems, the words themselves take on a physicality, and the “sensual slant” allows the translator’s body to assume its erotic power. Decades before AI was treated as a serious threat to the livelihoods of literary translators, Holbrook points out that the goal of translation is more than “absolute semantic propriety.” The body is what makes human translators different from their machine counterparts, adding an unpredictable element informed by the material conditions of that translator’s life and experiences. This is also why Marlatt, Brossard, and those in the Canadian feminist school of translation argued that it was important in certain circumstances to have women translating other women, citing examples where men

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<sup>274</sup> Amanda Labarca, “Queer Translation as Performative and Affective Un-doing: Translating Butler’s Undoing Gender into Italian,” in Brian James Baer and Klaus Kaindl, eds., *Queering Translation, Translating the Queer: Theory, Practice, Activism*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2018, 197.

<sup>275</sup> Susan Holbrook, “Mauve Arrows and the Erotics of Translation,” *Essays on Canadian Writing*, vol. 61, 1997.

mistranslated women due to ignorance. The classic example, given by Barbara Godard and then cited in multiple articles by Luise von Flotow, is how to translate Brossard's sentence, "Ce soir, j'entre dans l'histoire sans relever ma jupe."<sup>276</sup> Von Flotow writes:

There are two translators available for the job: one with more or less traditional views on the importance of 'fidelity' and equivalence in translation, who believes that a translator's work should be seen through, and not heard about. The other is a *feminist translator*. The more traditional translator renders this line from the play as follows: 'this evening I'm entering history without pulling up my skirt.' This seems a perfectly adequate, idiomatic version of the source language text, although I would prefer the more colloquial 'without hiking up my skirt' The feminist translator, on the other hand, translates as follows: 'this evening I'm entering history without opening my legs.'<sup>277</sup>

The implication here is that the feminist translator, by going beyond fidelity and the literal, gains a better sense of Brossard's intended meaning.

Marlatt and Brossard's transformances also playfully reconfigure the power dynamics present in sex. As Susan Holbrook wrote of their transformance, "they both refuse a passionless repetition, inspired instead to the phonic tug and caress, tease of coming close to meaning and then pulling away, that play of friction, making it hard to figure out who's on top."<sup>278</sup> Here, Holbrook invokes a sexual lexicon including "play," which is often used to refer to the performance of a BDSM scene and also general playfulness in bed. She also writes about the question of "who's on top" referring to the top/bottom relation in queer partnerships, as well as the

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<sup>276</sup> Barbara Godard, "Translating and Sexual Difference" in *Resources for Feminist Research*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1984, pp. 13-16.

<sup>277</sup> Luise von Flotow, "Feminist Translation: Contexts, Practices and Theories," *TTR* 4, no. 2 (1991): 69-70.

<sup>278</sup> Holbrook, "Mauve Arrows."

domination/submission paradigm. Whereas some translation theorists, like George Steiner understand the translator as the dominator and the source text as forced into submission, Marlatt and Brossard are engaging with power dynamics that are far more fluid and more in line with the ways queer and feminist theorists have explored the dynamics of BDSM. Their roles in the transformance do not map neatly onto heterosexual power structures, making it “hard to figure out who’s on top,” and thus resulting in bodies resistant to capture by hegemonic forces.

### **Beyond Fidelity**

Fidelity is a feeling, an attitude which can make love grow. However, I also think it’s wonderful to be able to love, know, and explore the vitality of other women.<sup>279</sup>

—Nicole Brossard, *Thank God I'm A Lesbian* (1992)

In the above excerpt, Brossard describes fidelity not as a value or guiding principle for relationships, but as an affect. I am interested in the way that these transformances could remap or transform the discourse around fidelity in translation. To give a sense of normative attitudes around fidelity and translation, I offer the following example:

The notion of fidelity in translation was the major theme of an international conference on translation organized in 1959 by the International Federation of Translators, in which George Mounin (1968: 53) considered absolute fidelity to the entire source language text to be the primary quality of translation. This is how he put

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<sup>279</sup> *Thank God I'm A Lesbian - Dieu merci je suis lesbienne*, Dirs. Dominique Cardon and Laurie Colbert, video, 1992.

it, 'In our translations, like women, we must be perfect in both faithfulness and beauty' (quoted in Albir 1990:14).'<sup>280</sup>

