

Horizons of Transgression in a Lesbian Novel: Nicole Brossard's *Mauve Desert*

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*A lesbian who does not reinvent the world is
a lesbian on the path to disappearance*
-Nicole Brossard

Abstract

The following article analyzes Nicole Brossard's *Mauve Desert* as a lesbian novel. The author raises several complex issues, like the definition and history of lesbians, before discussing structural aspects that clearly place Brossard's text as specifically feminist lesbian. The three sections that conform the novel interconnect lesbian experience, writing and translation. As such, the novel succeeds in transgressing patriarchal authority and opening a space of collaborative free lesbian literary creativity.

Key words: Nicole Brossard, feminism, lesbian, lesbian novel

Resumen

El siguiente artículo analiza *Mauve Desert*, escrita por Nicole Brossard, como una novela lésbica. La autora introduce ciertos temas complejos, como la historia y definición del lesbianismo antes de adentrarse en el análisis de los aspectos estructurales que claramente convierten el texto de Brossard en una novela lésbica feminista. Las tres secciones que comprende la novela construyen un espacio de interconexión entre la experiencia, la escritura y la traducción lésbicas. Como tal, la novela logra transgredir exitosamente la autoridad patriarcal, a la vez que abre un espacio liberador de creación literaria lésbica colaborativa.

Palabras claves: Nicole Brossard, feminismo, lesbianismo, novela lésbica

What is a lesbian? Few words are as charged with challenge as the word lesbian. I like to think of lesbian as a space of unlimited possibility, but this means that it is also a space of struggle. There is nothing wrong with that; feminism is ultimately about struggle. Nicole Brossard, a lesbian feminist author, describes it thus: “For me the word *lesbian* is laden with an existential flavour and fervour that derive from our faculty for dreams, imagination, utopia” (23). And literature is in fact where we can see this faculty for imagination manifested the most clearly. However, it is also where the contestations over the text are also made the most evident. As Martha Vicinus argues, “[l]esbian desire is everywhere, even as it might be nowhere. Put bluntly, we lack any general agreement about what constitutes a lesbian” (433). The fundamental disagreement seems to be rooted in the necessity to establish if a lesbian has to be sexually attracted to women, and has had or has genital sex with other women, or if a lesbian is a “a woman-oriented” woman who does not necessarily have had or has genital sex with other women ¹. In fact, “the lesbian is repeatedly treated as if she were a ghost, whose sexual activities cannot be defined, and yet she repeatedly reappears, haunting the heterosexual imaginary. This ghosting of lesbian desire has made possible a denial of its reality for too long” (Vicinus 9). Thankfully, this denial has in recent years turned into intense scholarship, which, even if not really accessible to the general population, has begun to permeate even the thickly misogynist walls of academia ². Whatever the theoretical controversy surrounding the word, the realities of the women who identify as such, and the creation of a feminist literary strategy to appropriately analyze their creative productions, it is an undeniable fact that “none of the authors doubts her existence. There may be no core, no fixed definition, but lesbian subjects exist” (Idem 1). Multiplicity of debates notwithstanding, I find Brossard’s own summing up of the issue the most inspiring. She claims that “Lesbians appeared as bearers of a symbolic charge going well beyond a sexual practice” (24)³. In the characteristic beauty of her language, Brossard makes her commitment to women and to a politics that joins the erotic with the political evident when she says: “As I speak, I have a political pact among women in mind. Touch me. Private life is political ... I write and don’t want to do it alone any more. I want us. I want to make history shake and shudder and growl” (Qtd in Forsyth 50). This growling will come from the lesbians, from the brave women everywhere in the world who choose women over men sexually, spiritually, and ideologically, even in the face of death.

Any discussion of a novel that can be termed *lesbian* has to start with a discussion of the relationship between lesbians and language, to then be able to move into the realm of writing itself; indeed, “the word lesbian provides a key term for the woman writer to position herself anew in an alien language” (Farwell 117). This means that *lesbian* is transgressive enough on its own to be more than an open door to rebel against patriarchy and its masculine ways of literary expression. Marilyn Farwell develops the concept of lesbian as metaphor in her article *Toward a Definition of the Lesbian Literary Imagination*. She introduces her claim by stating that “[a]lthough no little controversy surrounds

a female creativity vested in lesbian sexuality, feminist theorists from different and sometimes opposing philosophical traditions have suggested and developed this metaphor as a positive, utopian image of women's creativity" (100)⁴. Of course the image of the lesbian—whether a metaphor or not—is positive for women writers. It creates a liberating space unheard of before, especially in terms of the limiting oppressive patriarchal and heterosexist models that pre-exist it. The mere idea of a woman writer unencumbered by the heterosexual imperative is radical. Furthermore, "even as a metaphor, lesbian is a constant linguistic and conceptual challenge to the patriarchy. Unlike, for instance, the image of the mother, which not only fixes women in a patriarchal category but also can and has been appropriated by men, lesbian as an image is too threatening to be blithely absorbed by the male artist" (118). Thus, Farwell insists on the feminist potential of lesbian as metaphor, as well as on its existence in women's literature. We can then begin to discern both the context and the relevance of Nicole Brossard's arrival in its midst as a truly radical feminist lesbian writer. She does not write lesbian as metaphor. She is a lesbian writer writing lesbian novels. Forsyth expresses this artfully when she states that

