

PLAYFUL CITIZENS:
UTOPIAN INTERSECTIONS OF PLAY, SEX AND
CITIZENSHIP IN CONTEMPORARY
CANADIAN FICTION

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Utopian Intersections of Play, Sex and Citizenship in Contemporary Canadian Fiction

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Abstract

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“Playful Citizens” explores the contemporary novel, especially as written by Canadians, in terms of how it deals with ideas about play, game, and sex, and how it relates these ideas to constructions of civic responsibility. Considered as strategies for human interaction, play, game and sex act within fiction to situate the citizen at a troubled intersection where pleasure challenges responsibility. Playful or “ludic” activities arbitrarily conflate opposites and straddle boundaries because it is diverting, interesting, and vitalizing to do so: “fun.” Ludic activities challenge “responsibilities” almost by definition, and indeed the ludic and the civic test each other’s limits in Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* (1981) and *Blind Assassin* (2000), Nicole Brossard’s *Baroque d’Aube* (1995) and *Désert Mauve* (1987), George Bowering’s *Caprice* (1987), Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), Gail Scott’s *Heroine* (1987), Lisa Moore’s *Alligator* (2005), and in British writer Jeanette Winterson’s *PowerBook* (2000). The interaction of the ludic with the civic enacts a reconfiguration of power dynamics in these narratives, even as it permits a profusion of alternate fictional worlds to burst into existence. Taken together, the reconfiguration of power and the multiplicity of alternate worlds gesture unmistakably towards the “real” human potential for utopia.

The texts of interest for this project are metafiction and *künstlerromans*, both of which tend to construct the world of human experience as malleable. Similarly, both

often model “the human” through figures of writers, readers, and other makers and users of art. The above-listed narratives configure the pressing task of transforming reality and/or the world as “belonging to” the arts as the discipline most likely to inspire change. They also configure the transformative task as volatile given the malleability of the world and the metonymic plasticity of those who shape worlds in art. Deployed exegetically or diegetically, metaphors for interacting with or intervening in world-hood become, variously, sexual in Winterson and Brossard, and playful in Atwood and Brossard; meanwhile, in Atwood, Bowering, King, Scott and Moore, the sexual and the ludic combine to produce a highly-charged trickster aesthetic that governs both artistic and civic worlds.

When Canadian narratives intertwine ideas about citizenship with ideas about sex and play, they move beyond the agonistic values of the West’s individualist cultural models and power economies. The interaction of these ideas produces texts that challenge the limits of narrative and of quotidian political engagement, that interrogate regions of acceptability and of suspicion. Canadian narratives that confront the civic with the ludic explore human experience as reciprocal and inescapably contingent with collective experience. Sketching worlds that play with competitive power dynamics, they re-imagine the dynamics of human interaction as binding critique to hope, producing a volatile, ambivalent, and indelibly ironic utopian potential.

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This dissertation is dedicated to my most cherished playmate, Brian Ernest Staveley.

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1. Playful Citizens: An Introduction.

“Playful Citizens: Utopian Intersections Between Play and Citizenship in Contemporary Canadian Fiction” began its life as an exploration into a narrative theory of play with feminist inflections. It was set to explore the arbitrariness that playful or ludic structures, that is, structures that play with art as a form, emphasize when they help form any “artistic” product, whether that product is textual, musical, sculptural, visual, filmic, theatrical, and so on. Ludic structures express delight and fascination with art because they enliven the compulsion toward (or obsession with) having access to “pleasure” through artistic products, even as they insist on the “art-ness” of those products. They encourage the pursuit of the arbitrary for its own sake.

As I wrote, Canadian academics in English Literature, notably Smaro Kambourelli, Len Findlay, and Donna Palmateer Pennee among others, were increasingly focusing attention on questions of citizenship, and it became clear that my work also offered a way to test these areas of interpretation. My reading in this area suggests that academics in the humanities find the concept of the citizen useful because it emphasizes individual responsibility, because it encourages expectations that an individual can have a concrete effect on the world she lives in, because it is predicated on the individual’s relationship to a wider collective, and because it strongly implies the presence of a reciprocal relationship between individual and collective that can be mutually beneficial. Within the experience of citizenship thus conceived, the arbitrary exists under vexed conditions. Whether it originates from the actual world in the form of incidents that exceed the limits of human control, or from the individual via pursuits that elide political

control, the presence of the arbitrary tests the bounds of civic experience by challenging what it permits and prohibits.

Narrative play is only one relatively benign way in which individuals pursue the arbitrary. People engage with narrative both for fun and for profit or, less colloquially, both for enjoyment and for illumination. But through the play of narrative, people, in particular writers and readers, collectively construct and experience an alternate non-actual world; they explore possible alternatives to the way things are. The narratives and fictions that particularly intrigue me use a complex embedding/framing system, refracting such alternatives against each other. In both their diegesis and their exegesis, such narratives play intensively with the ideas of control, vulnerability, and responsibility that resonate compellingly with ideas of power and arbitrariness that crop up around citizenship.