The “we” here of course, is men, and the faithfulness and beauty are put forward not as values men ought to adopt, but qualities that women need to possess. For decades, translation studies was seen as a male domain and the majority of translation theorists (though not translators) tended to be men. The Canadian feminist school of translation was intended to correct this inequality, but as of the 1980s it was one of the few exceptions. Translation studies scholar Arshy Azizi noted, “As Derrida reminds us in ‘Des tours de Babel,’ the task of the translator is addressed to the *traducteur* and never the *traductrice*.”<sup>281</sup> This dearth of women in translation studies resulted in the popularization of sexist metaphors that Lori Chamberlain described in her seminal 1988 talk, “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation.” She was responding to an adaptation of Mounin’s statement, the French phrase “*les belles infidèles*,” a popular term used in seventeenth-century France to describe courtly women who could be faithful or beautiful, but not both.<sup>282</sup> The phrase was used as a metaphor to describe translators and their relationship to the source text. Chamberlain pointed out that the feminine endings in French made it impossible to apply the phrase to men. *Les belles infidèles* also depends on a linguistic binary and a gendered

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<sup>280</sup> Enoch Ajunwa, “Advancing the Theory of Fidelity Erosion in Translation,” *Translation Journal*, July 2015, <https://translationjournal.net/July-2015/advancing-the-theory-of-fidelity-erosion-in-translation.html>

<sup>281</sup> Arshy Azizi, “Gendered ‘Revenge’ in Emma Ramadan’s Reworking of Brice Matthieussent’s Meta-Novel,” *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, August 23 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/gendered-revenge-in-emma-ramadans-reworking-of-rice-matthieussents-meta-novel/>.

<sup>282</sup> Lori Chamberlain, “Gender and the Metaphorics of Translation,” *Signs* 13, no. 3 (1988): 455.

hierarchy that assumes heterosexuality. Quebecoise feminist translators rejected *les belles infidèles* as a guiding metaphor for their translation practices, so much so that Brossard's English translator, Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood titled her bilingual memoir *Re-belle et infidèle / The Body Bilingual*. In translation studies, the debate of whether or not a translator is faithful to their source text is still everpresent, and one I think we must move past, considering its roots.

As demonstrated in the Brossard epigraph from the documentary *Thank God I'm a Lesbian* Brossard was well aware of this trope of in/fidelity, but was more interested in turning the metaphor on its head. She once stated that "Marlatt is one of those 'people to whom you know that you will always be faithful.'"<sup>283</sup> In this case, as Holbrook writes, "her fidelity suggests allegiance, romance even." If we define fidelity as exclusivity, neither woman was "faithful" to one another. Marlatt would later collaborate on poems with her lover, Betsy Warland. More broadly, both Brossard and Marlatt would go on to collaborate on art with dozens of other women (and some men!). Their attitude shows how narrow Western conceptions of fidelity are. In Brossard and Marlatt's view, nothing was lost by adding more participants, and the ultimate faithfulness was to art and to the work itself. Marlatt and Brossard ask us: what does fidelity look like outside heterosexual marriages, outside the boundaries of church and state, and outside of sex for procreation? What if, instead of archaic, aristocratic French notions of fidelity, we were to embrace the idea of fidelity as a woman showing allegiance to another woman, or multiple women?

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<sup>283</sup> Holbrook, "Mauve Arrows and the Erotics of Translation."

What if, no matter how many people she slept with or how many texts she translated, she could still be faithful to her partner because their minds were linked in erotic understanding?

## **Conclusion**

Brossard understands that, in order to envision other ways of life, we must craft language beyond the confines of the accepted systems and models already in place. I have highlighted how a historical epidemic of gender violence and a lack of legal protections for women led to the second wave feminist movement and continued in the third wave of the 1980s up until the 2000s, an international movement that resulted in the creation of new language and cross-cultural feminist solidarity. The protests and art produced in North America during this time sent shockwaves around the world. Feminists asserted their rights and challenged patriarchal norms, translating their frustrations and experiences of living in a sexist world into words that men could hopefully understand. The increase in feminist visibility resulted in a backlash around the use of language, and films like *Thelma and Louise* showcased this gendered breakdown in communication. While *Thelma and Louise* was part of a larger group of work expressing female rage and revenge fantasies, other artistic interventions like *Mauve Desert* concentrated on creating female refuges within the text, even when these refuges were threatened by men. Brossard tapped into a common feeling of exploitation and dissatisfaction women were experiencing, but

