# i, a mother/ i am other: *L'Amér* and the Matter of *Mater*

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> "The fascination for writing the never previously written and the fascination for the unattained body proceed from the same desire.
> The desire to bring the real body violently to life in the words of the book, the desire to do violence by writing to the language which *I* { j/e} can enter only by force."
>
> (*The Lesbian Body* 10)

*this title waives all right to this speech*

Nicole Brossard calls *L'Amèr* a book of combat (14), and indeed the (s)wordplay begins with the title—one word that suggests three: *la mère* (the mother), *la mer* (the sea), and *l'amer* (the bitter). The English translation *These Our Mothers* by Barbara Godard cleverly sustains this tripartite pun through elision: these our mothers, the sea our mother, and the sour mothers. Such paranomasia recalls *The Newly Born Woman* by French feminists Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, a text whose title in French also suggests a phonetic conflation of signifiers: *la jeune née* (the newly born woman), *là je n'est* (there the first-person subject does not exist), and *là je une nais* (there an origin of a feminine subject). Within both texts, the (s)wordplay in the title immediately announces the feminist attempt to undercut, to parry, to disarm, the hegemony of phallogocentric signification. The word "title" has more than one meaning: a title not only represents the proper name for a text, but also signifies a univocal right to authority over property. Titles entitle books to be appropriated by author(itie)s for the purpose of expressing an apparently stable position within discourse; however, the title of Brossard's text dis-

rupts this stability through a linguistic self-consciousness that reveals the signifier's persistent tendency to evade the univocity of the proper name. Brossard's title does not lend itself to an economy of monosemic restrictions, but gives itself away to an economy of polysemic excess. The title in effect prepares the reader for the text's own violent attempt to destabilize any fixed, authoritative relationship of exchange between writer and reader.

*she resorts (to) words*

(S)wordplay is violent, but this violence is always an act of self-defense. The defender, by virtue of her sex, cannot avoid participating in the duel of discourse without surrendering her life to the opponent, the master, a man skilled in the use of his weaponry, "language"—weaponry that the defender is always forced to employ, albeit according to her own style of combat. The battle is staged within the for(u)m of the book, an are(n)a where violence erupts at the level of both form and content. The syntactical fragmentation of the text parallels the deconstructive activity of the depicted narrator, who explicitly juxtaposes an act of violence with an act of writing: *"[j]'ai tué le ventre et je l'écris" (L'Amér* 19)—"I have murdered the womb and I am writing it" (*Mothers* 21).[1] The violence of the narrator is directed self-reflexively at both her uterus and her text, but this attack is not a spectacle of self-mutilation—the kind of masochistic spectacle that, according to Clément in *The Newly Born Woman*, typefies the experience of the hysteric, who reifies her suffering by repeatedly attacking herself instead of her male audience in order to sustain the voyeuristic attention of men (18-19). While Brossard's narrator attacks her opponent by miming an assault upon her own body and upon the body of her text, this attack is not designed to reaffirm the inevitability of either feminine suffering or feminine speechlessness (as the attack does in the case of the hysteric); on the contrary, the violence of the narrator symbolizes the irrevocable rejection of such inarticulate pain. Her attack does not result in the impotent aphasia of hysteria; instead, the death of her womb, of her "[a]nonymous matrix" (13), is correlated with the birth of her writing, of her "polysemous dream" (37).

Brossard's text sets out to dramatize what Jacques Derrida in *Of Grammatology* might call "the unity of violence and writing"

(106)—the notion that "writing cannot be thought outside of the horizon of intersubjective violence" (127): in short, language is the site of struggle, of hierarchies both established and dismantled. Brossard's text demonstrates that women have been the historical victims of language and that this victimization is enacted through the very words that women have traditionally spoken: such oppression appears to be embodied, for example, in the uterine terminology deployed by Brossard's text. The Latin word for "womb," *matrix*, is derived from the Latin word for "mother," *mater*; however, any biogenetic connotations to the word *matrix* have been virtually lost over time due to the advent of technical discourses that have appropriated the word *matrix* for the purposes of defining specific types of mathematical arrays, circuit diagrams, and chemical substrates, all of which are associated with what Brossard in *L'Amér* calls *le laboratoir* (33),[2] a masculinized space forbidden to women. Moreover, the French word for "womb," *le ventre*, is a masculine noun, whose homophony with the word *vendre*, "to sell," suggests not only man's appropriation of the female anatomy, but also man's subsequent prostitution of it. Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* points out that the history of sociocultural law begins with exogamy, the exchange of women—an exchange coeval with language, the exchange of words (496). Luce Irigaray in *This Sex Which Is Not One* goes on to observe that both systems of exchange occur only amongst men in, what she calls, an "hom(m)o-sexual monopoly" (171), a monopoly that not only denies women any control over such exchanges, but also places the female body under erasure so that it may be subsequently transformed into a sign invested with the value of a (re)productive commodity. Women who participate in this hom(m)o-sexual economy are, according to Irigaray, rendered *indifférentes* (220), undifferentiated, in that they have no right to their own sexual identity, only to masculine definitions of it.