“Power” is a particularly compelling aspect of arbitrariness to explore, whether it is understood as a literal physical force, as the political force that subtends human interaction, or more figuratively as the ability of a made thing to generate a response in a person by inspiring, provoking, or reassuring her. In some of the literature of paranoia that appeared in the twentieth century, it was common to understand political “power” as a most precious commodity, jealously hoarded by the few and viciously fought for by others. I think this understanding has shifted in the last few decades, following Michel Foucault *et al*, so that we are becoming more open to understanding “power” as held unequally, but by all. Having power is neither a right nor a privilege, but a condition of being a living entity on this planet.

As such, power can be understood less as a rare trophy to be competed for than as a fully familiar accoutrement to living that demands to be theorized far more flexibly. If power pertains to an economy of bounty rather than of scarcity it may be exercised for reasons that can be either arbitrary or considered, or any gradation in between. For humans, power entails responsibility, and responsibility entails understanding. Current media rhetoric strongly implies that each of us has the power to effect change within the biosphere, within the human environment, within any facet of contemporary life, and in order to direct this change towards the ends we desire, we need to understand the consequences of our actions and inactions. Whether it has been systematized with rules and conventions or is a spontaneous activity of the moment, play offers an effectively inexhaustible means of constructing and deconstructing the intricate relations of a bountiful power economy.

Ideas about power and play began to co-exist for me as I completed an M.A. with narrative-play theorist R.R. Wilson. For me, as for him, narrative intricacy in the form of interleaved framing and embedded narratives became a sure indicator that playfulness or ludicism was at issue within a text. My research on Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* read both texts through a theoretical matrix that incorporated postmodernism, magic realism, reader-response theory, and the semantics of fiction outlined in Thomas Pavel's *Fictional Worlds* (1986). The same matrix underpins "Playful Citizens," although it has taken on a different role because of my new attention to citizenship studies.

The texts I chose for this project include Nicole Brossard's *Baroque d'Aube* (1995) and *Désert Mauve* (1987); George Bowering's *Caprice* (1987); Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993); Gail Scott's *Heroine* (1987); Lisa Moore's *Alligator* (2005); and Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976) and *Blind Assassin* (2000). A British narrative, Jeanette Winterson's *PowerBook* (2001), opens the discussion.¹ The Canadian writers are from regions within Canada that are considered to be geo-politically and culturally unique, although regionalism is not a primary focus of "Playful Citizens." Of these books, Atwood's *Blind Assassin*, King's *Green Grass, Running Water*, and Winterson's *PowerBook* are personal favourites as well as offering rich examples of narrative play; I have considered them crucial to this project from its earliest stages. Each uses the structural play of embedded narratives both to pursue possibilities for their own sake and to re-engage with narrative process, and in their narrative play they investigate the quality and extent of the connection between art and citizenship. They configure human experience as navigating the coincident limits of pleasure and responsibility, whose mutual contamination generates a utopian profusion of possibilities for which arbitrariness can be a viable means of management.

The distinctive nexus of narrative, play, citizenship, and utopia provides a space for interrogating current directions in Canadian fictions. The distinctively Canadian world they reflect is a place where limits are challenged, including the limits of power, the limits of responsibility, and the limits of pleasure. As a country that has participated

¹ Although Winterson is not Canadian, I include *PowerBook* here because it is a particular example of narrative play with embedded fictions, and as such offers valuable points of access to my subject.

in and been marked by such imperializing cultures as those of the US and Great Britain, Canada has been vitally engaged with the instability of power. Canada's fiction writers have perennially interrogated cultural relationships such as those between power and identity or power and gender. Canadian writers are uniquely positioned to challenge the cultural limits of citizenship and of playfulness, and through them to explore the ironies and optimisms of narrative utopias.

2. Theorizing Play, Pleasure and Citizenship in Canadian Fiction

2.1 Narrative and Playful Citizens

“Playful Citizens” explores contemporary novels, especially as written by Canadians, in terms of how they deal with ideas about play, game, and sex, and how these ideas relate to constructions of civic responsibility. Considered as strategies for human interaction that straddle boundaries and conflate opposites, play, game and sex act within fiction to situate the citizen at a troubled intersection where pleasure challenges responsibility. As a form of self-expression and self-actuation, the freedom to pursue personal pleasure is both a right and a privilege, and as such it is one of the many things that the implicit contract between the citizen and the state should protect. Within the arena of artistic narrative, however, the ludic or playful and the civic test each other’s limits in Margaret Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* (1976) and *Blind Assassin* (2000), Nicole Brossard’s *Baroque d’Aube* (1995) and *Désert Mauve* (1987), George Bowering’s *Caprice* (1987), Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993), Gail Scott’s *Heroine* (1987), and Lisa Moore’s *Alligator* (2005). British writer Jeanette Winterson’s *PowerBook* (2000) provides a useful point of departure, as we shall see. Each of these texts uses the technique of embedding narrative within narrative to explore the mutual challenge of the ludic and the civic. The resulting reconfiguration of power dynamics permits a profusion of alternate fictional worlds to burst into existence in these narratives. Taken together, the reconfiguration of power and the multiplicity of alternate worlds gesture unmistakably towards the “real” human potential for utopia.

The pleasure made available by dizzy-play subtends the narrative intersections between pleasure and responsibility, the ludic and the civic. Associated with the simplest games—spinning in place, rolling down hills, and riding on merry-go-rounds or roller-coasters—the pleasure of dizzy play connects with the pleasures of reading/writing, sex, play, and citizenship because all arguably result from the experience of being in process, incomplete, and contingent. *Vertiginous experience subtends interpellative processes.*¹ The reciprocal challenge of maintaining contracts between individuals and larger groups, such as the state, implies an ongoing negotiation for balance even as it hallucinates an extended balance vacuum; experiencing this visceral fluctuation between extremes, this violent contingency, often registers as vertiginous.

