

Le mal de mère/ The (M)other's Text

Alice Parker

Le mal de mère

Le texte de Parker repose la question de la mère, de sa figure, de son sens dans le système patriarcal actuel. Plus spécifiquement, l'auteure revoit cette figure sous l'angle féministe et lesbien. Si nous «envisageons la mère d'abord et essentiellement comme une femme», nous dit l'auteure, c'est le réel et ses représentations que nous attaquons, que nous cherchons à ruiner. Déjà, dans nos sociétés, beaucoup de femmes ne sont plus mères (particulièrement les lesbiennes), alors comment les femmes d'aujourd'hui peuvent-elle se définir par rapport à cette figure emblématique? Parker cherche également par ce questionnement à échapper à l'asservissement de l'hétérosexualité. Elle croit qu'il nous faut revoir le sens de certains mots (mère, fille) et surtout investir certains autres (par exemple le mot «lesbien») pour qu'ils puissent entrer dans l'usage, qu'ils servent à authentifier une réalité autre. Enfin, elle pense que c'est en repoussant les frontières des genres, des sexes et des mots que nous donnerons, à la fiction comme à la réalité, un nouvel angle de vision, un sens inédit à l'univers. Parker parle d'une version, d'une configuration neuve.

The Virgin Mother occupied tremendous territory on this and that side of the parenthesis of language. – Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*.

Avec ton lait, ma mère, j'ai bu la glace. Et me voilà avec ce gel à l'intérieur. – Luce Irigaray, *Et l'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre*.

S'il n'était lesbien, ce texte n'aurait point de sens. Tout à la fois matrice, matière et production. Rapport à. Il constitue le seul relais plausible pour me sortir du ventre de ma mère patriarcale.

– Nicole Brossard, *L'amèr ou Le chapitre effrité*.

My title plays on the French term for seasickness, transforming it into 'mother-sickness.' This project has provoked untold anxiety. While I would like to think my discomfort arises from the choices I have made in

positioning myself as a *lesbian* over the last fifteen-plus years, my motivation may be much less admirable. Simply posed, have I not internalized the matrophobia of the culture? I tend to skip over books and articles that have 'mother' in the title. And what about choosing Monique Wittig, for whom mother is a counter-revolutionary term, as a theoretical mentor? Was this altogether sanguine? How does this choice relate to my perception of *écriture féminine* (a writing said to be feminine), the texts of Hélène Cixous which tend to privilege maternal spaces for example, which I may have dismissed too lightly? At this stage of my personal journey, on the waning side of my middle years, it is time if ever to *come to terms* with my location as a daughter and as a mother. It is time to deal with the consort of the patriarchy, and with the deformities induced in women by compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory re-production.

While trying to remain sensitive to impulses to 'guilt-trip' (women who happen to be) actual mothers, I feel I have to account for the deadly combination of traits Audre Lorde identifies in her own mother: hypercritical and emotionally unavailable to her rebellious younger daughter, the one who is too dark, too fat, half blind, and wears her hair in an afro *avant l'heure* (Lorde 1982). She has a family resemblance to my mother, a waif who lost her mother almost at birth, whom her father abandoned at the age of eight to her step-family, who was unable to love herself much less the undernourished, weird daughter I turned out to be. And I, incomprehensible daughter of exiles, obediently remained out of her (body) space and out of sight.

I wonder if the heavy dose of maternal puritanism – my (Jewish) mother took the injunctions of the Old Testament seriously – didn't incline me to interpret Colette's thesis in *The Pure and the Impure*, where she qualifies bonding between women as 'pure,' rather literally. Purity is not a quality I now value in human relations; it belies the diversity and richness of our cultural locations and interactions. Nor do I want to reduce the complexities or distill the impurities from lesbian motherhood. Here again Audre Lorde aims her wise words right at the knottiest dilemma, how to give our children the courage to be who they want/need to be in spite of our own quite different agenda, by enabling them to understand that identity is process, and that we too are vulnerable (1984 72-80). It makes little sense to repeat abusive disciplinary patterns with our own children, to socialize them according to gender expectations we are working to destroy. This goes for all the symbolic

systems/codes/discourses to which we are heir. The lesbian (m)other breaks epistemological and ontological molds because she represents a non-sense. However uncomfortable it feels, I would preserve my uneasy relationship with the 'mother tongue,' my sense that I am always (tres)passing, my desire to locate my self in a new language, 'another mother tongue,' lesbian and Francophone.