Femininity is merely fabricated by men through language, through the symbolic order, and is then reiterated by women, especially by mothers, who remain unwittingly complicit in this patriarchal project:

> Mothers are essential to its (re)production[....] Their responsibility is to maintain the social order without intervening so

> as to change it. Their products are legal tender in that order, moreover, only if they are marked with the name of the father, only if they are recognized within his law: that is, only insofar as they are appropriated by him. (*This Sex* 185)

Brossard's narrator retraces this theoretical framework poetically by pointing out that such appropriation always implies an arbitrary declaration of ownership, a linguistic act of violence performed upon the body—an act reserved only for the male: "[h]e took possession of the child as of a word in the dictionary" writes the narrator (22), who denounces "[p]atriarchal mothers able only to initiate their daughters to a man" (18)—mothers who willingly participate in what Irigaray calls *"la mascarade"* (220), a false femininity that permits the mother to experience desire only as it is prescribed by the desires of the father. Brossard's narrator emphasizes that "[e]very distinction which already takes away her body and her senses[...]by force of words keeps her at the other end, exiled, brought forth from him, aborted" (24). The killing of the womb by the narrator therefore becomes the dominant metaphor for the killing of an inauthentic self, one whose reproductive function has been historically subject to masculine control.

Brossard's text demonstrates that linguistic activity has always been intimately connected with man's oppression of woman and that any attempt to do violence to such oppression necessarily entails an attempt to do violence to discourse: "[t]he biological mother isn't killed without a simultaneous explosion of fiction, ideology, utterance" (23). The exclusion of woman from any condition of reproductive autonomy is directly correlated with her exclusion from any condition of discursive independence: she is acknowledged as a subject only insofar as she is subject to a male, who relegates her to the function of a mere mother, an exploited childbearer, a woman "motherhoodwinked" and then written off as a pretext for hom(m)o-sexual relationships among men. Independent exchanges conducted solely among women are, according to Irigaray, always repressed within this hom(m)o-sexual economy because such female relationships, particularly acts of lesbianism, necessarily imply a woman's rejection of her own commodification, and this rejection requires that men reappropriate the lesbian experience by interpreting it as a pathological, masculine behaviour (*This Sex* 194). Women are for-

bidden to relate independently to each other, to indulge in "free association," so to speak; consequently, there exists a linguistic void between patriarchal mothers, a void that Brossard's narrator describes as "the domestic silence" and "the senseless grammar" (26). Irigaray proposes that, in order to to disrupt this masculine monopoly on exchange, a woman must reject *la mascarade* of imposed exogamy, of imposed language, in order to adopt an aesthetic of endogamous excess, an aesthetic that allows women to interact with each other, both physically and discursively, outside the restrictive scrutiny of masculine authority (*This Sex* 215).

Brossard's text certainly embodies this aesthetic manifesto and demonstrates that, while phallogocentric ideology enforces an established schism between a woman's body and a woman's language, placing both under masculine control, a lesbian experience can defy this control by imbricating the poetic and the erotic. Writing within such an aesthetic paradigm becomes for Brossard's narrator: "[a]n exercise in deconditioning that leads me to acknowledge my own legitimacy" (16)—"[t]he means by which every woman tries to exist, to be illegitimate no more" (16). With this utterance, Brossard's narrator violates the univocity of phallogocentric signification by blurring the definitions for "legitimate" and "illegitimate." The word "legitimacy," derived from the Latin word for "law," *lex*, signifies both the state of being born into wedlock and the state of being accordant with legal regulations. These two states of being are synonymous with respect to women: to be involved in either state is to undergo the feminine version of bastardization, to be placed in an alienating, familial structure that is illegitimate in the sense that it is both spurious and false, misrepresenting sexual difference while denying women the possibility of any intercourse with each other: "[t]o submit to the father (in body) or representation[...]brings every woman back to her illegitimacy" (17). Brossard elaborates her point in a 1981 *Broadsides* interview: "[t]he fact of not existing for a man is the worst thing that can happen to him"; "[b]ut that is just what men have insisted about women, that they don't exist" (18); "[w]e need to legitimate our own existence". Paradoxically, legitimacy for the illegitimate women lies in committing a crime, in killing the womb, in literally breaking the letter of the law.