Meanwhile, the citizen is compelling as a critical concept because the vexed contingency that characterizes the relationship of the individual to the collective is inherent within it. It offers a way to think beyond Western individualism; yet more to the point, the process of maintaining citizenship, conceptualized in the abstract, resembles the experience of narrative precisely because the constant, tense ambivalence between expulsion and absorption is similar. Whether the expulsion and absorption is social or

¹ While I do not refer to it specifically within these pages, I base my understanding of the state's interpellative processes on Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970), so that wherever related terms arise his influence should be inferred. I do, however, admit an obverse possibility within this project's references to interpellative processes. Althusser assumes that the citizen responds and assents to the interpellative call as a prelude to discipline or punishment, so that the citizen understands herself as inherently delinquent and in need of correction. This elides the fact that practically speaking, the citizen cannot know before responding whether she is being called to be punished or for some other reason, such as to be praised. At least these two possibilities co-exist in the gap between the call's utterance and the citizen's response, and the interpellative processes depicted in the current narratives of interest play on those possibilities.

psychological, the prospects can be both reassuring and terrifying, and these qualities mark vertigo as well.

Narrative and citizenship have been linked in Western thought at least since Plutarch, when the texts of Aristophanes and Menander were critiqued not for their own merit as narratives but for how they contributed to “the formation of a good citizen” (see Simon Goldhill, qtd. in Reinaldo Laddaga [2007] 452).² This same idea underlies ethical approaches to theorizing narrative, which have experienced any number of ebbs and flows in academic endorsement from Classical times to the present day.

Writers of narrative resemble active citizens, meaning people who participate in civic processes at least to the extent of voting, if not by lobbying, volunteering or otherwise directly serving the public. Bina Toledo Freiwald (2005) attributes to Benedict Anderson the argument that “the essence of the nation is self-consciousness—born of those cognitive and affective acts by which subjects effect a shift from ‘I’ to national ‘we’” (Freiwald 166). In that we understand that the act of vicariously accessing alien subjectivities through narrative brings readers to reflect anew on their own subjectivities, narrative also effects such a shift. Such reflection on the relative standings of the individual and the collective is crucial to the survival of the human community, and is

² Interestingly, play and game also has a long history of being valued for its civic and civilizing influence. Schiller, for example, asserts not only that play imposes order on chaos, but that man “only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays” (translation borrowed from R.R. Wilson [67]). Twentieth century play theorists such as Roger Caillois and D.W. Winnicott stress the creative and civilizing benefits play brings. In *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1949), Johan Huizinga argues that play is not simply an offshoot of culture but actually produces it.

understood within the humanities to be facilitated by the influence of all arts including narrative arts.

Both writers and citizens are engaged intensively in world-building projects. At base, citizens help build worlds by electing state officials and tasking them with running the nation according to the voting public's mandate. The voting system's endorsement/rejection process produces quantum changes that can affect both the physical reality and the culture of the human world. Writers build non-actual or fictional worlds by judiciously selecting aspects of the actual world's cultural and material realities to represent in language, maintaining some aspects of these realities intact and transforming others, while eliding many. The world-version that results from the selection process, in tandem with events that unfold within the narrative, comments evocatively on the actual world. According to the well-worn truism, books can volatilize readers to change the world culturally and materially, and narrative depictions of character and world pinpoint what needs to be changed, because experiencing fictional worlds and their narratives can produce shifts in perception and comprehension.

Dizziness, meanwhile, attends the gut feeling of what it means for a person's particularity to be always changing, always developing a reciprocal relationship with a contingent collectivity, always being a subject in process. Dizziness and vertigo arise when one's equilibrium is challenged, as happens constantly if one's centre of gravity is fluid and shifting in relation to one's environment. People sometimes enjoy feeling dizzy,

and so dizziness can be a state that is desired and pursued.³ This is the corporeal corollary of perpetual chaos and change. While dizzy play is not always pleasurable to all players—it can produce pleasures outside the range of narrative seduction and political seduction—the texts of interest in this project explore how ontological vertigo links narrativity and narration directly to the pleasures of play and sex while also linking them to the uneasy pleasures of the citizenship experience. This linkage occurs when writers' distinct approaches to shaping particular narratives confront the need to write politicized narrative framed by common human experiences.