rather than writing manifestos, she chose to express this through fiction and poetry. Her work relies on two equally important strands: a deep respect for the history, culture, and autonomy of Quebec as a Francophone woman, and a hunger to reach out to others and expand her worldview, to pass on what she knew but also to cultivate knowledge and learn from others. She proves that these strands are complimentary, rather than in opposition, embodying Lejeune's philosophy of "solitaire et solidaire." As I have argued elsewhere, to be Quebecois is to immediately be thrust into heated debates over language and culture. You cannot live in Quebec and still believe in the fantasy of a monolingual world. Although Brossard is, without a doubt, a Montreal author at heart, the transformances with Marlatt prove her commitment to challenging the existence of borders. Because of her rejection of national boundaries, her work cannot be defined as regional, or even solely Quebecois literature. Her interest in other cultures, languages, and international travel creates a body of work that simultaneously looks outwards and inwards.

Taken as a whole, Brossard's work represents the political desires of the network, along with the other members we've looked at, including Scott, Doucet, and Marchessault. Like Doucet, she writes in multiple languages within a single text, even though readers view Doucet and Brossard as single-language authors of English and French, respectively, and critics also refer to Brossard's work as having a specific "accent." Doucet and Brossard also pushed themselves to give interviews and talks in languages that were not their native French, which I view as an act of humbling and empathy for the Other. Like Scott, Brossard takes risks with all her writing; they are

experts at manipulating and cracking open language to see what is inside. Scott puts more of her life into her writing and often bases stories off real events, while Brossard prefers to work in the abstract and symbolic territory. Yet Scott and Brossard share a concentration on the sentence-level as the space to perform experiments with language, focusing on the micro aspects of communication. Like Marchessault, Brossard queers expectations by reversing or inverting gender in order to call attention to gender disparities and engages in conversations across an international feminist intertext. Although Brossard herself noted the difference in their writing subjects and styles in an interview—she is solely concerned with urban spaces, whereas Marchessault is interested in the ecological and pastoral—she also recognizes that they share the spiral shape and feminist values as a guide.<sup>284</sup> Brossard is the influence that Doucet, Scott, and Marchessault all have in common (though less direct, in Doucet’s case). She is the person who unites their disparate art forms, the blazing core of their feminist constellation.

While it’s tempting to portray Brossard as an uncomplicated icon (such as a CBC site entitled “Super Queeroes” does), I can do her a greater service by writing about who she truly is: complex, and utterly human. Although she is a visionary and trailblazer in so many ways, some of her ideas, such as those about bisexual women or pornography, have not aged well.<sup>285</sup> While I firmly reject these misguided and offensive ideas, I have noticed they are common amongst second wave North

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<sup>284</sup> O’Brien, *So to Speak*, 133-4.

<sup>285</sup> O’Brien, *So to Speak*, 126-7.

American feminists. I do not wish to devote much space to refuting her old beliefs, as critiques of these beliefs are widely available. But suffice it to say Brossard was not above falling prey to stereotypes and outdated views. However, one of the best things about Brossard, as with other women in the network whom I spoke to, such as Sherry Simon and Scott, is the ability to change beliefs and admit when they were wrong. In my experience, it's rare to come across older people not set in their ways, who are willing to learn and grow throughout their entire lives. I'm reminded of the quote by American writer Kathy Acker: "The students who come to my class...are very interested in their bodies and sex and pleasure. I learn a lot from them about how to have pleasure and how cool the female body is."<sup>286</sup> Acker picked up an interest in tattoos and piercings from her students, and also shared an interest discussing French theory along with her older lover, Sylvère Lotringer. She bridged age divides and engaged in intergenerational relationships, both platonic and romantic. The network, too, spans across time, from its origins with the female Automatists to modern Quebecois feminist, trans, non-binary, and queer writers. In the coda, I look at some of these writers, who have returned to ideas like literary salons, language play, and feminist translation like children going through their parent's vintage clothes; trying everything on, seeing what fits and what feels right.