Brossard's text uses syntactical fragmentation, disrupted sentences and textual lacunae, "[s]harp words, full of gaps" (19), in order to stage this criminal activity allegorically: after all, the word "sentence" is not only a linguistic term for a syntagmatic chain that obeys grammatical rules, but also a legal term for a judgement that prescribes a time of punishing imprisonment. Brossard's narrator tries to break out of this linguistic prison, the sentence, in order to resuscitate the original, erotic connotations of the word "sentence," a signifier derived from the Latin verb *sentire*, "to feel." The text disobeys syntactic rules, in part through its apparent abuse of punctuation: the period, for example, does not consistently break up the text into discrete, syntactic units, each having a predicate structure; instead, the period frequently breaks up the text into fragments determined more by the rhythm of speech than by the meaning of words. The period is in this way transformed from a masculine indicator of resolute completion to a feminine indicator of rhythmic suspension: "period" in fact intricates within its own definition both the processes of the written text and the processes of the feminine body. Such a breaking of grammatical law does not result in mere senselessness, however, but expands the established parameters that restrict discourse to a utilitarian function: the transmission of univocal meaning.

*she (a)voids a void*

When Brossard's narrator writes that, "[i]f it weren't lesbian, this text would make no sense at all" (16), she acknowledges that within the hom(m)o-sexual monopoly her text must appear relatively unintelligible since it violates the predominant standard of phallogocentric exchange against which all discourse is judged—the phallus, the law of the father, with its formulaic production of fixed meaning. Brossard's text, however, subscribes to an altogether different system of exchange, a system that concentrates more upon the material corporeality of writing than upon the efficient production of meaning. Steve McCaffery in *North of Intention* defines meaning as profit earned through the exchange of language's material elements, the graphemic, the phonetic, the gesticulative, all of which must be expended, withdrawn, dematerialized, in order for meaning to be foregrounded (204).[3] McCaffery borrows the terminology of

George Bataille in order to distinguish between a "restricted economy" and a "general economy," the former maximizing meaning's production at the expense of language's materiality, the latter maximizing language's materiality at the expense of meaning's production (203).[3] Within the restricted economy, the message is more important than the medium; within the general economy, the medium is itself the message, albeit one that may appear incomprehensible. Michelle H. Richman in *Reading Georges Bataille* points out that the restricted economy sustains itself by asserting a monologic relationship between signifier and signified (141), by insisting that each word has no more than one signification. Whereas the restricted economy privileges content over form, referentiality over non-referentiality, intentionality over non-intentionality, monosemy over polysemy, the general economy disrupts such hierarchization through an excess expenditure of linguistic material.

Brossard's text demonstrates that phallogocentricity exemplifies the operation of a restricted economy because masculine discourses valourize the monosemic, referential function of language: just as women are reduced to objects of utilitarian value, so also is language reduced to the status of an exogamic commodity—exogamic, in the sense that language must mediate reference to an extra-linguistic domain rather than disperse reference across an intra-linguistic domain. Brossard in *"Corps d'Energie/Rituels d'Ecriture"* responds to the restricted economy of phallogocentricity by resorting to four "rituals," among them "the ritual of sliding," a ritual that emphasizes the materiality of language—a ritual that "consists[...]in concentrating sufficiently long on words (their sonority, their orthography, their usual sense, their potential polysemy, their etymology) in order to seize all the nuance and potentiality, to do this until the forces that work in us stage a scene that is absolutely unpredictable" (12). Auto-referential violence in *L'Amèr* may therefore be seen to represent an endogamous activity that challenges not only female commodification, but also linguistic commodification. Brossard's text participates in the general economy by drawing particular attention to the material corporeality of the words written upon the page: what the narrator variously calls the "[d]omesticated symbol" (23), the "calligraphic alphabet of[...]childhood" (36), the "acid [that] has begun to soak into the

paper of the book" (36). Within the context of the restricted economy, the lesbian text does not simply make a nuisance of itself, but comes to make a new sense of its self.

Brossard's text demonstrates that any attempt to preserve the body of woman from phallogocentric exploitation implies that the materials of language must also be preserved from such exploitation. The word "material" recurs frequently within the text since the etymological derivation for the word "material" is also the Latin word for "mother," *mater*. Irigaray in *The Speculum of the Other Woman* points out that this historical synonymy between matter and *mater* stems directly from the platonic insistence that materiality, like maternity, represents nothing more than passive receptivity to an essentially masculine power (179). Women and language, like all forms of matter, have been traditionally represented as the amorphous substrate that awaits definition by men. Within the terminology of *L'Amèr*, women have become "avide de mots" (80)—translated "av(o)id for words" (82):[4] women are "a void" in that they are infinitely receptive to a language extrinsic to their gender; they are "a void" in that they are completely empty of any language intrinsic to their gender; and they are "avid" in that they are eager to obtain independent access to a linguistic alternative. Brossard's narrator suggests that such an alternative lies in the creation of a purely feminine, linguistic space that preserves both the body of woman and the materiality of language from phallogocentric exploitation—"a clandestine space where every law is subordinate to the imaginary" (70), a space that exceeds the parameters of the restricted economy's symbolic order. Brossard explains in the *Broadsides* interview:

> Things can happen in your body, in your skin, but as long as you cannot create a satisfactory syntactic environment for words of emotion you can be devoured by them. You can vanish in a sea of silence or disintegrate in a patriarchal society. For me to use words is not only a matter of expressing myself, but also a way to produce a new territory, a new space, a new environment for my body as a skin able to transform and be transformed by language. (11)

Brossard's text places itself in explicit opposition to materialism, to the unchecked appropriation of mat(t)er, and

points toward a new materialism, toward the unexploitive celebration of mat(t)er. "Materialism is," in either case, "reached only by the symbolic route" (*Mothers* 20); language in effect provides the for(u)m for the political agenda.