Narrative vertigo speaks to the experiences of being perpetually in process or unfinished, and of living in a world that is also perpetually unfinished and in-process. I understand narrative vertigo as particularly suited to postmodern narrative even though it arises in other times and places. The experience of contingency evinced by tensions between the individual and the collective is common across cultures and across times, yet it is heightened by the technological and cultural changes experienced by this planet's human citizens since the 1920s. It seems all the more urgent in a time when individuals

³ The play of dizziness and vertigo, termed *ilinx* by social philosopher Roger Caillois in 1963, arises when a person challenges her own equilibrium voluntarily in order to experience pleasure. Caillois glosses *ilinx* as “the Greek term for whirlpool, from which is also derived the Greek word for vertigo [*ilingos*]” (24), and describes the play of *ilinx* as a “kind of game [... which is] based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist[s] of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic on an otherwise lucid mind. In all cases, it is a question of surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure, or shock which destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness” (22). I see dizzy play as the action of deliberately but playfully imposing indeterminacy on experience or, alternatively, as generating a pleasant sensation of dissolution, as if the borders of the self were liquefying, seeping together or blending with the edges of the larger environment. It is hard to identify any gain besides immediate, visceral pleasure coming from the literal act of spinning in place besides the immediate pleasure of the spinning, the loss of equilibrium, the sensation that one's borders are pleasantly dissolving. Because of the absence of gain, I understand *ilinx* as the kind of play that is least heavily loaded with purpose, as the simplest type of play, and as the variety of play that most closely resembles Friedrich Nietzsche's ideal (see below).

and corporations are exhorted to take responsibility for and action against climate change, for example, which is widely understood as a dire problem for which all are collectively responsible while no individual is directly to blame.

Yet the narrative-within-narrative structure has existed for centuries, attesting to a well-established anxiety about the chaotic aspects of being contingent. One early example dates back to 850 CE in its earliest version. The framing tale of *The Thousand and One Tales of the Arabian Nights* depicts the narrator Scheherezade as a gifted storyteller who spins her elaborate tales in order to distract her husband, King Sharyar, from killing her. Other examples include Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, both of which incorporate several fully-formed layers of narratives, narrators, and narratees within their picaresque structures. These different times share in common qualities of cultural upheaval, even turmoil; the texts themselves depict worlds that are rich in humanity, studded with complex cross-cultural encounters, and infused with a sense of excitement at the sheer variety of human invention. The vertiginous strategy of embedding narrative within narrative is now proliferating in the Western world in movies, television programs, games, and print narratives, and especially in Canadian postmodern narratives, where the richness, complexity and excitement of the earlier narratives is translated into a satiric and ironic idiom.

Each of this study's texts of interest can be categorized as postmodern, whether postmodernism is understood as a historicized movement or as "a paradigm of contemporary Western cultural strategies" (R. Rawdon Wilson [1990], 106). All of the texts of interest were published between 1980 and 2005 so that they are on a more recent

end of the postmodern spectrum, generally held to have begun in the middle of the twentieth century. Narrative play theorists have tended to explore narrative play largely through fictions written by white men.⁴ Choosing the specific texts of interest for this study is only partially an arbitrary choice, then, since as playful postmodern narratives by women and/or Canadians they collectively indicate an area that continues to be under-explored. The study's consciously uneasy correlation of the civic to the ludic realms of postmodern subjectivity explores an aporia within narrative theory: the congruence of aesthetics and ethics produced by the equivalent demands on narrative to supply pleasure and demonstrate responsibility for the benefit of the reader.

These narratives engage with politicized debates on gender, race, and privilege that began in the 1960s and 1970s. As Linda Hutcheon theorizes them in *The Canadian Postmodern: A Study of Contemporary English-Canadian Fiction* (1988), postmodern narratives critique "Universality," "Truth," and the like. Postmodernism has been charged with both exhausting and replenishing contemporary cultures. It "plays" with "serious" issues and "defers resolution," adopting ambivalence as a critical strategy. Hutcheon writes, "Ambivalence, in this and in the Bakhtinian sense, is another word for postmodern paradox: the refusal to pick sides, the desire to be on both sides of any

⁴ The body of theory on narrative and play on which I rely for this generalization was written by Mihai Spairosu, Ruth Burke, Brian Edwards, R.R. Wilson, Steven D. Scott, and Paul Milton between 1980 and 2000. Writers they examine as playful, postmodern, or sometimes "proto-postmodern" include Miguel de Cervantes, William Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, Laurence Sterne, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Malcolm Lowry, John Fowles, Jorge Luis Borges, Robert Kroetsch, Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, Donald Barthelme, Robert Coover, Robert Pinget, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Claude Simon, Angela Carter, Peter Carey, and Louise Erdrich. Note that only three are postcolonial writers, only two are women, and only one is not of European descent, suggesting that at least for these particular theorists, this particular "canon" is written by people who are white, male, and European.

border, deriving energy from the continual crossing" (162). Schiller reads the drive to play (or *Spieltrieb*) as similarly mediating between the material and formal drives (*Stofftrieb* and *Formtrieb*). Meanwhile twentieth-century play theorists, such as Steven D. Scott and Jacques Ehrmann, follow from Schiller in constructing play as a fluctuating movement that binds dichotomies without resolving them, describing it as an activity that embraces ambivalence and mines it for its potential innovations.

Play as an activity performs ambivalence, binding the actual world to the non-actual playworld. As long as play activity continues, both actuality and non-actuality are equally valid and of equal value. Vertiginous play embraces this paradox for the sake of the disorientation it produces; vertiginous narrative does the same. It tests the degree to which narrative and experience determine each other by unsettling layers of narrative reality, embedding and interweaving them, and it plays with the relationship between "art" and "reality."