In 'theory' there is no mother before feminism, except in phallic drag. Luce Irigaray tells us that the founding crime of Western civilization is a matricide (1981 15-6). What have been killed are the mother's desire and her claim to a language in which she might express her self as a woman. Add to this the dilemma of the lesbian mother, who may have to choose between her self and her children. The Oedipus scenario, Irigaray continues, in which the phallus is substituted for the umbilical cord effectively severs our relationship to the maternal body (1981 19-20). Our culture reads direct communication with ("openings of and to") the maternal as a threat of insanity (1981 22). According to whose norms? What if women refuse to reproduce the social order, the family, private property? What if we redefine hysteria as a revolutionary strategy? What if daughters in league with their mothers use their power to explode social meanings (1981 86), to transform cultural signs and language itself (1981 89)? "Le rapport mère-fille est le *continent noir du continent noir*," says Irigaray (1981 61). The place to begin is with the real and with the introjected mother, to envisage her as a woman (1981 62). What better project for a lesbian, to connect with mothers first as women? This is a good place to apply pressure to the social contract, which in a patriarchal culture insists that all women be subsumed under the category 'mother,' rather than that mothers, like lesbians, be subsumed under the sign 'woman.' Although it is evident that not all women are mothers, especially lesbian women, a categorical refusal of the 'mother' will not help me re-claim a space of nurture and communication. The lyricism of Cixous tugs at my insides.

What does it mean to be "of woman born"? I reread Adrienne Rich's work with some reluctance, struggling with my own impulse toward matricide, carefully juxtaposing her experiences/information with my own. Then it seemed imperative to factor in the provocative and radical writing of Nicole Brossard, who put her analytical, poetic and psychic resources literally on the line to write *L'Amèr*. Brossard, who eschews lyricism, hates anything resembling personal, confessional narrative,

and yet knows that she cannot “kill the womb” in the abstract. So she tells it like it is, a war zone for the young lesbian mother, caught between her lover, her child, and the expectations of the patriarchy – that girls be “initiated to the male like a current practice of lobotomy.” Like Rich and Brossard I was radicalized by the experience of motherhood, by my powerlessness and isolation in view of the responsibility I had assumed, by my rage – not so much at the tiny lives that threatened to consume my energies as by my location as a Mother in the culture. For one thing, I did not deal with the pathology in my family of origin until more than thirty years later, and thus could only repeat abusive patterns with my own children. Further, in the Alabama of the 1960s I was in exile from the multicultural context of my younger years. It would be almost a decade after the birth of my two children before I would deal with issues of sexual orientation; in the meantime, one day I ran away from home. I literally could not survive in the location to which I had been assigned. In Freudian terms I refused to accept my castration, to repress the masculine persona. The question is not so much how and where the mother can situate herself in culture as how to theorize a location in culture for the mother that unsettles traditional discourses and expectations. As Sarah Kofman observes, in the conflict between thanatos and eros, psychoanalysis comes out firmly on the side of death where the mature woman is concerned (223). It was from the dead body of the mother that I was trying to escape...the mother I killed...the mother who was killing me.

Much as I would like to ditch psychoanalysis I believe it is a faithful mirror of the place of woman and of the figure of the mother in Western culture. However, my indulgence extends only to the theory of psychoanalysis insofar as it describes the location of woman along the cultural divide of sexual difference. In no way do I support the prescriptive therapeutic activity of generations of analysts from Freud through the present who consistently abused their women patients by refusing to listen (sic!) to their stories – converting incest and other sexual violations into hysteria – and by advising them to return meekly to the prisons of husband and family. Even female and feminist psychoanalysts, as I hope to demonstrate with an examination of Julia Kristeva’s “Stabat Mater,” end up culpabilizing the mother (Alice Miller), remain stuck in the functionalist model of the “negative Oedipus” (Kofman), or jettison the mother’s desire on the shoals of the Father’s Law (Julia Kristeva). Luce Irigaray herself, whom I consider the most provocative, has trouble

seeing the mother except through the eyes of the daughter, and in her later works abandons the lesbian intimacy of the mother-daughter entente in favor of a heterosexually inf(lect)ed love scenario which shades off into *agape*. Kristeva, who explored the preoedipal lesbian space of the *chora* with the most persistence, who insisted that the repressed lesbian energy of the *semiotic* returns with the birth of the daughter's child, finally capitulates to Freudian authority in her longing for *legitimation*.