For [Brossard] *to write in lesbian* does not mean making statements about lesbians in general. Rather, it involves putting words on pages that evoke the voice and corporeal presence of a woman in the world whose passions carry her towards another woman and other women. While the phenomenon is simple in itself, the impact on patriarchal cultural practice—when a woman represents both the range of human relations and the source of meaning in her life as primarily focused on and nurtured by women—is revolutionary. It is *heavy with consequences*. (46)

Hence, and as Janice Raymond corroborates, lesbian sexuality is "a sexuality that is imagination rooted in reality" (283). Precisely, this is most evident in Brossard's *Mauve Desert*. This novel is what I have chosen to call structurally lesbian; that is, in its very form—as always inseparable from content—it challenges patriarchy completely and absolutely, at the same time that it escapes unequivocally from its limitations, grounded as firmly as it is in lesbian sexuality and experience. The way in which this thematic orientation is translated into the text is precisely the subject of this paper.

Nicole Brossard's novel *Mauve Desert* stands in obvious defiance of patriarchal authority as a lesbian novel. The structure of the narrative transgresses masculine, linear conceptions of time and creates its own; this is its most innovative aspect. It can be read as one complete novel divided in three "parts" or as three separate novels in one. The first is the original text, the second is the story of a woman who reads it and becomes obsessed with its translation, and the third is the translated version, which is the result of a process not unlike lovemaking, or, in the words of the translator, Maude Laures: "To apply oneself to understanding, to overlook nothing despite the wanton flow of words" (56). In all three novels, the main female character is looking for freedom and the materialization

of sexual desire for another woman ⁵. This sexual desire is entwined with the women's desire for freedom in a way that is inextricably linked to language, to writing, to the particular ways in which women manifest themselves erotically in the texts that they create. To this end, the motifs of journal writing, translating, reading other women's writing, the endless possibilities of life in the desert, and driving at night at high speeds become central. "Brossard's writing," claims Forsyth, "weaves in ludic symbols throughout patriarchal structures and their institutions. Her words use but also upset common sense, dominant discourse, and prevailing beliefs that order, classifications and authoritative assertions reflect transcendent realities" (42). For example, Brossard upsets the traditional (patriarchal) use of the desert as symbol and / or as metaphorical space that represents death by making it Melanie's favorite place. She drives through the desert at night to remind herself of the reality of life, of beauty and movement.

When considering the novel in its entirety, Brossard's fundamental achievement is structural transgression, in the sense of the purposeful and exquisite way in which she threads each character's individual transgressions together and across the three sections of the complete text. In the first novel, *Mauve Desert*, the core issues between Melanie and the other characters are barely hinted at, very much like the saguaros that outline the horizon when she speeds through the desert. In the second novel, *A Book to Translate*, Maude Laures labors to explore these issues, to give them the depth needed to successfully translate them into another language. But in so doing, she effectively pours herself into the text, and her translation is so like original creation itself that at times the reader cannot tell them apart. In the end, in her exploration of each female character, Laures becomes part of them. In the process of reconstructing these women in order to make sense of the tragic ending of the first novel, she also falls in love with the author, creating a dialogue with her in which she confronts her over the death of Angela Parkins. The translator's deep involvement is obviously the most evident in the third novel, *Mauve the Horizon*. Brossard's emphasis on the complex relationships between writing, reading, and translating as erotic and female practices of being clearly situates *Mauve Desert* in the liberating space of the lesbian novel ⁶.

Mauve Desert revolves around Melanie and her core issue, namely, the complexity of the relationship between reality, language and desire. This is clear from the very opening of the novel: "The desert is indescribable. Reality rushes into it, rapid light. The gaze melts. Yet this morning. Very young, I was already crying over humanity" (11). Melanie is "crying over humanity" in the process of attempting to understand her position in reality, which is inevitably her position in language, as even she can sense that only through language does reality even exist. The problem is that language does not really offer her a space to exist in it. Patriarchal language, created by and for men, does not leave room for a questioning lesbian teenager. Brossard illustrates this conflict by means of the desert and its importance to her main character, who tries to mediate between the pure, unadulterated reality and beauty that she experiences in the desert and her desire to write, which is ineffably linked to her sexual desire for Angela