Embedding narrative within narrative is one way to play seriously with narrative form, and because it is as rule- and convention-based an activity as narrative itself it becomes game-like as well. Games combine the familiar and the unique for the game-player. One game of Monopoly is much like another game of Monopoly, yet the moves and outcome vary infinitely each time it is played. A narrative that reflects on its own status as an artifact by incorporating another exemplar of narrative artifice within itself replicates a game-type experience because it offers a similar combination of the familiar and the unique. The narratives will bear a family resemblance to each other, just as one board-game resembles another, but there will also be marked differences between the

narratives, just as no two encounters with board-games are identical. The differences incurred by the interaction between framing and embedded narratives promote the impression that narrative is both inexhaustible and infinitely innovative. Strictly speaking, literature is not a game and game is not literature, but the “gameliness” of narrative becomes important when the narrative foregrounds its own status as a product of craft and choice, when it points out the arbitrariness of its own unfolding by holding within itself other crafted narratives that explore other narrative possibilities.

Postmodern and gameful metanarratives construct disparate, vertiginous fictional worlds that are interconnected and interdependent. They build worlds that are contingent and arbitrary. This study reads metanarratives as building worlds that are self-conscious and reciprocal, contingent and arbitrary. Citizens in these works are characterized by intellectual engagement, strategic sensibility, and a critical and ironic awareness of the disparity between things as they are and things as they could be. This study also reads Canadian postmodern gameful metanarratives⁵ as critically scrutinizing the role of the sociopolitical within the human world, and it reads those by Canadian women as envisioning worlds wherein people participate in constructing practical utopias by working towards dissolving dichotomies.

I read narratives that hold other narratives within them as engaged with unmooring conventional concepts of narrative, subjectivity, and the political, especially as they interrelate, in order to shift and recombine their components. The narrative strategy of vertiginously embedding fiction within fiction plays with both narrative and

narrativization, emphasizing the arbitrariness of the choices that form them. Through this play arises a mirage of possible alternatives to actuality: “real life,” or the material world of experience as opposed to the possible world of imagination. Narrative vertigo refreshes the commonplace “what if” and “what might have been” questions on which fiction thrives, gesturing toward the immanent transformation of these basics even while it questions the basis of the transformation. It is particularly suited to fictions that are engaged with critically thinking through political ideologies and hegemonies that keep oppressive powers in place, such as those written by writers with feminist, postcolonial, or queer concerns, to select three of the most obvious.

The stacking of story within story fantasizes a basic change in the relationship between the actual world and its human citizens that will be reflected by the way narrative itself, one site where that relationship is thought through, is transformed. The promise is always indistinct, and, because it seems to offer something that current thought is not prepared to grasp, as if science suddenly acknowledged that a fifth direction exists along with the cardinal directions of north, south, east and west, or as if an extra dimension were being added to the three or four⁶ we currently acknowledge, it is rarely fulfilled within vertiginous metanarratives. What these texts do instead is indicate a point of no return. They show what is *not* viable in interactions between the world and its human citizens, and why it never has been viable, and they indicate what options remain. For Roland Barthes, the text of bliss is blissful because it indicates what cannot be

⁵ “Gameliness” as a term suggests that there is a gamely aesthetic to the work; “gamefulness” indicates a dedication to game-playing. Of the two I use “gamefulness” more frequently.

encompassed by language. Similarly, moving among the narrative levels of a metanarrative, a reader may briefly perceive possible modes of existence that have not yet been conceived.

Embedding one story within another disrupts the framing fictional world. Where the embedding is relentlessly repeated, as it is in the texts by Atwood, Brossard, Winterson and others that are examined here, fiction refers to fiction more intensively than to any "reality" shared by writer and reader. Whether or not they offer a viable utopian alternative to repressive actuality, these fictions reveal the arbitrariness behind repressive hegemonies and ideologies because they make referentiality equivocal; and they model worlds that survive even though they might be disconnected from a world marked by unproductive ideologies. The hybrid, dynamic, heterogenous spaces of vertiginous metanarrative suggest that the imaginary of Canadian postmodern narrative is hybrid, dynamic and heterogenous. They also offer the phantasmal promise to help transform the Canadian postmodern imaginary into its next, currently still indeterminate form, to perform a mediation between the actual and the possible.

The fluidity of collective identities is at issue in other forms of narrative besides the strictly literary. Some game-players are convinced that there is great and unexplored potential for social transformation within games. In "'This is Not a Game': Immersive Aesthetics and Collective Play" (2003), Jane McGonigal suggests that games are a unique tool for "social engineering" (8; the phrase is borrowed from player Eric Ng), especially where game takes forms that have been made possible by the internet.

⁶ Whether there are three or four dimensions depends on whether or not time has been established as an

McGonigal traces the impact of The Beast, the nickname by which the first immersive game was known. Designed to expand and enhance the fictional world of the Steven Spielberg-Stanley Kubrick film *Artificial Intelligence: A.I.* (2001), The Beast is “a series of digitally distributed clues and narratives that seemed to be some kind of game, but one without clear rules, objectives or rewards” (McGonigal 2). As the game unfolded many players received material artifacts from the game-world as clues, but the main incentive for playing The Beast was the pleasure of solving its puzzles.

