

# I Write Le Body Bilingual

## a love affair-e in nomads land

Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood

"... like trying to say a map"  
Patti Smith

you are in a room with four speakers. one voice's in French one in English one in the masculine one in the feminine. sometimes this room seeps onto the printed page and bleeds. QUADRAPHONIC SITE.

you live on rue Fabre, east of Montréal Main, because you're afraid of losing your mothertongue, the language of love. yet English is a major part of your daily life. so where do your loyalties lie? you always did call your father Daddy and your mother Mômman. sometimes you even spoke English with him. it was OK, he was a businessman, and business in Québec in those days was conducted in English. this you'd never do with her. you must respect your mother-tongue.

now/here you are/attempting your first public piece in an other tongue. how to think (of) yourself in-to a second language? in the absence of *mater materia*, the roots don't go back all the way ... you're building in the second person ...

Frued too wrote the mother in an other : "matrem nudam". out of fear? guilt? revenge? maybe the distance afforded by other-tongue provides a better reading of origins? the irony of so perilous an identity ----- here ----- the fault line -----dis -----course of fracture and displacement ----- the profound schizophrenia built-in-to the national psyche of Québec. wanna belong/wanna make it.

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**FASCIA** (from *L. band, bandage*) : sheet of connective tissue covering/binding together body structures

emerging from viscera onto fascia, the uncharted territory - le body bilingual - no gash/gap of estrangement - 2 solitudes - but continuous porous tissue erasing language barriers. trying to read what is imprinted on<sup>e</sup> skin between body-language-structures.

**ENGRAMME** (fr. *L. gramma:writing, record, small weight*) : trace left on neural tissue by an event from one's individual past

thought-forms of past tattooed : fascia *engrammé*. a trans<sup>e</sup>lucid memory membrane mouth, trying to voice the gravitational pull of. a convergence of signs.

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it happened one summer day in Parc Lafontaine when you said No to a guy handing you a tract "*pour l'indépendance du Québec*" during a demonstration protesting Trudeau's plan to repatriate the Constitution. like saying a double No : No to the piece of paper, No to the political dream you don't share because it would have you choose and you refuse to choose, "*pis j'suis pas moins Québécoise que toi pour cà!*". even if it is true you can't write a text wholly in French -- so what and why should you, you've spoken English since the age of four, and never were *indépendantiste*.

outraged, the guy lunged at you. his friend grabbed him by the arm: Let's go, she ain't worth it.

with that No began the un-gagging, the end of the civil war within. inside/ *la Révolution tranquille* had not been quiet. it hurt like hell. love hurts.

*what i can't feel i surely cannot see*  
**Be Good To Me**  
sung by Tina Turner

you feel neither de Lotbinière nor Harwood but a hyphenated citizen by birth, i.e. in your maiden form. she was accused of treason in '68, apparently for speaking "white" and having a half-English name. drop the Harwood, they said. choose, *l'anglais-e*, mutilation or rejection. another or. another call to order, i.e. to silence. deep cut throat. poor her. at 17 she was not only politically incorrect but inarticulate. she felt guilty but could not defend herself. lonely but refused to convert.



"In bilingual societies", writes Maroussia Hajdukowski-Ahmed, "one language represents power more than the other. The lower down on the social echelon, the more people tend to "minor" unilingualism (language of the colonized); the higher up one goes, the more one finds 'major' unilingualism (language of the colonizer). In between, people are more or less bilingual depending on their aspirations"<sup>1</sup>

would it have mattered to those modern-day patriots that The Name originated here in 1823 when Loise-Josephte de Lotbinière, whose family was in 'La Nouvelle France' since 1651, married Robert Unwin Harwood, a Protestant businessman newly arrived in Montréal from Sheffield, England? (daughters of the landed French nobility were then entitled to keep their maiden name when there were no male heirs to keep papa's property/name alive.) would it have mattered that, pistol in hand, she defended the seigneurie house against the British soldiers during the 1837 uprising? that her descendants have always worn the new hyphenated family name and spoken mothertongue?

here the hyphen unites. language line bridging both sides of Montréal Main like a *main amoureuse*.