Parkins. As Forsyth mentions, “[The author] often situates her characters on edges where such expanses [seas, deserts, aerial expanses] meet civilization’s realities” (45). In this case, “civilization” is patriarchal language, the very lens through which reality even exists. The desert is also the place where Melanie confronts both beauty and the fear that her desire produces. She says: “I was wide awake in the questioning but inside me was a desire which free of obstacles frightened me like a certitude” (11). This fear, however, is not a negative kind of fear at all, as she explains later on in her own words: “Here in the desert, fear is precise. Never an obstacle. Fear is real, is nothing like anguish. It is as necessary as a day of work well done. It is localized, familiar and inspires no fantasies” (22). One of the obstacles that she rids herself of is language, and its inability to fully incorporate her as a linguistic agent because of its intrinsic and essential exclusion of women. In her article “Our Last Chance for Silence,” author Catherine Campbell argues that the desert, in fact, represents pre-linguistic space for Melanie (142). Precisely, and the character’s process is a literal and metaphorical coming out of the desert and into an inevitably patriarchal language that will betray her in the end, when she is unable to translate her feelings of loss after Angela’s death into words.

But before the tragic ending that will then open the space for *A Book to Translate*, Melanie is still somewhere between the desert, where “she exists in her own right—without comparison [and is in direct] contact not only with things but with her emotions as well” (Campbell 143), and her mother’s hotel, where she longs for a relationship like her mother’s and Lorna’s and where she is confronted by the reality of a society created by men, and thus by a kind of fear that *is* negative. In fact, in the motel, watching the horror of the daily news, Melanie “would turn up the television and devote body and soul to the overpowerful fear of reality” (25). The reality of the world is juxtaposed to the *precise* and liberating reality of the desert, as we can see in the following passage:

On dry storm nights I would become tremors, detonations, total discharge. Then surrender to all the illuminations, those fissures which like so many wounds lined my virtual body, linking me to the vastness. And so the body melts like a glimmer of light in the abstract of words. Eyes, existence give in before that which comes forth inside us, certitude. The desert drinks everything in. Furor, solitude. (20)

Here we can clearly see the “certitude” of Melanie’s self, which then becomes impossible for her to translate into, either in her writing, or in her relationships with other women. Just as evident is the fact that, indeed, “Brossardian words produce seisms in the apparently stable grounds of reality; they open spaces that readers quickly recognize as having to be opened, spaces that you probably hadn’t previously known were available for imagination, fresh knowledge, emotion and experience” (Forsyth 44). When Melanie attempts to write her emotions, she is catapulted into an unknown space—that of linguistic representation—and is forced to face the fact that she will always *lose* when writing beauty *into* language: “I had now

entered the fear of the unspeakable, in the frenzy of words involuntarily I was abdicating to silence. ... The horizon is a mirage that orients the thirsting body” (28). As soon as Melanie takes up her pen to translate her desire for Angela Parkins, she gives up the desert, her one haven, her pre-linguistic safe place: “I lost the desert. I lost the desert in the night of writing” (29). This “night of writing” takes place in her friend’s Grazie’s house, after she has driven the entire night to escape the motel and the inevitable jealousy that her mother’s fulfilling lesbian partnership arouses in her. She is jealous of her mother, of her mother’s lover Lorna, of their intimacy, of the way in which she disappears when they touch. She observes them closely, and in spite of the fact that she loves them deeply—“[d]uring the day my mother would be a woman, day and night, Lorna would be with my mother and I would cherish their winged presence” (36)—she needs to run away and drive all night in the desert, desperately trying to come to terms with her inevitable yet painful insertion into language: “I was fifteen and I was watching reality encroach on beings like a tragic distortion of beauty. Humanity’s trembling aura hovered in the harsh light. Reality was rushing by, I was diving into humanity” (32). After she has written herself and her desire down in word, Melanie strives to undo what she has done. She runs back into the desert, driving, driving, driving, desperately trying to reconcile the irreconcilable:

An exhausting solitude I inflicted upon myself as if to recapture that time from before writing, before reality. ... I wanted heat and thirst whole, excessive. I wanted my body feverish, to lose nothing of its fluency, of its exuberance. I wanted it both in focus and out of the frame, overlaid on the hyperreality of blue, compelled in its every cell to acquire a taste along the reality of roads for all the ephemeral shapes crossing my gaze. ... Only what’s body, sweat, thirst. (28)

Melanie somehow knows that her desiring lesbian body will never be translatable into patriarchal language. And, narratively speaking, this seems to be what thrusts the first part of the novel into Angela’s horribly violent death at the hands of the one male character in the book.