By making use of television commercials, newspapers, websites, telephone calls, the US Postal Service and other means, the “puppetmasters” who designed The Beast’s intricate futuristic world attracted a global playership of over a million players, of whom the largest distinct player collective, known as the “Cloudmakers,” comprised almost 7500 participants. McGonigal writes that the game’s

alternate reality required no tool or vehicle for interaction outside of player’s [sic] ordinary, everyday experience. The game called players at home, faxed them at work, interrupted their favorite television shows with cryptic messages, and eventually even mailed them packages full of game-world props and artifacts via the United States Postal System. The Beast recognized no game boundaries; the players were always playing, so long as they were connected to one of their many everyday networks. (3)

Although it took some time for the game to develop such intricacy, the combined puzzle-solving ability of this player collective surpassed the puppetmasters’ challenges from the start. The gamewriting team had taken months to devise a schedule of difficult puzzles involving a murder mystery set in the year 2142. The puzzles required a variety of skills including “programming, translating and hacking skills, obscure knowledge of literature,

history and the arts, and brute computing force. The diverse skill and knowledge base required to solve the game's problems, as well as the magnitude of its unwieldy plot, made cooperative groups [of on-line players] like the Cloudmakers absolutely necessary" (2), since no one individual player could be expected to have a knowledge base adequate to the task. The game had promoted a stereoscopic type of vision, where, McGonigal says, the reality of actual New York, Chicago and Los Angeles—the three cities most embroiled in the game—also held the game reality of the world of 2142. The game's designers planned for the puzzles to be solved over three months, but as a collective the players surpassed all expectations by solving the whole puzzle schedule in a single day (3).

A later immersive gaming group, The Collective Detective, eventually bent its energies toward solving real-world problems such as government corruption and overspending (7). More disturbingly, the Cloudmakers collective bent its puzzle-solving skills toward the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon within three hours of the attacks (1). While McGonigal points out that this particular effort was quickly abandoned, it attests to the fact that this immersive game had "aroused an affective and self-conscious belief that enabled players to respond emotionally and viscerally to the needs and demands of each other and of the fictional world" (6), to the point that they would invest time and emotional energy in trying to save not only fictional characters but also potential real-world victims of crime (7). It had provided a uniquely shared experience, a flash-point of equipment, opportunity, and ability that enabled thousands of regular people to co-operate on a single defined cause from within their own homes and

workplaces across the world. The gap between deploying this force on behalf of a fiction and deploying it on behalf of actuality was small and easily bridged, once fuelled by the sense of engagement and enablement experienced by these playful world citizens.

The image of regular people intervening with and possibly transforming the real world in this paradoxically hands-on and virtual way is potent, not least because McGonigal's progressivist approach frames this play as a potentially productive and beneficial intervention. Common ways of thinking about play either place lusus or gameful activity in direct contrast to "serious" or "responsible" activity, or oppose play, like fiction, to the "real." McGonigal's provocative portrait of players engaged with the transformation of actuality is useful because it frames play as both a useful and a responsible activity. Yet it also indicates some areas of anxiety.

In *Play in a Godless World*, Catherine Bates takes progressivist, humanist views on play, such as McGonigal's, to task. She points out that they assume, among other things, that it is a good thing to be human, civilized, and creative, and that when chaos is succeeded by order, order is an improvement because it is positioned as resolution (1999, 13-27). Exploring Friedrich Nietzsche's thought, Bates points out that he strategically refuses to endorse humanist assumptions arbitrarily. For Nietzsche, the endorsement of play as a humanizing medium espoused by Schiller and others is contradictory partly because it makes play bear the vast ontological workload of bringing humanity as such

into existence, but even more because it assumes that an intensification of the human is a desirable, beneficial state.⁷

Nietzsche, Bates observes, contends that play is not play unless nothing else rides on it but the pleasure of playing. For Nietzsche, the play of childhood is better described as work because it is educational or developmental, either teaching the child about the world, reality, and unreality, or expanding the child's intellectual and imaginative capacity. If play civilizes it is not play but a tool of the state, and if it brings progress or gain of any kind it is not play but labour. Adult play often provides an opportunity to stretch the muscles of strategy, and its aim is either to gratify the will to power or to incite it; this also is not play as Nietzsche conceives it, since it is based on a victor-loser dynamic and since honour, a form of power and thus of profit, accrues to the victor.

The purest play, in Nietzsche's view, is suggested by the activity of building a sandcastle, destroying it, building another, and so on. It is an experience of flux, a diversion that produces nothing permanent; as Bates writes, it is not "a shaping or an ordering, but a Dionysiac shattering—a making and breaking of form" (1999, 51). If form relates to the shapes and patterns according to which a living being understands its world, or a player understands her game, then Nietzsche valorizes play as what repeatedly destroys and reconfigures that understanding.

Throughout this study, play is understood as a means of interrogating assumptions, assessing illusions, and exploring alterities through simulation. Much of the

⁷ A second problem with the "humanizing" effects of play involves the fact that nonhuman species also play. Domesticated animals, pets, and other mammals are easily understood as playful, but a growing body

interplay between the actual and non-actual in Atwood, Brossard, Winterson, King, Bowering, Moore and Scott is figured as play with worlds, that is, as imagining alternatives to the base fictional-world-that-is. Thus play also figures the limits of the collision between the actual and the non-actual, the place where fantasies of transforming one into the other become confounded.⁸ In the texts under investigation, a distinct tinge of either the utopian or dystopian inflects the imagined alternatives. Here “utopia” is understood to model ways in which pleasure and even bliss might become a real and sustainable feature of people’s socio-political experience. As such it also becomes a phantasmal limit-case for effective civic engagement, positing the point where arbitrariness, pleasure, self-interest and so on distract the citizen and/or the state from pressing their engagement to help achieve a utopian (or prevent a dystopian) state of affairs.