We know about 'resistant readers'; my hunch is that the minute we get close to the subject of the MOTHER we become resistant writers, in spite of our seeming obsession with putting this subject into words. The questions I have tried to keep before me are: Have radical writers provided conceptual strategies that will help us move beyond the gridlock of nuclear family ideology and the attendant gender roles? What about the feminization of poverty, female-headed households, abuse of women and children, incest, all of which may derive not only from misogyny but from fear and hatred of the Mother? What about sexual mutilation (clitoridectomy – a term I sought in vain in my 'unabridged' new Webster's), in which the operants are women? Have we been able to emerge from the Oedipus complex which encouraged us to unload all of our psychological angst upon the (phallically constructed) figure of the Mother? What chances do we have to reconceptualize family, gender and women's lives in the post-modern era?

In its attempt to remap the sociopolitical terrain feminism has produced in the last two decades a number of counter-discourses, perhaps none more compelling or urgent than the analysis of the symbolic term and topos of the mother, and of the institution of motherhood. It may be that all feminist writing has as its point of departure the site of the living, dead and resurrected mother. Or, when we sign, the addressee of the signature is the mother, as Derrida suggests. The mother we wish we had, the mother we wish we were. This is true even when the text thematizes the ritual killing of the mother (Monique Wittig, esp. *Dictionnaire*). Or when its alleged origin is in the slaying of the father (Virginia Woolf). Thus in writing from the site of the mother, I will be exploring what is perhaps the most overdetermined sign in any language. As Derrida (writing on Nietzsche) summarizes it: "The mother is the faceless figure of a *figurant*, an extra. She gives rise to all the figures by losing herself in the background of the scene like an any-

mous persona. Everything comes back to her, beginning with life; everything addresses and destines itself to her. She survives on the condition of remaining at bottom" (38).

I have used the three texts, published within a year of each other, with which I started this piece, and which have lost none of their strength in the decade and a half since they appeared, in unequal doses: Julia Kristeva's "Stabat Mater" (1976), collected since in her *Histoires d'amour*, Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* (1976), reedited with a new introduction in 1986, and Nicole Brossard's *L'Amèr* (1977). Rich's work was foundational, affirming my perceptions and my politics; as a result I have cited it infrequently, but it nurtured me throughout. The other two were difficult for quite different reasons; as will become apparent, I spent most time with the least congenial, the least feminist, struggling with the demons of psychoanalytical theory. Somehow, I had to exhaust the theoretical challenge of Kristeva's text as I wrestled with my 1950's socialization (motherhood as peak experience).

In spite of their ideological differences, I want to see the works as complementary – as Luce Irigaray put it, "L'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre." The simultaneity of their publication need not obscure their familial relationship. The first operation I want to perform, in the wake of other theorists, is to evacuate the power relationship the terms mother and daughter have acquired since classical Greece, and note that while I am the mother of my daughter she too is my (m)other, and that I as a woman daily give birth to my gendered identity and to my *rapport* with other women. But like Monique Wittig for whom "mother" and "woman" are inadmissible in the lesbian-feminist lexicon, my resistance to the terms I have chosen to explore is evidence of the cultural overdetermination of this semantic cluster/field. Adrienne Rich observes, "[motherhood is] a ground hedged by taboos, mined with false-namings" (1986 15).