Right before the end of *Mauve Desert*, Melanie finally manages to get close to Angela. The actual physical manifestation of her lesbian desire brings her back to the reality and beauty of the desert as she knew it before *writing* it and therefore *losing* it. She says: “I don’t really know Angela Parkins and yet here we are, bodies close for a moment, then distant, long and slow in the distance of America. We are inseparable and distant in the midst of eternity. We are the desert and *matter* of fact as shadows set” (45). Angela and Melanie *are*, in fact. No man-made language stands between them at that moment, for any distance that exists between them cannot question their bodily integration into one another. This harmonious, lesbian connection is shattered by the intrusion of patriarchy and language, both metaphorically and literally, when Longman shoots and kills Angela. Melanie’s reaction evidences the breakage between her and her capacity to write about reality; once again, there is only imbalance and distortion:

Angela we're dancing, yes? Angela Parkins has no more hips, no more shoulders or neck. She is dissolving. Angela's eyes, quick the eyes! There is no more balance between us. My whole body is faced with disaster. Not a sound. The commotion all around like a silent movie. At the far end of the room, there is longman's impassive stare. The desert is big. Angela Parkins is lying, there, exposed to all eyes. Angela is dissolving in the black and white of reality. What happened? He was, after all a man of genius. Of course Melanie is night teen. (46)

As Angela dissolves into the "black and white of reality," Melanie becomes unable to articulate her experience of reality, immersed in a "silent movie." Within this soundless experience, Longman remains "impassive," apparently almost indifferent to the tragedy that his violence has inflicted on the women. The murder becomes the manifestation of his male desire to dominate, to do more than calculate endless equations locked up in his room while others (other men, presumably) go out into the desert and actually test his figures and materialize them into actual bomb explosions.⁷ Longman's obvious repressed homosexuality is shown the most clearly in the following passage:

He was singing and the water was entering his mouth. Longman would have liked his body muscular. He 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. Longman imagined the muscles straining, the heart throbbing, the veins pumping, the sweat of fear which would not have been like his perspiration during the hours spent doing figures. He would have loved the action and wholly his enemies' bodies. (35)

The inability to express his sexuality is likely one important reason why Longman kills Angela. He cannot stand the fact that these two women, *attractive* women, choose each other's bodies over any man's and are able to make their lesbian desire evident in a room full of people, a double emasculation of sorts which he takes upon himself to punish. Melanie ends the book by emphasizing the absolute disruption of her capacity to relate to anyone after suffering the impact of reality *via* the violence of male discourse: "Then came the mauve of dawn, the desert and the road like a bloody profile. There are memories for digging into words without defiling graves. I cannot get close to any of you" (46). However, Brossard brilliantly transforms the apparent finality of Melanie's defeat back into loneliness and wordlessness (an almost-death) by using it as a transition into the most creative section of the novel, *A Book to Translate*. Indeed, and by the specifically lesbian weaving of form and content evident in the text's structure, the author manages to construct for the reader a reality in which Melanie does, in fact, *get close* to everyone and everything once again.

A Book to Translate is the longest of the three sections of the novel, and the one where all the dialogue takes place. This book is the core of the novel,

the absolute center of Brossard's lesbian writing project, I believe. Here we see the actual processing of reality and the search for beauty and lesbian fulfillment that Melanie was brutally stopped from realizing in *Mauve Desert*. Maude Laures, the translator, embarks upon a journey with the original text, with the *auther*⁸, with the characters, with the (lesbian) reader, and with Nicole Brossard herself in a spectacularly innovative type of writing that I have chosen to call *lesbian*⁹. Maude Laures, the translator, expresses her attraction to the text very explicitly: "She was thinking slowness while with her gaze she abstracted the book's equilibrium. And it fell over in the slow motion of silence arousing the throbbing desire that never quits her" (51). In effect, Laures falls in love with the lesbian erotics of *Mauve Desert* and is propelled forward in her exploration and interaction with the text, characters and authers¹⁰ by her lesbian desire—to understand Laure Angstelle, to translate *Mauve Desert*, to insert herself in the matrix of the text and the women themselves:

Everything had nonetheless been possible in the auther's language, but in her own she needed to arm herself with patience. Unfailingly find the fault line, the tiny place where meaning calls for some daring moves. Such was the price of beauty, like a longed-for light. Maude Laures had let herself be seduced, *sucked in* by her reading. It is not always possible to dream without having to follow through on the images. (55)

In a way, Laures is now faced with the consequences of having fallen prey to the text's seduction. The challenge has become, now, to find the truth of the text, the truth of the characters' and their actions, the truth of the auther... summarily speaking, she has to unravel the lesbian structure of the novel to then "ravel" it again in another language, her language, therefore immersing herself and her desire in it as well.¹¹ Lynn Huffer describes *searching* in a way that is very helpful in elaborating on what I have been calling the *immersion* of the translator in the text that she translates:

I think that Brossard is one of those cartographers of an invisible *I* who speaks from the heart of an invisible *we*. The line of that *we* runs parallel with mine, for a moment, perhaps, but it also stretches away behind and before me. Of course, we have to constantly ask the question: who are *we*? For Brossard that asking is part of the struggle. Nothing is given from the start, especially not the origin of an identity. The *we* can only find itself in the effort and the struggle of the searching. (114)

This critic is evidently addressing the connections made possible by Brossard's lesbian writing, which connects the (lesbian) readers, characters, and *authers* with lesbian literature, identity, reality, beauty, and truth. In Brossard's own words, "wholeness for a women [sic] is knowing that she is all of this when, with her entire body, she stretches out majestically toward life" (Qtd in Forsyth 25). *A Book to Translate* "stretches" to touch all other interconnecting parts of *Mauve Desert* in ways that make it the most dynamic and intense section of the novel.