This section has thus far established some parameters of play regarding its relation to reality, its ability to confound dichotomies, its potential for interrogating

of research indicates that insects and reptiles can also choose to play rather than engaging in life-supporting labour. See especially Gordon M. Burghardt’s *The Genesis of Animal Play: Testing the Limits* (2005).

⁸ Paul Milton’s unpublished dissertation “Beyond Agonistics: Games of Vertigo in Postmodern North American Fiction” (1996) addresses ludic postmodernism as expressed by two Canadian and two American writers of the 1960s and 1970s, specifically Leonard Cohen, Ray Smith, William Gass and Robert Coover. It pays particular attention to the vertiginous aspects of postmodern narrative. There is some overlap between Milton’s area of focus and my own, specifically the interests in Canadian writing, in ilinx or the play of dizziness, and in Baudrillard. We are both interested in usefully recuperating what Milton calls “vertiginous ludics” (26) for narrative theory. The wider arc of Milton’s discussion, however, privileges the different, individual subjectivity. Like Cailliois, Milton constructs vertigo as generating a pleasurable danger response, so that the appeal of dizzy-play relates directly to the challenge of successfully retaining one’s individual subjectivity in the face of a direct threat to it. Milton and Cailliois construct vertigo as sharpening, not blurring, instincts in response to danger (29); I am more interested in how dizziness generates a pleasure or even an erotics of blurriness, fuzziness, and indifferentiation. This seems to me the less theorized and thus the more insidious of the two, and it offers a means of exploring what lies outside the model of individuality that the West has privileged so thoroughly.

illusions and exploring alterities through simulation. It has presented play as questioning conventional representations of the human and of freedom, as mining arbitrariness in the service of education and therapy, as playing through such spectrums as creativity and control, reason and the irrational. Looking at play, especially at dizzy-play which radically challenges borders, differentiation, autonomy, equilibrium and perspective, is one means of considering what follows from anti-essentialist theorizing that prefers “both-and” thinking over the binaristic “either/or.”

In narrative, play and dizzy-play arise on diegetic and exegetic levels where they confound distinctions between “narrative” and “actual” experience, between “fiction” and “reality,” and interrogate the nature of power-relationships like that between state and citizen or, alternatively, seducer and seduced. Jean Baudrillard theorizes seduction as essentially performing a kind of blurring between seducer and seduced; this will be discussed at length in Chapter 2.2 below, and again in Chapter 3.1. According to Baudrillard, seduction operates in this way at least partly because power exists only as a fantasy, not as a “reality.”

This play with power and self-image has direct implications for the current study’s interest in play and in citizenship, and its resonance distinctly shifts in its texts of interest according to how each text invests in the particular experiences of being a woman and of being a man. It relates strongly to the aesthetics of dizzy-play and vertigo. The following section will outline some situations peculiar to the relationship of women and play, including the experience of corporeal indeterminacy that attends vertiginous aesthetics as elucidated by Sigmund Freud.

2.2 Women, Seduction, Narrative and Citizenship.

Sexualized discourses play on distinctive patterns of arousal or excitement and release especially in Brossard and Winterson, but also in Atwood, King, Bowering, Moore and Scott. They turn toward resolving rather than reinforcing the isolation of disparate subjectivities. All of these writers also engage with questions of what it means to be constructed as a woman and what it means to be constructed as a woman who is a citizen. Only some of the writers examined here accept the “feminist” label as an accurate adjective for themselves and their work, but all are deeply concerned with struggles that are particular to being a woman. On the one hand, those struggles relate to women’s embodiment, psychology, and experience of citizenship; on the other, they relate to women’s experience of arbitrariness and the ludic.

There is nothing published in the theory of play, game, and literature that takes into account specific contributions from women as such, and indeed women are underrepresented in the list of primary writers who have gained attention as specifically playful or gameful writers. This is a problem in its own right. Critical attention to this gap within narrative does not yet exist except in a piecemeal fashion. Social feminist Teresa Ebert, for example, promotes the gap in academic attention to women’s ludicism in her *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire, and Labor in Late Capitalism* (1996). She sees ludic feminism as roughly coextensive with discourse theory which, she contends, undermines hard-won feminist advances against “problems of labour and exploitation” with specific relation to “gender, sexuality, difference, desire and subjectivity” (ix). The philosophical bias of her study opposes my own in that she

constructs play as both irresponsible and regressive, positioning it against seriousness, where I follow play theorists including R.R. Wilson, Stephen D. Scott, Jacques Ehrmann, Mihai Spariosu and others in positioning play, not against seriousness, but against reality. More properly speaking, I see play as very constructively performing a contingent and fluctuating conflation of reality with non-reality.

Ebert additionally understands theory based on discourse and language to originate in and exclusively support the white upper-to-middle class (233). While this construction may be justified, language is arguably the most important component of the human ability to think and communicate, so that language is integrally involved in the processes of developing and maintaining identity. If widespread and effective change can be effected in the world at large, then language, especially when playfully used, is the last thing that should be ignored in the battle against “problems of labour and exploitation” with specific relation to difference in ethnicity, gender, culture.