Of Woman Born provides an impressive survey and analysis of the historical roots and present reality of the institution of motherhood, the patriarchal supports of which, as we approach a new century and millennium, remain firmly grounded. Rich assesses the ways in which female sexuality had to be narrowly channelled in the interests of the fathers so that woman's ability to bear children could be regulated. What constitutes woman's mythic identity or immanence is precisely the power to produce new life, which, like death itself, its mystic twin, is the most awesome mystery of all. How is it possible, Rich asks, that women have

agreed to divest themselves of this power? How has the mother come to stand for “the victim in ourselves, the unfree women, the martyr” (1986 236)? How can women consent to an ontological status that deprives us of intellects and souls? Generically, spiritual power and creative energy have to originate with the woman, the mother. Coming to consciousness in the 1950’s, a proper socialist daughter of (anti-semitic Jewish) parents who were card-carrying atheists, the mythic status and inherent spirituality of women have been difficult for me to access. We need larger definitions of ‘mythic’ and ‘spiritual’ that encompass women’s social and psychic intelligence, and intuitive relationship to the earth (and its creatures) that underwrite ‘Ecofeminism.’ Then what of the concept of ‘the mother tongue’? Women know that all language is initially maternal; as Louky Bersianik insists, the first words the child hears come from the mother (190). They are verbal gestures the baby incorporates with other sensual stimuli that touch her. Like Kristeva and Brossard, Rich would insist upon “the corporeal ground of our intelligence” (1986 40). Women have been encouraged to disavow their physicality, their situatedness in their bodies, because of millenia of misogyny and because they have seen bio-logic as a source of their oppression. But Rich, Kristeva and Brossard would each write (on) the body of the mother with a different ink, inscribing a particular (auto)bio-graphy.

Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary

‘Real’ mothers do not escape a cultural double-bind: having identified the ideological roots of our shame, the punishment meted out to Eve for the sins of pre-Biblical matriarchs, we continue to rely on patriarchal injunctions that we bear children in pain as our mothers did before us, and especially, that we pass on the guilt. Equally unnerving, pregnancy and birth are sentimentalized and trivialized as a rapturous, asexual bond between mother and child. Such a bond exists only in fantasy and prepares mothers poorly for the actual tasks of parenting. I cannot pretend that my identity as a lesbian protects me from the internalized messages directed to me as a daughter and as a mother. I like to think we can re-ally ourselves with what native peoples call serpent wisdom. We can use our generative power to deconstruct a discourse that not only inscribes a chasm hedged by guilt and abuse between the generations, but actually legitimizes the maiming and murder of women and female children.

My original purpose was to set up a triangulated structure in which Rich re-read motherhood, Brossard re-wrote it, while Kristeva posed a third term, which at once re-essentializes the Mother and locates maternity in a prediscursive space anterior to discourse and culture. Now I think what I have is a record of a process of interrogation. I saw that removing the maternal body (and female desire) to a precultural locus – the “semiotic” – which functions like the subconscious in no way liberates them from a repressive discourse. On the contrary, this repositioning simply marks them as repressed by that discourse. As Judith Butler observes, Kristeva is enmeshed in phallogocentric conceptualizations (79-93). The conceit of the (M)other in Kristeva’s work is a product of the intellectual structures of Western metaphysics, Judeo-Christianity and psychoanalysis, which, like the fantasies of the benevolent despot and the philosopher-king coopt more radical thought. She is not even certain that the absent parent is not some ungendered *father* of prehistory. Kristeva, the proper daughter of Freud, Lacan and psychoanalysis, offers us in her “archaic father” an originary, pre-gendered support for what will later become the individual (“Stabat Mater”). Her role in the triangle I am envisioning is to reinvest the discursive space of the mother, which both Rich and Brossard evacuate, with her desire for structural coherence, grounded in what she calls a bio-symbolic order. According to this order, the ‘emptiness’ represented by the Mother when her womb is no longer full co-responds to the separation trauma experienced by the child, resulting in a primary narcissism. Since the Mother, forced to part with the child, is deprived both of the phallus and its substitute, there is, according to psychoanalytic dogma, nothing to see there. Instead the little pseudo-phallus will seek itself, or a mirage thereof.