Brossard's text opens this new, generic space for feminine speech, in part by disrupting the generic categories that already exist within the restricted economy. Brossard in the *Broadsides* interview describes her text as *"une fiction théoretique"* (11), a conflation of two, historically antagonistic, genres: the philosophical and the literary. Frederic Jameson in "Magical Narratives" points out that a genre is a species of social code, a prescribed literary structure that attempts with varying degrees of success to impose interpretive parameters upon the reader, to devise a formula for the automatic exclusion of all but one response to a given literary utterance (135). Genre is therefore merely another manifestation of the restricted economy's desire for authoritative meaning. Brossard's text, however, defies the monosemic imperialism of genre in order to produce a new, elusive "genre" that makes a virtue of polysemic rebellion. Brossard's text intersplices fragments of domestic biography with fragments of academic explication and, in doing so, undermines generic convention and rhetorical coherency, both of which have traditionally ensured the conveyance of monosemic expression: "[a]ll convention subjugated, it's delirious to approach matter like a conversation dispersing the institution" (94). Within *L'Amèr*, the French word for "delirious," *délirant* is used in a context that suggests the neologistic verb *délire*, "to unread"; consequently, Brossard's delirious attack upon generic convention implies an act of unreading, of deconstruction, that may at first appear essentially hysterical to a reader accustomed to a purely referential discourse; nevertheless, the subversion of genre is intentionally political. Brossard's narrator writes that "the extent to which the gap between fiction and theory is reduced, the ideological field is eaten up" (95); the relentless disintegration of generic boundaries implies a directly proportional disintegration of phallogocentric mastery.

Daphne Marlatt in "Theorizing Fiction Theory" observes that "fiction theory" is "a corrective lens which helps us see *through* the[...]fictions which have[...]constructed the very 'nature' of woman" (9), but "this is not to say that fiction theory is busy

constructing a new ideology, a new 'line'" (9), for being "suspicious of correct lines[...], it enters a field where the 'seer' not only writes it like she sees it but says where she is seeing from—and with whom (now) and for whom (soon to be)" (9). Brossard in *The Aerial Letter* declares: "I must enunciate everything, articulate an inexpressible attitude, one that wants to remake reality endlessly, in order not to founder in its fictive version nor be submerged in sociological anecdote" (67). Brossard's transgression of generic boundaries is correlated with her attempt to destabilize any fixed, monologic division between lived experience and aesthetic representation:

> [W]hen I was writing *L'Amér*, I felt that I had to move reality into fiction because patriarchal reality made no sense and was useless to me. I also had the impression[...]that my fictions were reality[...]and that from there I could start a theoretical work. (*Broadsides* 11)

Brossard's disruption of the reified differences between fiction and reality recalls a similar disruption made by Monique Wittig in *The Lesbian Body*:

> Our reality is the fictional as it is socially accepted[....] [W]e possess an entire fiction into which we project ourselves and which is already a possible reality. It is our fiction that validates us. (10)

Brossard and Wittig attempt to expose the masculine fiction of reality so as to reaffirm the feminine reality of fiction: this attempt to use her "fiction" to undermine his "reality," to invert the epistemological hierarchy traditionally maintained between the two terms, parallels the attempt of both writers to examine critically the categorical distinctions between art and life, the poetic and the erotic, text and body. The lesbian aesthetic in effect appears to regard the schism between the *poetic* (the body of the text) and the *erotic* (the text of the body) as codified, as essentially generic in structure, and therefore subject to a kind of literary hybridization: text and body can be synthesized so that they become metonymous extensions of each other, become what Brossard's narrator might call a "cortex" (59), a word that suggests not only the biomaterial foundation of consciousness, but also a vascular membrane, like a sheet of either skin or paper, through which

biogenetic exchanges can occur; moreover, the word "cortex" also suggests a pun on *corps/texte*—literally, a body language, an expressive form resistant to the violent abstraction of masculine discourse.