**COMMENT** : "You're lucky to be so perfectly bilingual".  
(wondering) What's luck got to do with it?

you feel yourself Susanne not Suzanne. people almost always misspell it, choosing the 'correct' French spelling, with a z. but the second s too is on the birth certificate : your parents took Susan and added a French *terminaison*, thus providing you with a perfectly bilingual name from start to finish. lately you've been wondering whether the constant "correction" (when you ask for the second s they knee-jerk and immediately

want to drop the -ne) isn't a form of rejection of the impure. like the androgyne, yours is le body bilingual, "disliked by the orthodox, who view(ed) all mergings of the sexes as unequivocally sinful"<sup>2</sup>

paradoxe : proximity of opposites in oneskin creates outsidersness.

second s / second sex. it's the same damn malaise that logos has in conceptualizing the feminine, isn't it. Mōman/woman she does not figure in the male symbolic order except as that familiar other. gap/gash. siteless. the feminine being "the compulsion to deride order" (Lyotard), elle *dé-range*, this "living heresy" (Pope Joan/*Top Girls*), this out-law whose laughter dissolves *border* lines. trying to topo-graph this nomad's land where fr iction between tongues generates ----- "emotional ground".<sup>3</sup>

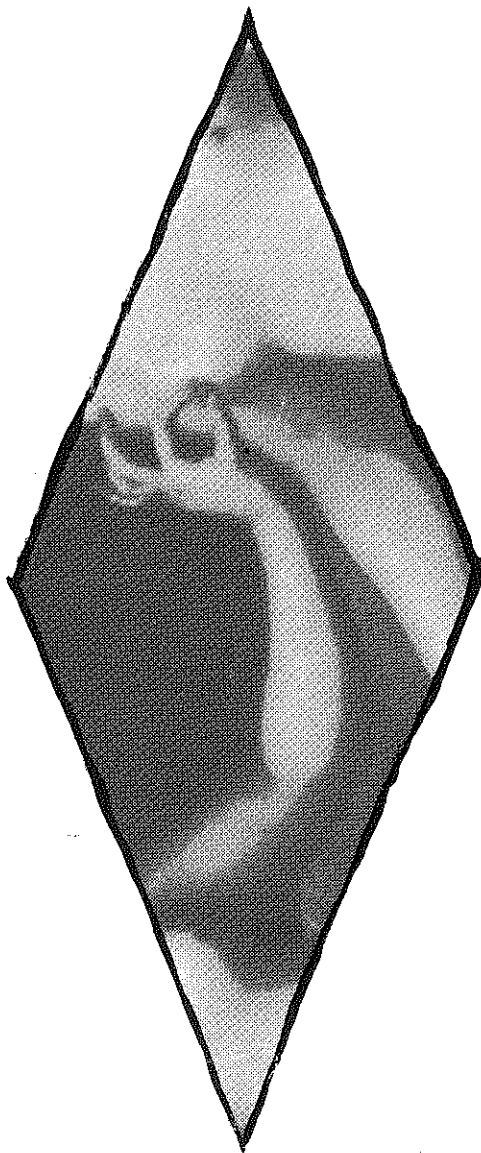
can you feel the here in there? the her in here?