In contrast to the fullness experienced with the (originary) mother, the young Narcissus finds in the mirror/pond simply a “screen over emptiness,” (in Lacan, called a “*gaping hole*” [Kristeva 1987 23]). Does this remind you of something? I-identification depends upon the balance of “emptiness and narcissism,” which likewise constitutes the “zero degree of imagination” (1987 24), where the images begin to be formed. This is where the child is first inserted into language, and begins to incorporate the “speech of the other,” an “other” which Kristeva reads (following Freud) as the “father in individual prehistory,” a father with no gender (1987 26). Kristeva admits that the child’s first affections are directed toward the mother, but both identification and imagination-

function are “always, already within the symbolic orbit” (1987 27). What is even more problematic here is the leap she next makes in asserting that the Father is “the magnet for primary love” (1987 27). If it is still unclear why I am following Kristeva down this devious path, the following statement should show where we are headed: “The object of love is a metaphor for the subject – its constitutive metaphor, its ‘unary feature,’ which, by having it choose an adored part of the loved one (I leave you to decide which part), already locates it within the symbolic code...” (1987 30). The Phallus: “metonymic object of desire. Metaphorical object of love.” Only a short step to the analyst, He (1987 30).

Even the “Song of Songs” in Kristeva’s reading legitimizes the couple and the wife (1987 96-100). So we are not surprised when she moves to provide Mary, virgin of the same name, with a mytho-biography, reinvesting her with the desire evacuated from the place of the Mother. In the chapter of *Histoires d’amour* devoted to the mother *proprement dit*, “Stabat Mater,” Kristeva, although far from feminist, does finally ask some questions of interest to women, centered on the problematic of feminine perversion (père-version [patriversion]) or the relationship of the woman-as-mother to the law. If we regard her terms as descriptive rather than prescriptive, we will observe why her analysis carries weight with many feminist theorists. As Kristeva sees it, the “self-sacrifice” of childbirth puts the mother in an “anonymous” position for the sake of the (presumed-to-be-male) child who must be educated according to social norms so that he may join the chain of generations. Female masochism, Kristeva continues, is sealed in the child, “coiled up in the desire for *law* as desire for *reproduction* and continuity” (1987 260; my emphasis). She is forced to acknowledge that “such coded perversion, such close combat between maternal masochism and the law have been utilized by totalitarian powers of all times to bring women to their side” (260). This reactionary role, she declares, “corresponds to the *biosymbolic latencies of motherhood*” (1987 260). Within this economy, the relationship between mother and daughter, between women, is a state of hostility (1987 261). This is complicated by the repudiation of the other (masculine) sex, which no longer functions under the aegis of the child. Kristeva is forced to admit that one way out of the struggle between the sexes and the internecine battles among women is a dialogue that would affirm differences. But she is suspicious of the right of the (m)other to search for fulfillment, “equivalents of power” which she calls “countercathexes in strong values,” stating that “feminine psychosis today is sustained and

absorbed through passion for politics, sciences, art" (1987 261). Motherhood, then, since the death of God and the demise of the Virgin, is without a discourse. It is in this lacunary space that Kristeva writes, but without taking a stand. In fact, the heretical ethics she proposes, *a herethics* (1987 263), is inescapably phallogocentric: it is what gives "flesh, language and jouissance to the problematics of the *law*" (1987 262; my emphasis).

"Stabat Mater": the place of the Mother is *standing* – at the foot of the cross, below the crucified Son. Her milk and tears are "metaphors of nonspeech" – there are no words to say them (1987 249). Although as *Mater Dolorosa* she represents a "return of the repressed" (1987 249), Mary is engulfed in silence. How can she mediate for woman, whom Kristeva, following Hegel, qualifies as "immediately universal," lacking heterogeneity and desire (humanity?) (1987 248)? Unlike Demeter and the Great Mother goddesses from whom she is derived, Mary cannot speak to, of, or for her son, much less her daughters.

Kristeva's scenario spotlights a heteropatriarchal mother-son pathology. She appears to be caught between her allegiance to a phallogocentric system, the 'lip' service she pays to the fathers (of psychoanalysis, philosophy, the Church), and her location as a woman and an intellectual in the post-modern, late twentieth century. She distributes her "Stabat Mater" on a double track, the parallel columns establishing a dialogic interaction between the analysis and a more lyrical, personal meditation in which she herself occupies the site of the mother. Here her ambivalence is manifest: "Belief in the mother," she writes, "is rooted in fear, fascinated with a weakness – the weakness of language." This 'lack' is responsible not only for the empty Mother figure that is the counterpart to the 'Word' of God, but also, through the agency of artists and interpreters, an "oversaturation of the sign systems" and "an overabundance of discourse" that encumber the Mother (1987 252-53). Noting the absence of "mothers and their problems" in Freud's casebooks, she wonders whether motherhood might not be "a solution to neurosis and, by its very nature, rule out psychoanalysis as a possible other solution" (1987 254).