*le je(u) des yeux: a masculine territory*

Brossard's narrator attempts to defend the female "cortex" from masculine violence, particularly the violence of the male eye that objectifies woman in order to reaffirm the predominance of male subjectivity. Brossard's narrator in the section entitled "The State of Difference" points out that the schism established by the eye between subject and object provides one of the foundations for the structure of sexual differentiation:

> I chose to speak first about his look. Because this is where the perception of difference begins. In this way difference is confirmed and nourished. Science of looking: observation. Exact use of difference: control and mastery of that which is under observation. (35)

This schism between subject and object, between male and female, sustains itself through language, since words are a medium of exchange, a phallogocentric substitute for the direct, physical contact that initially obtains between mother and child. Brossard's narrator points out that, whereas the early relationship with the mother is characterized by both the tactile and the unspoken, the later relationship with the father is characterized by the visual and the spoken; maternal relationships maintain closeness, while paternal relationships maintain distance: "to know him, I need my eyes, I must speak to him"; "[h]e won't let himself be touched" (33). Brossard's narrator points out that entry into language requires that the daughter be divorced from the constant touch of the mother in order to submit to the gaze of the father: "[M]y hand pushing back my mother's body, my mouth parted to organize myself like him[....] Under his eyes. Then to align myself at his side" (34). Brossard's text in effect reiterates the psychoanalysis of Jacques Lacan, who argues that the child experiencing the "Imaginary" (Silverman 157) during the pre-Oedipal phase of development identifies itself completely with its mother and thus cannot conceptualize either difference or absence; the eventual entry of the child into the "Symbolic"

(Silverman 178), a position of subjectivity within language, occurs during the advent of the Oedipal crisis when the father forbids access to the body of the mother and thus forces the child to repress any continuing experience of the "Imaginary" in order to assume a distinct identity: the entry of the child into language in effect requires submission to the law of the father, to phallogocentricity. Linguistic initiation for the female child entails entry into a subject position already defined in advance by masculine authority. Language establishes the difference between mother and father, male and female, but in the words of Brossard's narrator: "[h]is difference is transformed into *systematic* power", and "[f]rom this point he secures for himself control of the differences" (34). His vision of the world in effect becomes her version of the world.

Brossard in *The Aerial Letter* observes that "[t]he image of woman is a foreign body in the eye of man" (125), and she argues that women must refuse to submit to this paternal scopophilia in order to maintain a paradigm that privileges touch over sight. Brossard explains in the *Broadsides* interview:

> What is working most in [the] lesbian sensibility is skin. The skin provides the thought and the thought affects the whole surface of the body. It is through the skin that you catch and transmit energy. The skin is tactile memory. It protects your interiority, your integrity. Your skin works like a synthesizer, transmitting words, emotions, and ideas[....] Imagination is travelling through our skin, all of its surface. A woman's skin sliding on a woman's skin creates a slipperiness in the meaning of words and makes a new version of reality and fiction possible. (18)

Brossard in *The Aerial Letter* emphasizes that "[t]he imagination travels through the skin" (83), that "[s]kin is energy" (83), and that "[s]kin reflects its origins" (130): "*touching*[...]impresses upon each skin cell that it must work at the emotion of living" (99). Touch, unlike sight, closes the gap between people, between words, and so disrupts a scopophilic system of differentiation. This feminine emphasis upon touch informs the very notion of *une fiction théoretique*: the word "theory" is derived from the Greek word *theorien*, "to see," and connotes an epistemology based upon the visual; the word "fiction," however, is derived from the Latin word *fingere*, "to shape with the hands," and con-

notes an epistemology based upon the tactile. Brossard's conflation of genres may therefore be seen as an attempt to produce a theoretical discourse that incorporates touch as its fundamental episteme: a "[f]ictional theory" in which "words will have served only in the ultimate embrace" (*Mothers* 6).

Brossard in *L'Amèr* goes on to deconstruct the male gaze most explicitly in the section entitled "Act of the Eye"—a section divided into two parts: the first corresponding to the position of the "eye," the surveying subject; the second part corresponding to the position of the "figure," the surveyed object. The first section's running title begins as "Act of the Eye" and acquires an extra, lexical fragment with each subsequent page until the title ends as "The Violent Act of the Eye on Enamoured Purple Infiltrates Enraptured Unfolding *Her*" (51-60). The form of this running title parallels its content: the full title describes metaphorically the project that the eye of the reader must undertake when plotting the gradual expansion of the title across its ten pages. The running title is structured as a progressively unveiled secret, what Roland Barthes in *S/Z* might call an "hermeneutic sentence" (84), a syntagmatic enigma, whose solution is divulged suspensefully during a series of interruptions or delays. The structure of the title parallels the structure of a striptease: just as the voyeur watches the woman disrobe herself progressively until her naked body is revealed, so also does the reader watch the title unfold itself progressively until its full message is laid bare. Within a scopophilic paradigm, the materiality of both body and text (intersecting at the italicized "*Her*" in the title) become objectified sources of satisfaction for a voyeuristic appetite; however, Brossard's text undermines the satisfaction of the voyeur, the reader, by overloading the voyeur with textual enigmas that resist reduction to complete solutions and singular perspectives. The first section of "Act of the Eye" is in fact structurally panoptical. Barbara Godard in "*L'Amèr* or the Exploding Chapter" points out that Brossard's narrator multiplies perspectives by allowing other female writers to make a statement in their own voice about the various operations of the eye (31): such a "communal feminist text," according to Godard, "denounces the economics of proprietorship on which authorship is based" (31) and instead valourizes an economics of both cooperation and sharing, an economics that emphasizes a plurality of viewpoints.