“Brossard’s writing,” argues Forsyth, “weaves in ludic symbols throughout patriarchal structures and their institutions. Her words use but also upset common sense, dominant discourse, and prevailing beliefs that order, classifications and authoritative assertions reflect transcendent realities” (42). As Laures works her way through Angstelle’s text, she comes across many instances of this new, lesbian re-working of patriarchal assertions. In fact, it is her job (and her passion) to delve into them, to explore them and then come up with ways to “fill in the gaps,” so that she can understand, even *experience* the feelings, thoughts, and emotions of the characters. One telling instance of this collaborative process, for example, is when the translator interprets and expands on the physical attraction between Melanie and Angela, in a section subtitled *The Tattoo*: “There is now a slowness to the night. Voices and laughter can be heard coming from the Bar. They are leaning against the Meteor, Angela Parkins, her head toward the teenaged girl, lips nearing the indelible body. The ocelli are like little apparitions which on the pigmented dermis attract the eye, a sure code for the species” (73).¹² It is impossible not to sense Laures herself interspersed in the sensuality of this description; she is, in a way, participating of the erotic exchange between the two women, as she endeavors to experience the desire from Angela’s point of view, point of *body*, I would call it. Indeed, Laures describes (and includes herself in) a “transcendental reality,” beautifully. Susan Holbrook refers to this literary lesbian transaction when she asserts that “Brossard invokes *délire / de lire* in order to convey the momentous stimulation, excitation, and creative response a woman experiences when reading the text of another woman” (176). Later, the translator designates an entire section for the characters, among which she includes Laure Angstelle, where she delights in giving way to her own desire for the auther of the original text, and indulges in “the thought that Laure Angstelle had no doubt been a proud woman with a supple body, eyes filled with torment, vulnerable in the face of beauty and silence, dispirited whenever human misery fell like spittle upon the living” (83). In this passage, Laures clearly manages to conjure up the image, the sheer physicality of the original auther with clarity and in an act not devoid of love. Once summoned this explicitly, the process of creating *Mauve the Horizon* together, continues spiritedly, sensuously, to climax in the dialogue between Angstelle and Perkins that will be discussed later on.

Laures goes on to explore Melanie’s mother and Lorna’s relationship, dominated by feelings of alternating comfort and jealousy on Melanie’s part in *Mauve Desert*. She even makes sure to speculate on their pasts, their backgrounds. In the following lines, the translator describes an imagined encounter between a young Lorna and the first girl that she kissed: “Lorna Myher waited a moment then when the girl reached her, at that distance when breaths can intermingle, kissed her on the mouth. She closed her eyes. Lorna’s gaze slid over the lacquered green leaves of a creosote bush, swept into the scarlet and sweet taste of the flowers all around” (86). Here, the girl who kisses her aids Lorna in becoming one with her environment, with a nature that is benevolent to their union. Lesbian eroticism, in terms of Lorna’s and Kathy’s relationship, is later described thus by Laures:

Whenever Lorna came very close, Kathy Kerouac would wrap her voice around her and Lorna would silently sojourn in the contrast of words leaving it up to the little flashes blinking in her gaze to round out the sound shapes that made her long for Kathy Kerouac. When Kathy talked that way, the television would sink into the distance like a washed-out form of civilization. (90)

The closeness between the two women is such that everything, patriarchal exterior world, (symbolized in the fear-provoking television set) included, disappears into complete unimportance. Later on, in the *Scenes* section of *A Book to Translate*, where Laures actually allows the women to speak to one another, Kathy tells Lorna: “I don’t desire you. I’m moved by you. I’m keenly touched by everything in you that signifies. That is infinitely more precious than desiring you. I’m vitally touched by you” (125). In these luminous lines, Brossard is making evident the intimate connection between desiring lesbian bodies, writing, and the signifiers of language that shape reality and beauty. Kathy does not bother perplexing over the complications of men’s language and what it does or does not do to the reality of her love for Lorna; that is a struggle she leaves to her daughter Melanie, the writer, even as she warns her about the danger involved in obsessing over it: “Melanie, you mustn’t think about death. Death is something somewhere invented by men to forget and elude reality. ... I’m saying that men invented death because they think about it. They cultivate it raucously” (120). To Kathy, men’s writing is equivalent to death, to the killing of the subject into patriarchal art. With this statement, Laures is also introducing the element of irony, given that at the end of the first book, actual physical death interrupts Melanie and Angela’s relationship. However, as we have seen, this ironic element is chiefly a stylistic device that comments on the act of writing itself, for the third book clearly opens up the possibility of unlimited lesbian collaborative creation in its intrinsic denial of the patriarchal destructiveness manifested in Angela’s murder.¹³