In a way, the openness of the members of the network to change their politics is no surprise because flexibility is part of more creative and experimental views of

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<sup>286</sup>R.U. Sirius, "Kathy Acker: Where Does She Get Off?" Interview in *io* 2 (1994): <http://www.altx.com/io/acker.html>.

translation and writing. For experimental translators, works in translation are never truly “finished,” allowing for infinite afterlives.<sup>287</sup> Instead, they remain open to reinterpretation and revision, as well as to layers of meaning added through new paratexts. And they provide material for transformation into other mediums—in the case of *Mauve Desert*, into music, theater, books, and video games—and of course, transformation into other languages. My dissertation is yet one more transformation of *Mauve Desert*, placing it alongside *Thelma and Louise*, and also in conversation with the other pieces created by Doucet, Scott, and Marchessault. Now that we have some context for Brossard and *Mauve Desert*, we will be able to see how her work informed a radical new iteration of the network, moving forwards in time. In terms of respect for translation, the last decade has seen some of the greatest advancements in translator activism and the elevation of the literary translator’s position. For the new generation of the lesbian feminist network, language transforms even more rapidly, and participants question the relevance of words like “lesbian” and “feminist.” Despite the hard work of Brossard and her peers, gender parity has not been achieved in North America from an economic or a violence perspective. There is no question that the ideals of the Montreal feminist lesbian network remain incredibly urgent. What’s changed, I believe, are the tactics that the new generation chooses in their writing to call attention to these grave problems, as well as a broader shift in how society conceives of gender and sexuality. Exploring the connections and distinctions

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<sup>287</sup> For example, American translator Sawako Nakayasu’s experiments, in which she revisits or adds to the translation at a later date.

between the lesbian feminist network and contemporary Quebecois authors will illuminate the state of the current Montreal literary scene, and I hope, provide clues about the network's direction in the future.

## Nothing is Lost : A Coda of Sorts

In 2025, Éditions Remue-Ménage published *La théorie, un autre jour: Correspondances* featuring writing from some of the major contemporary intellectuals in Montreal: Juli Delporte, Karine Rosso, Chloé Savoie-Bernard (replacing Maryse Andraos), Olivia Tapiero and Camille Toffoli.<sup>288</sup> The title is a reference to *La théorie, un dimanche* and the contributors were interested in recreating the conditions of the original by getting together to speak and create theory, before the Covid-19 pandemic interfered with in-person gatherings. Their communications soon took on the form of letters/emails out of necessity. They also chose to abandon the format of the original, with each woman writing a piece of theory and a creative work to accompany it. Instead, the text is closer to the communications between the board members of *Tessera*, spread out all over Canada, hashing out what they wanted their journal to be and how they wanted to define theory and feminism. The 2020 shift to solely written correspondence creates an interesting contrast to the La Théorie group. What is lost in the lack of physical gatherings, or gained in the epistolary format? Can their exchanges really be considered literary salons, or are they something else entirely?

Besides the title, there are other connections to the legacy of La Théorie— in 2015 Rosso and Toffoli helped co-found Librairie L'Eugélonne, named after La

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<sup>288</sup> Juli Delporte, Karine Rosso, Chloé Savoie-Bernard, Olivia Tapiero et Camille Toffoli, *La théorie, un autre jour: Correspondances*, Montréal: Éditions Remue-Ménage, 2025.

Théorie member Bersianik's feminist sci-fi novel. As with *La théorie, un autre jour*, the bookstore L'Eugélonne directly names its influences and the network as its feminist origin. I was lucky enough to host an event reading from my novel, *Prétend*, at the bookstore, which also held the previously mentioned festival celebrating the work of Jovette Marchessault and her *Lesbian Triptych*. If we want to see the modern incarnations of the Montreal lesbian feminist network, we need look no further than L'Eugélonne. The bookstore is a mix of feminism old and new—they carry many original titles from the network, alongside books and zines about trans identity, BDSM aftercare, sex work, anti/decolonialism, and HIV/AIDS. Instead of a single owner, they are run by a collective who make decisions democratically. In my opinion, they embody the next generation of the network; fully aware of their lineage, but applying the ideas to different obstacles.