Brossard's narrator in "Act of the Eye" does not submit to the male gaze, but goes on to disrupt it by exploring visual sensation polyvalently, by assuming the vantage point of several kinds of gaze: the darting eye that resists fixing its glance upon a single object of desire (51); the closed eye that temporarily suspends the gaze in favour of inner meditation (52); the tearful eye that blurs distinctions between perceived objects (53); the amorous eye that in the tradition of courtly love establishes a primary bond between lovers (54); the voyeuristic eye that facilitates the violent objectification of women (55); the specular eye that sees its own evolving identity reflected in others (56); the clairvoyant eye that permits a multifaceted perspective of time and space (57); the staring eye that views the world blankly (58); the vigilant eye that maintains a close watch upon its own operations (59); and the transformed eye that represents a chrysalis giving birth to a new consciousness (60).

The second section of "Act of the Eye" has a series of titles that represent variations upon the word "figure," a word in which body and text again intersect, since "figure" signifies both a feminine physique and a textual trope. The word "figure" suggests that what women have historically regarded as the reality of their own bodies is in fact no more than a metaphorical phantasm conditioned by the male gaze. John Berger in *Ways of Seeing* writes:

> A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself[....] And so she comes to consider the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman[....] Her own sense of being in herself is supplanted by a sense of being appreciated as herself by another. (46)

Women are socialized to accept as natural, as realistic, the male perception of their bodies; however, the second section of "Act of the Eye," disrupts this socialization and traces the future evolution of the female body from a "realistic figure" (61), static and recognizable, "the most submissive there is" (61), to a "free figure" (70), dynamic and unrecognizable. Such a free figure eludes sight; she "breaks the contract binding her to figuration" (62); she disfigures figuration so that such figuration cannot disfigure her.

Brossard's narrator resists being reduced to the kind of image both depicted on the cover of *L'Amèr* and contemplated in the segment entitled "The Figurine" (67)—an image of the Venus of Willendorf, a terra cotta statue of a woman, whose lack of both eyes and mouth, a lack offset by the contrasting exaggeration of her breasts and belly, represents for the narrator a blind, speechless female imprisoned within a primitive mythology of maternal fecundity. Brossard's text tries to escape the imprisonment of reproduction by suggesting an alternative textuality that endows women with discursive autonomy.

*l'amèr/ique: a feminine frontier*

Brossard's writing stresses that any attempt made by women to disrupt a restricted economy based upon exogamic exchange requires that women participate both physically and discursively in a general economy based upon endogamous exchange. Brossard's narrator argues that "[i]t is while caressing the body of another woman over its entire living surface that she kills the mother" (23) and that, "if she wants to survive, a woman must assert herself in reality and become recognized as symbolic mother: incestuous in power, but inaccessible sexually for reproduction" (17). The narrator's denunciation of patriarchal mothers as nothing more than "maternal clowns" (37) and "filles du roi" (37) heralds the lesbian celebration of metaphorical "daughter mothers" (29) who obliterate patriarchal forms of differentiation, mothers who "experience bliss in the ultimate intercourse like two signifiers and metamorphose so mutually that they contain a single meaning" (25)—mothers for whom the *jouissance* of body and the *jouissance* of language are no longer disjoined. The very term "daughter mother" suggests a metaphorical fusion of the female child with the female parent, a fusion reminiscent of a pre-Oedipal psychology. Brossard's term "daughter mother" also suggests a mother who can be her own daughter, a woman who can "engender" herself so to speak, and thus remain free from masculine definitions of the feminine. Moreover, Brossard's term suggests an exclusively female economy, a purely matrilineal heritage "without intermediary without interruption" (*Mothers* 24), a heritage effaced by the historical valourization of masculine primogeniture. The "daughter

mother" thus corresponds with not only the pre-Oedipal fusion of mother and child, but also implies a form of maternity that must have existed before the reproductive commodification of mothers by fathers.

Brossard's narrator attempts to revive this maternal origin forgotten by masculine history: in the section entitled "The Vegetation," she undergoes a figurative, evolutionary retrogression in order to move from culture to nature, from the city to the jungle, from the "civilized" world of masculinity to the "uncivilized" world of femininity—from the conscious mind that represses to the unconscious mind that is repressed. This attempt to return to a prehistoric epoch unconditioned by patriarchal civilization parallels the attempt to return to a childhood psychology unconditioned by patriarchal feminization—a return seen to be necessary for acquiring discursive autonomy:

> None of what appears in front of me could be nourished or even in a state of being if I didn't break in from the margin where *I have plunged within myself* not the woman but the little girl the mutilated girl resisting *the* woman. *(81)*