Trying to theorize the mother from an essentialist position she can only articulate a "demented jouissance" and a phantasmatics that is hysterical and labyrinthine, derived from male constructs (1987 255). There is no place within Kristeva's system from which one woman may speak to another. On the contrary, women can only share with each other

the mutual hostility with which a phallogocentric tradition has invested them (1987 256). The only space for women to communicate with each other, reproducing “the strange gamut of forgotten body relationships with their mothers” is a space in which they relate not as individuals but “between atoms, molecules, [with] wisps of words, droplets of sentences,” rather like a “community of dolphins.” I doubt that this place where the “symbolic shell cracks” and where “biology shows through” would satisfy many of us, *pace* the dolphins (1987 263). The question is whether we can/should escape the third term represented by Kristeva’s text, whether we should resist the temptation to suppress the biological essentialism it re-enacts. Do we not need to know what attends us on “this and that side of the parenthesis of language” (1987 250)? In my illegitimate position as lesbian mother not only do I have to look my oppressors in the face; I have to be as smart as possible in order to claim a subjectivity and an imaginary of my own.

If Kristeva’s mother stands there with her cross, caught between the passion of/for the Father and the Son and her desire to speak from some unmarked space anterior to the construction of such meta-narratives and the Law that supports them, neither Rich nor Brossard have much patience with such ortho/doxy. Kristeva has never been willing to move beyond the heterosexism of psychoanalytic doxa. Thus Rich’s lesbian re-reading of the mother, while less theoretical in its approach than that of Kristeva, jars us more, forces us to ask more disturbing questions. Psychoanalysis has been able to provide few clues to female psychosexual economy, especially the desire of/for the mother. When we try to theorize the mother’s desire and that of the daughter we immediately discern a shortfall in the lexicon, especially if we chose not to buy into the patrilineal game of ‘generations.’ The daughter who chooses alternatives to childbearing may be the most anomalous of all, having failed both her mother’s efforts to legitimize her existence, kinship rules and roles, evading socio-political control of her body and her desire. She is truly the “no-name” woman.

The Mother Tongue / La langue maternelle

“Il est important que nous gardions nos corps tout en les sortant du silence et de l’asservissement,” remarks Irigaray (1981 29). What she calls a “*parler-femme*” does not exclude the body – on the contrary it is: “un langage qui ne se substitue pas au corps-à-corps... mais qui l’accom-

pagne" (1981 29). Further, "il n'y a pas un sujet qui pose devant lui un objet," but rather "un va-et-vient continu" (1981 49). As we see in the work of Nicole Brossard, what Irigaray calls the "parole désirante" (1981 89) can create alternate modes of being and knowing that have the potential to change subjectivity.

Brossard writes:

Tout ce temps qu'elle demeure dans l'Histoire, elle ne peut gagner sa vie qu'à perturber le champ symbolique. Modifiant la clause première, l'instrument de reproduction, son seul outil. La dissolution des formes, comme une fin du monde jouée sur la scène du ventre plat. Son utérus posé à côté d'elle comme un sac à dos. Cela suppose qu'elle réorganise tout son corps, ses modes de déplacement. Elle a du jeu devant le miroir pour passer. (1977 33)

Brossard theorizes that we cannot extract ourselves from our alien position within the signifying system we inhabit, but we can make trouble by refusing to utilize or by (de)forming our means (tools) of (re)production, our uterus. Since the body is inscribed in culture, and cannot be apprehended in any unmediated fashion, we can only reorganize the body by 'rewriting' it. That is, if we rework the signs that confer meaning to the (lesbian) body, we can create the possibility of retheorizing our material location.