The new *La théorie, un autre jour* group are definitely not their predecessors; the demographics are more racially diverse, gender diverse (Delporte writes a letter about being non-binary), they utilize écriture inclusive, and instead of the pop singer Madonna and Scarlett O'Hara, they discuss trad wives, coronavirus, and Gaza.<sup>289</sup> Delporte is the first cartoonist to be included in one of these groups, signaling a greater understanding of the legitimacy and importance of graphic novels as an art form, thanks in part to artists like Doucet. They are not interested in correcting what they saw as the problems or “blind spots” of the original La Théorie group, but rather

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<sup>289</sup> Amélie Revert, “La théorie, un autre jour : penser et écrire le féminisme aujourd’hui,” *Le Devoir*, 22 nov. 2025, <https://www.ledevoir.com/lire/935463/theorie-autre-jour-penser-ecrire-feminisme-aujourd-hui>.

applying this experiment to their own lives.<sup>290</sup> Like the original group, the new community is hungry for larger conversations, and even for disagreement. They move towards understanding by challenging one another's ideas in the epistolary format. The result is something I think all the women originally involved with *La Théorie* would appreciate, and the book has been generally well-received. What remains, perhaps, is for the current generation to innovate their own feminist and queer formats, such that a future generation would want to reference or borrow from them.

In 2015, Coach House issued a new publication of *Mauve Desert* with an afterword by poet, teacher, and translator, Sina Queyras. Queyras knew Brossard as a well-established authority: "her name was already synonymous with feminist writing, with the elegant, multi-lingual urban landscape of Montreal, with thinking, with the possibility of a lesbian and/or feminist utopia"<sup>291</sup> To me, the most interesting part of Queyras' afterword is their use of both past and present verb tenses when describing the importance of the text. They write that *Mauve Desert*, "was and is a call to remake literature to suit female desire. It was and is a call for a kind of polyphonic mind meld of equally powerful minds."<sup>292</sup> In these sentences, Queyras is simultaneously visiting multiple streams of time. For them, the book is still doing in the present what Brossard intended for it to do in the past—a sign that she anticipated the book's translation and enduring power in some sense. In looking at two timelines at once, Queyras is also pointing us towards the future, where the book can have new lives we

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<sup>290</sup> Revert, "La théorie, un autre jour."

<sup>291</sup> Sina Queyras afterword to Nicole Brossard, *Mauve Desert*, Toronto: Coach House, 2015.

<sup>292</sup> Queyras, *Mauve Desert* (2015).

cannot imagine in the present. They know that this is possible because it has already happened. For instance, in using the pronouns they/them, Queyras is expanding on the transformative power of language in ways that would never have occurred to Brossard in 1987. Because the gender dynamics of publishing have shifted somewhat since the 1980s, we might say that there is no longer a need to reshape literature to suit female desire. But there is still a need for feminist literature, especially with a feminism that considers the intersections of gender/race/sexuality/ability and so on. One thing that is certain is that language will continue to change, and for a text that has already transformed in so many ways, future transformations and translations are almost certainly assured.

H. Felix Chau Bradley is another example of a non-binary, Montreal-based author who is carrying on the perspectives and traditions of the Montreal lesbian feminist network. They are the author of the short story collection, *Personal Attention Roleplay* (Metonymy Press, 2021) and currently serve as an editor for Metonymy, which describes itself as publishing “queer, trans, and feminist literary fiction and nonfiction by emerging writers.”<sup>293</sup> In 2021, Bradley interviewed Scott about her latest book, *Permanent Revolution*, for the Montreal Review of Books. *Permanent Revolution* revisits Scott’s early years in Montreal, her participation in the La Théorie group, her translation practice, and her experience of living between languages. When I interviewed Bradley for the literary journal 433, here’s what they had to say about Scott:

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<sup>293</sup> <https://metonymypress.com/>

At first, I was drawn simply to her portrayal of lesbian—or about-to-be-lesbian leftist radicals in Montreal (Heroine), and then I realized that what I really get ignited by is the way she harnesses her prose to move her characters. How language can be an active part of narrative, rather than just a container—that you can start your writing inquiry from a place of linguistic interrogation, that this might really get you somewhere new. How experimentation through writing is urgently important in times of crisis, or overlapping crises, which is of course true of the present moment.<sup>294</sup>

The most urgent crises now—climate change, cost-of-living/lack of available housing, xenophobia and racism, and AI, demand different linguistic strategies than the crises Scott was dealing with. But as Bradley states, it's important to return to “experimentation through writing” in order to make sense of the world in times of upheaval and uncertainty. In Montreal's Parc-Ex neighborhood, I attended a reading of Bradley's that felt very in the spirit of the network. They read recent writing, along with their (romantic) partner, the poet Eli Tareq El Bechelany-Lynch, and the poet Nico Dawson, brother of the recently passed author Caroline Dawson. Languages present included English, French, Arabic, Cantonese, and Spanish. The evening was free and open to the public, and felt like a natural progression of the groundwork laid by their predecessors.