Such an assertion recalls the narrator's earlier description of herself as an infant touching the mouth of her mother, an act that represents an erotic allegory for the narrator's archaeological endeavour:

> I open her mouth with thumb and index finger. The struggle begins in silence. The search. I part her lips[....] I have to see for my own ends. She lets me do it, I don't threaten any part of her true identity yet. She's my m ther, she knows it and I am supposed to know it just as well. Her mouth like an essential and vital egg, ambiguous. In the beginning. AAAAA. (19)

The signifier "m ther" in the English text is the translation of the signifier "m're" in the French text (17), and within both cases the form of the signifier concretizes its content: the erasure of the first vowel does violence to the word by rendering the word unpronounceable, thus suggesting that this maternal, pre-linguistic figure cannot be incorporated into a phallogocentric signifying practice without suffering distortion. The originary "m ther" resists being definitively articulated and thus appears linguistically transcendent, ineffable; however, this feminine ineffability

differs in character from the masculine ineffability of God, the originary father. God is the Word, the first signifier, monosemic and transcendental, inaccessible to phallogocentric discourse, yet nevertheless subtending it; the archaic mother, on the other hand, is not so much a signifier as the material precondition for signification: in the beginning is not so much the word as "the fictional character of the first A" (40), the "dream of the letter in the beginning" (80), "the a the acme the ancient('s) course" (81)—in other words, the "AAAAA," a spontaneous, primal cry, devoid of meaning and thus pregnant with a potential multiplicity of meanings. Whereas God is understood as a site of monosemic transcendence that ensures the semantic closure of the signifying system, the archaic mother is understood as a site of polysemic transcendence that ensures the semantic aperture of the signifying system. Whereas God is understood as a self-present identity; the archaic mother is: "Amazon. Her identity is not single" (19).

Abby Wettan Kleinbaum in *The War Against the Amazons* observes that, historically, the image of the Amazon does not serve to glorify woman; instead, the Amazon has been used by "male authors, artists, and political leaders to enhance their own perception of themselves as historically significant" (220).

Patriarchy has portrayed the Amazons as a matriarchal society, whose ritual of initiation requires that a woman emulate the male physique by cutting off one of her breasts in order to wield a longbow more comfortably: the stories about the inevitable defeat of such militant women, such masculine pretenders, serves only to certify for men the preeminence of an authentic masculinity. Brossard's text revises the terms of reference for this myth so that the myth might conform more closely to a lesbian aesthetic that regards the Amazon as a connotation for a feminist utopia, a utopia of purely independent women who do not wish to imitate men so much as resist their influence.

Self-inflicted mastectomy in this lesbian context becomes a metaphorical act that parallels the self-inflicted hysterectomy performed by Brossard's narrator: both acts of violence symbolize the rejection of maternal subservience to patriarchy, not a reification of such patriarchy. Just as Brossard's narrator wishes to discard the burden of her womb, her "backpack" (27), so also does she wish "[t]o set our breasts ablaze" (14), to "[s]our milk" (14), so that "breasts will no longer smother anybody" (25), no

longer make women subservient to a nurturing function; moreover, just as the loss of the breast permits the Amazon to use a masculine weapon more effectively against men, so also does the loss of the uterus permit Brossard's narrator to deploy a phallogocentric language more effectively against its masters: whereas such violence in the phallic myth is portrayed as an aggressive act, such violence in the lesbian myth is portrayed as a defensive act.

Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig in *Lesbian Peoples* in fact define the word "Amazon" by relating a pagan myth of origins, in which an edenic age declines with the advent of motherhood:

> [W]ith the settlement of the first cities, many companion lovers disrupted the original harmony and called themselves mothers[....] [A]mazon meant, for them, daughter, eternal child, she who does not assume her destiny. Amazons were banished from the cities of the mothers. [Amazons] became[...]violent[...]and fought to defend harmony. For them the ancient name[...]had retained its full meaning. (5)

Wittig and Zeig use this narrative to suggest that the status of the Amazon corresponds to the status of Eve before the Fall, before receiving the divine punishment of childbirth. Within Brossard's text, the Amazon is a militant "daughter mother," who yearns to reclaim a feminine history suppressed by patriarchy; however, the dichotomy between the Amazonian and the maternal is not so sharply demarcated as it is in the case of Wittig and Zeig, since Brossard's narrator is herself a mother of a daughter—albeit a lesbian mother who rejects any form of patriarchal indoctrination. Moreover, the narrator's heterosexual sister calls to mind Amazonian imagery by virtue of her breast cancer and subsequent mastectomy (42); within this case, Brossard's narrator realizes that both the "daughter mother" and the patriarchal mother suffer disfiguration under patriarchy—although in qualitatively different ways, the former kind of mother "[a]mputating oneself", the latter kind of mother "[a]mputated" (42). Whereas the "daughter mother" represents a "woman surgeon" (42) who actively excises from her body the masculine influence that debilitates her, the patriarchal mother represents a "white bride" (42) who passively relinquishes her body to the masculine influence that debilitates her. Brossard's narrator

responds to the suffering of patriarchal mothers, a suffering for which they are not entirely responsible, by trying ultimately to inscribe herself "in the practice of a surgery sympathetic to[...]differences" (42).