.....  
an offically bilingual state does not end prejudice, nor does it produce viscerally bilingual bodies. and because we live under the phallic signifier, all women are bilingual, speaking the dominant "he/man" language<sup>4</sup> and in our own muted tongue(s). in a state of trans<sup>e</sup>lation.  
(meaning) being so perfectly bilingual makes me just as marginal as being female

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in grade school i learned our notorious *p'tit catéchisme* and read Katy Keene comix "In My Room" with the Beach Boys. at convent i went to mass every a.m. and fantasized about Marianne Faithfull up through grades called *syntaxe, versification, rhétorique*. my friends turned *péquistes* and fans of our *chansonniers* (folksinger-songwriters) but the Stones had put the touch on me so i defected. exil-e in Anglophonia. so close yet so far away West of the Main. says Ahmed : "Excessive assimilation of the dominant model is a typical language attitude of the colonized, the bourgeoisie being the class most affected".<sup>5</sup>

while Daddy's Mōman spoke no English at all, Mōman's parents, exemplary members of Montréal's *bourgeoisie d'affaires*, had *The Gazette* delivered daily to their home in Outremont home. as the product of, you were born in heavy political crossfire . . . .  
. for years Mōman was the only one you spoke French with, except for some customers at Eaton's . making it -- at the cost of belonging?

never knew if you should say "we" or "them" when speaking about *les gens du pays*. a guy once called you "the most noncommittal broad" he'd ever met. you seem detached because the body is lost in translation. you become fluent in the universal language of symbols.



sometimes you feel other/sometimes you feel superior, being so "rare", so perfectly bi-. mostly you just feel *lâchée lousse*, footloose. (but Yes, more cultural, more *intello* in French. remember the scene in the 1964 movie *Becket* when Peter O'Toole as King Henry II of England is introduced to a new implement called the fork, imported from . . . France? except that Québécois is neither "Parisian" nor "good," it's uniquely North American French, for better *and* for worse. in horticulture its called "hybrid vigour".) in both groups you serve as "foreign correspondant." a position of privilege. hard to challenge. is this the cop-out?

maybe this SITE is *nothing but* politics . .

in French, a grammatical gender language, women must mark our *présence* by adding a silent e to the masculine root. *déviant-e*. and that's just the beginning. so we figure the more rules there are (*L'Academie francaise* is watching you), the more there are to break. broken is open. an entrance for women encoding our meanings. fair *sex/faire sens-e*.

but (how does this subversion translate into othertongue? and do i care? i mean : how do i love thee, "language of our oppressors" (A. Rich)? whose voice is speaking here? the Québécois-e voice, in which "our" means we French-speaking people of Québec and the oppressor's language is English, agent of British colonialism, of U.S. imperialism now? (in this sense Bill 101 has been good for getting the other's tongue out into public space. like bra-burning.) or is it the Québécoise voice, when "our" means women and the oppressor, as Rich means it, is any 'man-made' language, English being merely "the most positively and expressly masculine . . . the language of a grown-up man, with very little childish or feminine about it" <sup>6</sup>. *femmes du Québec* : d-double colonization.

like hysteria, it's not a visible condition, it's an inner grammar, hence difficulty of representation. and like the insane, le body bilingual can't be located on the social map, it's a "categorical scandal"<sup>7</sup>. *faire sens/faire scandal-e*.

maybe this SITE is everything *but* politics. dare one conceive an uncolonized space? inédit, it remains a-syntactical, a lushly polymorphous Eden. from there you can spiral out anywhere.so many knots. such an abundance of other. trying to inscribe that magnetic interstice between thigh closing shirt opening one hand caressing one or the other writing *la différence entre* ----- *à double sens-e*.