In the translation-writing space, I would like to highlight the author and translator Nathalie Stephens, who goes by the pen name Nathanaël.<sup>295</sup> Stephens was born in Montreal, has lived in France and Toronto, and currently calls Chicago home.

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<sup>294</sup> H. Felix Chau Bradley in Conversation with the author, “Permission to not be legible to everyone: An Interview with H. Felix Chau Bradley” *433 Magazine*, Nov. 2022.

<sup>295</sup> I would like to confirm here that although she goes by Nathanaël, Stephens definitively uses she/her pronouns in interviews and in her biography.

She is responsible for translating authors like Trish Salah, Scott, and Bhanu Kapil into French, and French authors like Hervé Guibert and Édouard Glissant into English.<sup>296</sup> Aside from this, she writes hybrid genre works that combine essay, fiction, and poetry in French and English, including her groundbreaking *Je Nathanaël* (L'Hexagone, 2003) and *Touch of Affliction* (Coach House, 2006). Though she no longer lives in Montreal, the city undoubtedly influenced her experimental, multilingual writing, and crucially, she is still a writer who is most often published and read in Montreal and Canada. I came to her through Elena Basile's essay: "A Scene of Intimate Entanglements, or, Reckoning with the 'Fuck' of Translation" in the fantastic anthology, *Queering Translation, Translating the Queer*.<sup>297</sup> Basile teaches at the Bonham Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies at Toronto University and is responsible for translating *Le désert mauve* into Italian. She writes of *Je Nathanaël*: "[Stephen's] thinking keeps traveling across multiple disciplinary (architectural, visual, literary, philosophical, mathematical) and linguistic...terrains."<sup>298</sup> The approach of highlighting the travel (the trans-) inherent in translation is entirely in line with Brossard's vehicles driving through the desert, or Scott's mathematical approach to language, or Marchessault's literary intertextual practice. She is writing reflexively about the act of translation while translating her self between languages, just as the members of the network did. Yet she is also expanding their work by

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<sup>296</sup> Rob McLennan, "12 or 20 questions: with Nathalie Stephens," *12 or 20 questions*, October 5, 2007, <https://12or20questions.blogspot.com/2007/10/12-or-20-questions-with-nathalie.html>.

<sup>297</sup> Elena Basile, "A Scene of Intimate Entanglements, or, Reckoning with the 'Fuck' of Translation,." In *Queering Translation, Translating the Queer*, 1st ed., edited by Brian James Baer and Klaus Kaindl. Routledge.

<sup>298</sup> Basile, "A Scene of Intimate Entanglements," 34.

playing around with and breaking down gender as the reader tries to figure out—is Nathanaël a queer boy? Is Nathalie? The experience of femaleness is not the point here so much as the universal experience of living in a gendered body. As Queyras said of *Mauve Desert*, it “was and is a call to remake literature.” Literature must adapt and evolve to meet the conditions of its time, or it dies out. I would like to leave you with the title of the 2008 Quebec Triennial, which takes its name from a quote by the French chemist Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier: *Nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed*.<sup>299</sup> It serves as a motto for art, translation, and creative writing, although of course, something is created in the artistic process. These contemporary authors are transforming past work (sometimes their own, sometimes that of others), breathing new life into the network. The different iterations of the network travel through disciplines and art forms and (new) linguistic terrain, remaking Canadian feminist and queer literature, so that it can be remade again in the future.

Nothing is lost, everything is created, everything is transformed.

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<sup>299</sup> Marc Mayer, *Foreword to Catalogue for The Quebec Triennial*, Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, 2008, 11, [https://macrepertoire.macm.org/media/publications/catalogues/D/CA2008.6\\_DNa.pdf](https://macrepertoire.macm.org/media/publications/catalogues/D/CA2008.6_DNa.pdf).

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