“In *Mauve Desert*,” explains McPherson, “the writing, reading and translating of the protagonist Melanie’s story suggested the transformative potential of narrative. Telling and retelling, grounded in both imagination and desire, might offer a way of countering the violent ending” (53). Indeed, Brossard overcomes the violence of the male character in her novel. One of the ways in which she accomplishes such undeniably (lesbian) feminist feat is in the representation given to Longman in *A Book to Translate*, which is impossible to even quote in the present essay, as he is refused a single word other than his name. In Laures’ work-in-progress lesbian collaborative translation / writing, Longman is enclosed, and in fact, relegated to a “file” which contains only a few black and white photographs. The magnitude of his insignificance is further emphasized by the fact that the man’s face is never visible in any of the pictures, which obliterates the destructive power that he had over the women in the first book of the novel—he is a not-body, a non-presence. So, in essence, he is transformed into a passive, voiceless, objectified version of his previous character-self, controlled entirely by

the auther, in spite of the fact that he brutally murders Angela in *Mauve Desert*. The implications of this textual (and visual) transformation are *heavy with consequence*. Narratively, structurally, he is forced—and reduced to—the selective images that the auther and the translator choose to show us, the readers. Longman is therefore stripped of agency and control, and this structural maneuver is both feminist and lesbian. In the most poignant scene of them all, the auther and Angela Parkins sit face to face and discuss the deathly power that Longman possessed in the first book as follows:

-And yet you knew him.

-I knew him by reputation. He was an inventor, a great scholar, but how could I ever imagine that that man carried such hatred inside him?

...

- He looked normal. He looked like a normal client. To tell you the truth, I never noticed him. My whole being was involved in the rhythm moving me closer to Melanie.

-Well then I'll tell you. I'll try to tell you why you died so suddenly, absurdly. You died because you forgot to look around you. You freed yourself too quickly and because you thought yourself free, you no longer wanted to look around you. You forgot about reality. (132)

"I never noticed him," explains the dead Angela. She was too preoccupied with the desire that she felt for Melanie. This explains both the cause of Longman's hatred for her and her actual "absurd" death. But the fact that this conversation is even possible textually, structurally, is wildly radical. This type of internal interrogation of the forces that shape the narrative is very rare in literature. That is the point I am trying to make here.

Toward the end of *A Book to Translate*, Laures, done with her intense investigation of the characters and events in *Mauve Desert*, dedicates a brief section to her "final thoughts" on the novel and her relationship with it, with the women, with beauty, reality, and writing. She comes to two very important conclusions, especially related to the explorations of the present study. First, she makes a very clear distinction between the two types of fear that are evident in Melanie's description of the world. One, as we have already discussed, is the pure, precise fear *in the desert*, of reality *unimpeded* by language, and, the second kind of fear is man-made, impure and immobilizing to lesbian women and their creative powers: "Fear is for every woman a signal to withdraw. It is not her limit, it is in her head a 'hollow' manner of vigilance forming between subjectivity and reality: a pocket of water in the gaze which makes the world blur, quick take. Fear impedes" (147). And secondly, she understands that the contrast between these two fears speaks, in essence, of the opposition between nature and civilization, or, to use an image from the text itself, the broad expanse of Melanie's mauve desert corrupted by bomb explosions orchestrated by men like Longman.¹⁴ Laures reflects on this thoughtfully in the following passage:

But nature is said to be everywhere for inside our skull, it exaggerates, embroiders, bluffs, amasses seas, cantons, forests and deserts, sumptuous dawns, orchids with no name. Nature dismisses us. So we occupy ourselves with the answer, seeking in language the tools liable to divert us from the nostalgia endlessly at work among the most extravagant settings. Yet civilization is always very simple: a woman, a birth, machinery, death. *The trick*. (149)

Having made up her mind about the theoretical core of the text, to put in a certain way, Laures, as translator, decides that she now understands the work well enough to begin *writing-translating-creating*. As she puts it herself, “she progressively got accustomed to the idea of becoming a voice both other and alike in the world derived from Laure Angstelle” (160). As for her motivation to undertake this task in the first place, Laures seems to desire to partake in the creation of this story, to make it linguistically accessible to more people, in order to simply make the world bear witness to the struggles of lesbian desire, which definitely partakes of “the initiative taken by all Québec novelist-poets, who do not write to add stories to the many stories which encumber bookstores, but to commit life’s movement to writing, to ensure that fiction reveals a part of what is real but concealed, to serve women as speech on which they can depend” (Dupré 98). This “service” is accomplished in Brossard’s lesbian novel, by means of lesbian collaboration. Indeed, “Laures knew that now was the time to slip anonymous and whole between the pages. Full desert, full horizon. In the lower belly, there where the tongue wants, a fine slow fear was beginning to well up, to distribute tasks” (161). From the bodily root of her lesbian desire, Laures is now ready to immerse herself into the work demanded by the co-creation of the original novel, for, as she phrases the transformation herself, “[w]here characters, objects, fear and desire had been, words were all [she] could see now. Words were taking over the action, poised for the capture of senses” (162). When she resurfaces, *Mauve the Horizon* will complete Brossard’s trilogy and the structural beauty of *Mauve Desert* will finally be displayed in its complete brilliance.