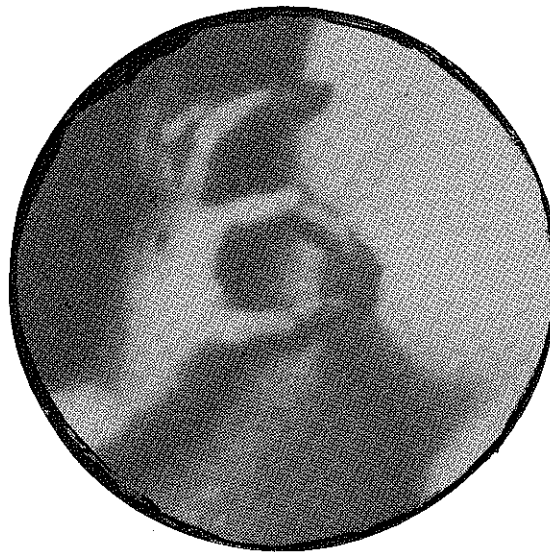
trans<sup>e</sup>location : with feminism came a political grid that included, served and empowered you, a her part of a them you could feel as we. "ethnic background : woman"<sup>8</sup>. that summer day in the Parc you voiced your "four-colour separation" realizing that binary phallogentrism had been at work in the attempt, back then, to make you choose. *sans le savoir*, you'd chosen not to be seduced, i.e. "led apart from" yourself, refused to betray Louise-Josephte : so few of us are lucky enough to know our female ancestors' names. felt yourself not French-Canadian, fractured where the hyphen divides, but Québécoise, whole. bandages removed from y/our wounded anima, racial memories voiced in the feminine.

you see the letters P A I N graffitied on a wall. you wonder is somebody crying with pain or with hunger? (pain=bread) what's the difference when signs converge on fascia **engrammés au féminin**? the female mouth's multilabial meanings (Irigaray)/red into the dialectical black and white. fluid red so as not to choose.

"a woman writing thinks back through her mothers" writes Virginia Woolf. Made in Québec, i'd shrivel up and die anywhere else. when Toronto friends urge me to move to "Canada", they're forgetting just how 'French' i really am. my act is so good i tend to forget too. i deride/n'i derive/using 'bad' language, abusing mothertongue. the great matricide goes on . . . just as *le masculin grammatical* rules over and includes (so they say) *le féminin* - while in the process of éliminating it -- English is now swallowing up French world-wide. "Language has always been the companion of Empire", right?<sup>9</sup> yet French has been vital in thinking *la post-modernité*. is this a contradiction?

writing French *au féminin* in this *fin-de-siècle* may seem suicidal. *utopique*. in fact, *c'est écrire la résistance*. inscribing mothertongue in a supra-national, gynocentric emotional ground, rooting a *culture d'origine(s)*. women writing forward, founding a future so we don't have to deep going back to the future (*rétro-futur*, as the trendy French call it). unearthing and/or inventing *les mots pour le dire*. can you feel the *mot* in . . . -her(s)?

still/now/ maybe this map, because it requires language, is unspeakable.



## GLOSSARY

**rue Fabre** : street often celebrated in Québécois novels and plays as representative of Montréal's working-class district, *le Plateau Mont-Royal*

**Môman** : Québécois transliteration of *Maman*. mother.

**pour l'indépendance du Québec** : for Québec's independence

**pis j'suis pas moins Québécoise que toi pour ça** : and I ain't less Québécoise than you are because of it

**la Révolution tranquille** : Québec's "Quiet Revolution" of the Sixties

**"Speak White"** : title of Michèle Lalonde's famous poem about Québec's linguistic colonization, written at the peak of the nationalistic fervor of the late Sixties.

**l'anglais-e** : English-wo-man

**main amoureuse** : amorous hand

**terminaison** : ending, suffix

**elle dé-range** : she dis-arranges, disturbs

**p'tit catéchisme** : the "little catechism" taught by rote for years in the French Catholic school system

**péquistes** : members or supporters of the PQ/Parti Québécois

**bourgeoisie d'affaires** : the new business-oriented French-Canadian bourgeoisie, often opposed to the intellectual one.

**The Gazette** : Montréal's English-language daily

**Outremont** : wealthy French-speaking area of Montréal

**gens du pays** : title of a song by poet & singer Gilles Vigneault which has become Québec's unofficial national anthem; it means people of this land or country

**intello** : a typically French-from-France way of abbreviating *intellectual-le*

**faire sens** : to make sense, to encode or create meaning

**faire scandale** : to create scandal

**sans le savoir** : literally, without knowledge; i.e. without knowing or realizing it

**la différence entre . . . à double sens-e** : the difference between and/or the difference enters, *entre* meaning between and also being the present tense of the verb *entrer*, to enter; à double sens-e meaning literally double meaning or 'double entendre' as it is said in English.