When I had children in the 1960s I realized for the first time in my life that I had 'bought into the system.' But I chalked it up to 'lack of choice,' a heritage from the 1950s. Without adequate tools to analyze the dissonances in my life, which were called 'role conflicts,' I did not see that the roles themselves were the problem, and felt guilty for wanting anything for myself. Like most women I wondered what was wrong with me, and displaced my anger on to myself and my children. As Adrienne Rich demonstrates in her last chapter, any mother can understand the misdirected anger that results in abuse or even infanticide, like the 'poisonous pedagogy' handed down from one generation to the next. What a different scenario Brossard enacts in *L'Amèr*, where she channels her anger into a highly charged text that explodes the myths, hom(m)olies, ideologies!

Brossard's lesbian mother figure "kills the womb" in order to "reorganize her material: private and political life" (1983 13, 27). Rather than exalting the plenitude of the Venus figure full with child (which will necessarily imply her emptiness after the birth has occurred and the

child has been recuperated by the patriarchy), Brossard rejects such a view of physical/psychological destiny. She invents a "differential equation" for calculating her inherent value: a triad of (m)other-daughter-lover.

"Ecrire je suis une femme est plein de conséquences" (1977 53). Brossard's 'signature' phrase always appears in a climactic location in her texts, performing not as a *dénouement* but to heighten the tension, to extend the meaning. It should be linked to that other lapidary message from *La Lettre aérienne*: "une lesbienne qui ne réinvente le monde est une lesbienne en voie de disparition" (1988 127). Lesbians are not endangered because of homophobia alone, but because of silence, suppression, or what I would call a signifying void. Equations to calculate differential trajectories for our energy require new ways of seeing, of figuring.

In Brossard's text the eye acquires the power to disrupt old habits and patterns, the ability to project new tonalities (mauve): the contract dissolves, the dream transforms, "intense, illisible. La figure est migratoire" (1977 69-70). According to a new geometry of space, our eyes fail us – on purpose (1977 72). Appearance and reality evaporate. The white spaces between words and in the text contain all of the colors of the rainbow, all of the energy of moving vortices. "Fissure" is fission, the excitement of a night spent dancing the tango. The text has a woman's body (1977 86).

A revised natural history is suggested in the section "La Végétation." Here a planned regression or "in-pulsion" to recover the girl that the lesbian once was (before she became a wo-man) re-activates our pre-history. "Avide de mots elle s'en méfie s'en lave les lèvres" (1977 90): we are back at the drawing board, back in the garden, rethinking word, nourishment, guided by physical contact, hands empty of tools (1977 91). Transformation begins from within: "avec le doigt dans la gorge pour faire vomir la muse endormie" (1977 92). Nourishment links life and death, myth and reality: "la **m**ourriture" is a neologism suggesting mother, nurturance and mortality. The language acquires versatility, mixing sounds, salt, skin. Was there an *I* before the patriarchy? Brossard suggests so, which is the function in her works of the myth of "origyn": although the writer is civilized, her body is "pareille à la mer les filles roses, sirènes à huis clos" (1977 93). Having inhabited someone else's fiction, how do we create our own?

Brossard's answer is a new category called "fiction-theory," in which one theorizes, deconstructs as one goes along, in which lesbian is a term

of continuous displacement. The mother is the obstacle against which we keep stumbling, inside and outside, reasserting herself where we least expect it. The only way to slay the phantom is to assume it, to explode it from within (implode it), the uterus, hysteria, in a lesbian embrace. A highly political enterprise, the curtain opens upon the unthinkable scene, the ultimate contradiction, a mere conversation. Single-breasted women take each other by the hand, beyond the dialectical difference of the One and the Other. Amazons take direct aim at the blank page (1977 103).

Resisting erasure, Brossard's lesbian (m)other recalls powerful images: in the summer heat she was only naked during the storm, full of hunger (1977 104). "La fiction rétorque" (1977 108); fiction snaps back. *L'Amèr* set in motion a long-term writing project to define subjectivity at the intersection of female and lesbian self-apprehension. "Je travaille," Brossard wrote in 1977, "à ce que se perde la convulsive habitude d'initier les filles au mâle comme une pratique courante de lobotomie" (109). She continues to use her writing as a weapon to explode this practice, and as a tool to intervene at the intersections of reality and fiction.