Mauve the Horizon is both “other and alike” to *Mauve Desert*. Having been interpreted by Maude Laures, the text acquires one more level of meaning even as it respects and retains Laure Angstelle’s original complexity. For instance, Melanie’s descriptions are now a bit more articulate, as in the following passage: “I had chosen to impose full sunlight on myself, to exhaust my body as if this could help me recapture the time from before reality ... In my civilized body I wanted the beast to sum up its code, that in the hyperreality of blue, images be reduced to a few glimpses, that the violent flow of words cease. Only what’s body. Nothing to think. Heat, asphalt” (184). The use of the word “civilized” explicitly points to our previous analysis of the Brossardian opposition of society and nature. Here Melanie struggles to free herself from the sense of oppression produced by the entry into the world of language. Laures allows the character an articulation of her emotions that would have never been possible without the process of lesbian collaboration evident in *A Book to Translate*: “Ever since I had

dared to write, reality was settling into every thing, taking up a lot of space” (180-181). The verb “dared” is very interesting. It speaks precisely to the immersion of the translator into the text of the first novel that we have been analyzing. Laures is indeed commenting on the transgressive aspect of Melanie’s will to write, to insert herself and her experience as a young, desiring lesbian woman into the reality of the world, even if in doing so she places her intimate, *exact* relationship to beauty in danger. Melanie’s goal, as expressed by Laures, is to one day be able to achieve some sort of balance: “I would [then] have the impression of understanding everything, night, Grazie, my mother, Lorna and all the other women who lived inside me. I would slip deeply into that intimate something which in reality rules everything” (194). Farwell refers to the specifically lesbian aspect of Melanie’s endeavor when she says that the “imaginative process that is circumscribed by lesbian is ... a shattering of old images and language, a space in which the [lesbian] woman writer can both oppose patriarchal categories and begin to define a new concept of reality” (117). This “new concept of reality” would encompass a space where lesbians can truly exist in their complete interpretation and experience of beauty, and it is exactly what Brossard accomplishes in the totality of *Mauve Desert*, in making lesbian writing come to life. Lesbian writing, in fact, produces “the necessity to re-think the very bases on which one constructs one’s sense of physical being in the material world, one’s sense of self, subjectivity and identity, one’s sense of relating to others, and one’s sense of knowledge and reality (Forsyth 41-42). The “one” we are dealing with here is evidently a *lesbian* one who propels herself transgressively forward in collaboration with lesbian others towards a liberating universe of free lesbian existence, in reality, beauty, and language. At last, perhaps we can glimpse this place in Melanie’s description of the mauve desert (as translated by Maude Laures)... “In the space *everything was ablaze, carnival voice the horizon, beautiful masked ball, cavalcade, the forest ferns in a fury, fiery beauty, there were so many words yet as long as thinking practice patience*” (184).

Notes

- 1 This obviously refers to Adrienne Rich’s now classic article *Compulsory Heterosexuality and the Lesbian Experience*, before and after being altered. In recent years the argument has expanded to more complex issues, such as desire *versus* actual sexual contact, and if genital contact is in fact the only contact to be considered “sexual” *etcetera*. We cannot overlook the fact that even the biological / social definition of “woman” is being (rightfully) contested, in spite of the fact that many feminist and feminist lesbian discourses continue to ignore the existence of transgendered women. Many of these discussions have been influenced by postmodernism and/or queer theory. The specificities of this fascinating, ongoing debate in the field of lesbian studies and/or feminism cannot, however, be analyzed in the present paper.
- 2 Martha Vicinus summarizes this scholarship thus: “To date, lesbian historiography has concentrated on three areas of research: (1) the retrieval and reconstruction of both individual lesbians and lesbian communities; (2) the exploration of the two major pa-