Such Amazonian imagery may at first glance appear to be a problematic iconography for a feminist aesthetic since the very militancy of the Amazon suggests overtones of masculine combativeness: after all, the classical legend depicts Amazons kidnapping men, appropriating their masculine reproductive function in order to sustain a female society. Cixous in *The Newly Born Woman* addresses this potential problem by pointing out that Amazons do not kill, but capture men alive, only to liberate them again (116):

> Amazons don't make war for reasons that men understand[....] The Amazons go around gathering men[....] Defeating, yes, but in order to espouse. It is the invention of a union that is the opposite of rape[....] Although the Amazons have broken off from the masculine world and created another State, they are in the minority[....] And to get what they want from the others, they still must come and conquer, snatch it away; they have to venture onto the other side in an exchange where the terms are still dictated by masculine law, by men's behavior and their codes. For a free woman, there can be no relationship with men other than war[....] To be an Amazon is to[...]repeat the act that proves or symbolizes that she is not captive or submissive to a man[....] He dominates to destroy. She dominates to not be dominated; she dominates the dominator to destroy the space of domination. (116)

According to Cixous, Amazonian violence is self-reflexive; it is paradoxically a violence needed to destroy the necessity of violence. The violence in the form of Brossard's text may therefore be seen as an Amazonian allegory for the feminine entry into a masculine territory, where the narrator must do violence to the violence of discourse in order to obliterate violence and invigorate language.

*this tidal wave's alright to this beach*

When Brossard's narrator says that, "[c]aught in the whirlpool, the wave, the dread, the pallor, I write" (22), she points

out that to express herself within a lesbian aesthetic is not without risks: "[t]o write I am a woman is heavy with consequences" (45), possibly because it may inadvertently repeat a masculine project by opening the way to what Lola Lemire Tostevin in "Reading After the (Writing) Fact calls "vulvalogocentricity" (66), the displacement of the law of the father with a new law of the mother. Brossard's narrator writes that "[t]he sisterhood of women is the ultimate test of human solidarity laying itself open to another beginning of delusions of grandeur" (14)—but while the narrator worries whether or not her book is going to be "the product of a fever or of a major exercise in survival" (37), her text demonstrates that she does not wish to repeat the masculine, oppositional structures of difference, but wishes instead to disrupt these differences in order to free women from masculine conditioning:

> I am working so that the convulsive habit of initiating girls to the male as in a contemporary practice of lobotomy will be lost. I want to see *in fact* the form of women organizing in the trajectory of the species. (101)

Brossard does not reaffirm feminine suffering, but rejects such ineffectual pain: "*Je sais que pour beaucoup de femmes la souffrance est l'origine de l'écriture; pour moi, l'écriture est à l'origine de l'écriture* ("*Entretien*" 186)";[5] to Brossard, feminine writing disrupts the masculine "practice of lobotomy" by disrupting discourse, by refusing an economy of exogamic exchange while simultaneously embracing an economy of endogamous exchange: she protects both body and text from a purely utilitarian function by celebrating their materiality instead of exploiting it, and she posits a way of knowing that does not not merely restrict itself to metaphors of sight, but incorporates the entire body in its epistemology. Brossard disarms phallogocentric language, disarms such words as "mother" and "woman" and "figure" so that they can no longer be used as masculine weapons: after all, words such as these harm others.

## NOTES

[1] The translation has been cited wherever possible, except in cases where critical attention is drawn to untranslatable, linguistic play, specific to the originary text.

[2] The word "laboratory" in French is the feminine noun *laboratoire*, but as Barbara Godard has pointed out in her "Preface" to the translation (7), the feminine "e" is removed from the end of the word in order to stress the absence of the feminine in this scientific forum.

[3] McCaffery points out that these two economies are not mutually exclusive: the general is always immanent in the restricted and manifests itself as a "suppressed or ignored presence in the scene of writing that tends to emerge by way of rupture" (203).

[4] The English translation "av(o)id" emphasizes the materiality of language by concretizing the content of the word within the form of the word. The very shape of the central "o" suggests a hole, or void, a spatial gap invaginated within language itself—a gap that suggests the presence of an absent centre. This gap, however, is itself embedded within a gap formed by the parentheses surrounding it: the word contains a void within a void. The closure of the "o" within the aperture of the central parentheses, an aperture opening vaginally along the vertical axis, suggests the inscription of a feminine space inside a potentially larger space that, while able to function within the horizontal linearity of language, remains always unbounded by it. The signifier "av(o)id" actually becomes a concrete representation of the feminine position within discourse.

[5] "I know that for many women suffering is the origin of writing; for me, writing is the origin of writing." [My translation]

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