**inédit** : literally, unpublished, un-edited; usually translated as unsaid or unvoiced.

**fin-de-siècle** : turn-of-the-century

**c'est écrire la résistance** : means writing resistance

According to french socio-linguist Marina Yaguello, the level of bilingualism is about equal for boys and girls under 15. The gap widens with age, men becoming increasingly bilingual in the marketplace.

2. Barbara G. Walker, *The Women's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983.

3. The title of a video by Montreal artist Ann Ramsden.

4. "He/man language" is an expression coined by psychologist Wendy Martyna in reference to the use of *he* and *man* as generic terms in English. Quoted in Dale Spender, *Man Made Language*. London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.

5. Ahmed, op. cit.

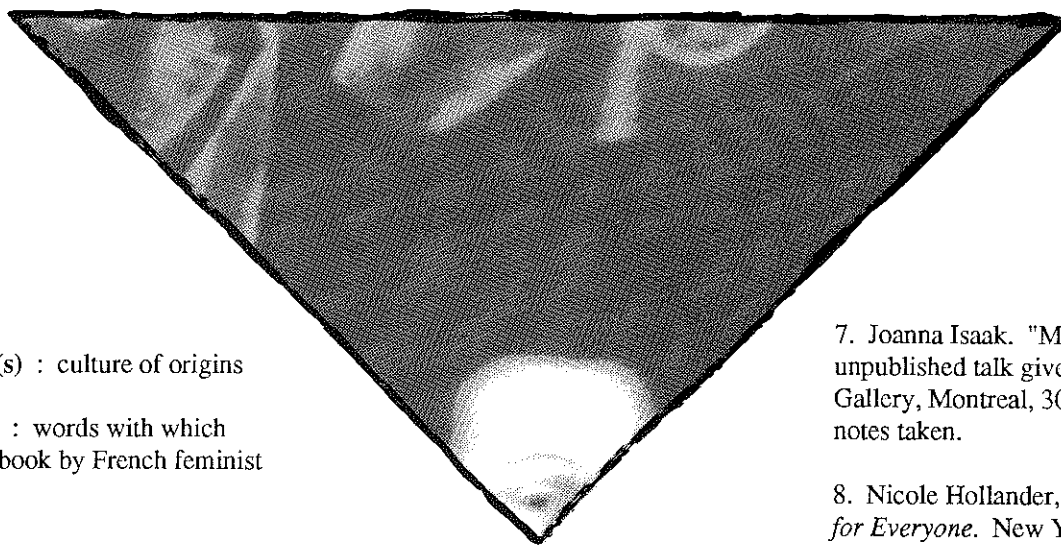
6. Otto Jespersen, *The Growth and Structure of the English Language*. New York: D. Appleton, 1923.

7. Joanna Isaak. "Mapping the Imaginary", unpublished talk given at Powerhouse Gallery, Montreal, 30 January 1986. From notes taken.

8. Nicole Hollander, *Okay! Thinner Thighs for Everyone*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983-84.

9. Inscription on frontispiece of the first modern European language grammar, published in Spanish in 1492, the year Columbus "discovered" America. cf Note 7 for source.

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images: Christine Davis

**culture d'origine(s)** : culture of origins

**mots pour le dire** : words with which to say it; title of a book by French feminist Marie Cardinal

**mot** : word

#### NOTES

1. Maroussia Hadjukowski-Ahmed, "Le dénoncé/énoncé de la langue au féminin ou la rapport de la femme au langage", in *Féminité, Subversion, Ecriture*, Suzanne Lamy and Irène Pagès, eds., Editions du Remue-Ménage, 1984. Translation mine.