In a revised kinship network, all young women are our daughters, but we have no way to protect them from unforeseen outbreaks of male violence; this is the sense of the seering rhetoric of Brossard's recent intervention, included in the impassioned essays written in response to the massacre of women engineering students in December, 1989 (*Polytechnique*). "Soudain," she writes, "je sommes morte/s...d'une coupure de sens" (1990 93). We all die a little when acts of senseless violence are directed against women because they are women, especially the daughters who have not yet acquired a name. Like the Holocaust, I would like to make *Polytechnique* required reading. When, I want to ask, when will we bury the phallus?

The three texts on which I have founded my inquiry represent three visions, three terms. They per/form together. Kristeva helps us understand how the mother/maternal is located within culture through exclusion and disruption; Rich helps us track the effects on women of masculinist hegemony and control of reproduction; Brossard, revises the language and the imagination, understood as the repertory of images, terms and sexual grammar we are heir to. The project to reclaim memory and write the future has to be undertaken collectively.

The open "Lettre à ma fille" with which Suzanne Lamy concludes *d'elles* is, like Madame de Sévigné's letters earlier which established the

genre, a love letter. The original couple, represented in the pre-classical world by Demeter and Persephone, is the mother and daughter, whose roles and power are interchangeable. To this dyad Brossard adds a third term, the lover, in order to foreground the nature of the relationship, and to displace or rather disperse any latent inequality that inheres in the couple, where one term is generally in a privileged position with regard to the other. Thus the letter is exchanged among rather than directed to; the one who signs knows in advance that she must relinquish control. The *letter*, in both senses, inscribes a differential equation of lesbian love, reenacting in a new figurative space that infinitely expands its probabilities, the “continuum” described by Adrienne Rich a decade ago (Rich 1986).

And yet, spun to the margins of culture by the force of interlocking discourses that arrange for the exchange of women (as “commodities” – Irigaray) and exclude their voices, women have experienced enormous obstacles in their attempt to communicate with each other. Irigaray writes: “Avec ton lait, ma mère, j’ai bu la glace. Et me voilà avec ce gel à l’intérieur” (1979 40). How do we deal with the compulsion to reproduce the Mother which has congealed our insides so that the only legitimate place for a woman is in the labour of childbirth?

Psychoanalytic theory (Lacan et al.) identifies the enigma of the ‘civilized’ human subject with the profound division that occurs when s/he is forced to accede to the “name of the father.” It is reassuring to think we all stutter when we are obliged to name who/what we are. But is this phenomenon, I wonder, as universal as psychoanalysis might lead us to believe? Or is the divided (castrated) subject principally a phenomenon of Western metaphysics?

At what point did we abandon the wisdom of native peoples who see no separation between Demeter (the mother earth) and Persephone (her daughter, the underworld)? Why/how have successive generations of sons and daughters suppressed the power and mystery of the mother (Rich)? When we move into culture/society, do we relinquish one of our parents? Or rather, is the mother subsumed into the father? Otherwise, might the mother-daughter relationship be so strong – so lesbian – that it threatens the constitution of civil structures?

If the mother as a sign is difficult to read because it is overburdened with cultural messages, the daughter as a sign is illegible because it is underdetermined. And as long as the daughter continues to be seduced/to seduce the father(s) she will remain nameless. A real

cultural revolution, such as generations of women have dreamed of in their utopian works, requires a refurbishing of the imaginary/mythic resources from which the symbolic gains its sustenance. "May the imaginary be a place," Nicole Brossard declares in *These Our Mothers*, "where the code of the species is preserved at its best, that strange simplicity basically required to tackle the subject" (1983/94). I believe that radical feminist/lesbian theory is in the process of creating the fictions necessary to effect such an alteration in form.

I believe that every woman – whatever her location – who thinks about the effects of her oppression on herself and her children is a theorist. The question is how to hear each other, how to communicate our insights to each other. Relativity and the quantum theory tell us that there are no fixed boundaries. In order to account for new visions (a new picture theory) Brossard's text performs gyrations that disrupt normal syntax. It is only by pushing the boundaries of gender, for example by the use of the word "lesbian" as what Wittig calls a "war machine," that we can get fiction and reality into a new stereoscopic focus. Kristeva forces us to consider what lies beyond the parenthesis (parent-thesis?) of language. Beyond the masquerades of masculinity and femininity, what sorts of bodily effects might we construct? What sort of generative energy have we infused into our daughters? The dance has only begun.

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