- radigmatic forms of lesbian behavior, namely, romantic friendships and butch-femme roles; and (3) the question of when the modern lesbian identity arose and under what circumstances”(434).
- 3 She does not mean, however, to minimize the sexual act itself, but rather expand on its meaning. Such minimization is nowhere to be seen in Brossard’s work, where the lesbian sex act, paired with lesbian sexual desire, is of paramount importance.
- 4 Farwell’s premise is that “What is called lesbian does not depend on women loving women genitally but, rather, on the presence and attention of women to other women that is analogous to the act of loving sexually another like oneself. In fact, words like presence, attentions, and sight are used more often to describe this metaphoric lesbian” (110). Needless to say, many lesbian theorists would disagree with this assumption of the “optionality” of the sexual/genital interest of lesbians in other women. Even if I find her literary arguments both sound and interesting, I remain on the more “essentialist” side of the argument, for I believe that sexuality is at the forefront—even if not exclusively—of lesbianism. Again, the implications of these statements escape the limitations of the present paper.
- 5 Melanie’s mother is a lesbian, her best friend’s mother is a lesbian, the translator is a lesbian, Angela Parkins is a lesbian. All the main characters in the three novels are connected in their specifically *lesbian* sexual desire. The presence of this desire, contained in the *form* of three interconnected novels, alters the structure of the text, its *content*, in significant ways; it is a complete departure from the traditional, linear, male-dominated novel. It is transgressive, powerful, and brilliantly feminist.
- 6 A lesbian novel exceeds a feminist novel in that it deals exclusively with lesbians and lesbian relationships. *Mauve Desert* is a world inhabited only by women who love other women. In this particular case, the lesbian theme is explored erotically and textually, by showcasing the writing process as a manifestation of lesbian desire.
- 7 The final violence of the male character is also a consequence of his previous, constant feelings of inadequacy in terms of masculinity and overall maleness; the fact that he creates the mathematical means necessary for the bomb’s explosion is not sufficient to overcome his self-perceived physical and emotional deficiencies (or even *impotencies*, as the author seems to suggest): “Longman who had invented the explosion like a hope for beauty knew he would not be able to survive the beauty of the equations... Longman felt fragile, full of a bitter solitude. He saw himself broken, mirror, fraction, incapable of figuring out his wound. So he sank impotent into prayer. Eyelids closed, hands joined, he pleaded for a long time, insensitive to the debris falling out on his shoulders” (31). In typically misogynist fashion, the only way to “unbreak” himself is by “breaking” Melanie and Angela away from each other, by any means necessary.
- 8 Brossard, as part of a group of Québécoises that re-think the concept of *l’écriture féminine* as what Louise Dupré calls *écriture au féminin*, further transgresses the assumptions of linear, dialectical, and patriarchal literature by changing the “gender neutral” term “author” to the woman-specific “auther.” These female modernist poets, writing in the 1970s, sought to explore “women’s subjectivity while inscribing it in textuality” (84). Such a daring strategy makes particular sense to the present analysis, especially in terms of the way in which the “translator” co-writes the second and third sections of the novel, and in the way even the (lesbian) reader is invited to do the same.
- 9 The *lesbian writing* that Laures loves in the third book follows Brossard’s own *lesbian writing*; that is, the way in which a lesbian writes herself into the text that expresses her particular lesbian desire, which in turn inevitably affects her perspective and worldview, as well as the structure of the narrative that she creates.

- 10 Here I am referring to the fictional auther of *Mauve Desert*, Laure Angstelle, and the actual auther of the complete text, Nicole Brossard.
- 11 At the beginning of the translating process, Laures refers to the fundamental nature of discovering the truth: “‘It’s not true’ ceaselessly returns, returning like an intrusion in her notes, canceling all efforts at concentration. ‘It’s not true’ returns, restrains her in her world, holds her back from this wild desire which forever lingers, the panic fear of substituting herself to the auther of this book” (53). This feared substitution never actually takes place, as is evident from the third section of the novel; the translated *Mauve the Horizon* is living proof of lesbian collaboration rather than substitution (which necessitates erasure).
- 12 In the section dedicated to Angela Parkins, Laures fills in her character further when she makes the character describe herself as a woman who “loved extreme feelings, explosions of joy, of voices, sudden rushes of tenderness making the body levitate, speech that is luxuriant, abundant and raw for, she believed, the body must be voracious and in the same breath be able to fly off as capricious and ductile as a silk thread” (94). This is one more clear example of the way in which Brossard brilliantly manages to make lesbian desire manifest itself vitally from every direction in the novel.
- 13 On this matter, Holbrook elaborates as follows: “Replacing a notion of the unidirectional flow of knowledge (from intending author, from source language, from original), delirium’s ‘reciprocal transference’ acknowledges the traffic between readers, languages, versions, words” (185). This process clearly relates to what I have been calling “collaborative lesbian writing.” In fact, at one point in their conversation, the auther actually advises the translator on how to go about her work. Angstelle says, “Keep to beauty, have no fear. Muffle civilization’s noises in you. Learn to bear the unbearable: the raw of all things” (134). Again we witness the relevance of beauty and reality and their relationship to writing, as well as the importance of remaining “raw,” in truth.
- 14 As Campbell simply puts it: “In short, the man-made creation, reality, is in opposition to the certainty and pure expression of the desert” (145). This opposition of “realities” is evident to most Brossard critics in general, and to most critics concerned with the specific analysis of *Mauve Desert*.

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