Ebert’s study specifically delineates the region of play as anathematic for politically responsible women, and in *Literature After Feminism* (2003), Rita Felski shows little patience for playful narratives by Jeannette Winterson and Angela Carter, among others, on the grounds that their artifice detracts from their substance. And a chance, oblique reference in *Border Crossings: Thomas King’s Cultural Inversions* by Arnold E. Davidson, Priscilla Walton and Jennifer Andrews (2004) indicates a continuing reluctance even among Canadian academics to examine trickster ludicism in fictional women. The academic positioning of play against seriousness and responsibility and how it plays against trickster narratives will be discussed at length in Chapter Five.

Taken together, these indicators suggest that for many Western academics today, playful women are intrinsically problematic, or, otherwise put, that playfulness and women are mutually exclusive. This may be an understandable residual resistance to archaic and misogynist constructions of women as constitutionally deceptive, cunning, infantile, irresponsible and weak-minded. But it is also a wholesale dismissal of play, whether it is conceived in Schillerian terms as an overt nexus for education, healing, creativity, pleasure, aesthetics, illusion and so forth, or whether it is conceived in Nietzschean terms as a continuous, open-ended and Dionysiac making and breaking of form (see Bates), as a productive shattering of perceptions of the human with rich potential for interrogating alterities and critically mining ambiguity.

It is therefore disturbing that contemporary academic sensibilities still resist granting women access to play, or discussing women writers according to their playfulness even though it is more than conventional to explore Robert Coover, Umberto Eco, John Barth, Robert Kroetsch and others in such terms. The current study foregrounds the ludicism of women writers because it is imperative that women have access—equal to men's—to artifice and to substance, to creativity and to practicality, to irresponsibility and to responsibility.

The same applies to the citizen as a figure of the human. The citizen tends to be discussed in terms of responsibilities and obligations as much as rights and privileges, but the terms of citizenship in Canada and elsewhere are widely inclusive precisely in order to grant civic protection even to irresponsible citizens so long as their irresponsibility does not extend to treachery or fraud against the nation. Since incarcerated criminals are

as eligible to vote in federal elections as citizens who are not incarcerated, it is clear that the state will not strip a person of her citizenship even when she is convicted of criminally, premeditatedly irresponsible acts such as murder, child abuse, and sexual assault. Ludicism engages a unique order of experience that encompasses the non-real and the non-serious even while it critically interrogates the real and the serious. Interrogating the ludic citizen, then, accommodates an irresponsibility in the citizen that is the more telling for not being bound to an empirical political reality. Therefore, the lusory and the ludic must form a part of current Canadian literary scholarship on citizenship.

My study proceeds as if the pleasure of ceding individual subjectivity is more closely implicated in the pleasures of dizzy-play than are the unpleasures of struggling to retain it. As a value, individuality is thoroughly ensconced in Western culture and is hardly under threat of extinction, but cultural developments generated in part by information technology and global economics are producing shifts in how individuality is conceived. Julia Kristeva, for example, explores the value of "a world without foreigners" ([1993] 36), which implies a world without xenophobia, a world that has gone past the "cult of origins" that Kristeva sees as "a hate reaction" (2). Such a utopia currently seems to be the best possible outcome of the discourses of dizziness and departicularization that this study explores, and the possibility of achieving such a practical utopia underlies its strategic "as if" choices.

With individuality being understood more and more consistently as contingent on group dynamics, the concepts of "independence" and "the individual" are increasingly

inflected by relationships and reciprocity. This in turn means that ideologies based on agonistic or competitive approaches, also far from extinct, are increasingly sharing the stage with principles outside the win-lose dichotomy. The performance principles explored by Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) and elsewhere are among these, as is the anxious postmodern resistance to undifferentiation and indeterminacy that underlies the continuing critical attention to identity politics.

It is the potential immanence of undifferentiation, indeterminacy, and overdetermination that gives rise to discourses of dizziness. To experience literal, corporeal indeterminacy is not to know where one begins and ends as a human subject, perhaps even as a living subject, not to know for sure whether one is singular, plural, nil, or some combination of the three, to be temporarily dispossessed of the means of making the distinction, and not to be certain why the distinction is necessary. Literal indeterminacy in the human means blurring edges, dissolution, evaporation, explosion, absorption, and the like—sensations that are also associated with sexual orgasm, with death, with seduction and surrender.

Sigmund Freud in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930, trans. 1961) refers to some experiences where such blurring is pleasant as he traces the psychological origins for spirituality. He understands religion as the apprehension of “a bond with the universe,” a feeling that is both “oceanic” and “limitless,” and the first example he cites is love: “At the height of being in love the boundary between ego and object threatens to melt away. Against all the evidence of his senses, a man who is in love declares that ‘I’ and ‘you’ are one, and is prepared to behave as if it were a fact” (13). In this context he

also makes reference to the infantile state where the child does not differentiate between self and world (14).

All of these experiences—infancy, love, and spirituality—are based on tropes of pleasure and nurturance, and Freud dismisses them because he sees the nostalgia for them as infantile and narcissistic, as the ground zero from which psychology develops (19). His progressivist reading of any change from the infantile stage and its pleasures as an advancement dovetails with his reading of human psychology as thoroughly determined by agonistic or competitive instincts that progress and “improve” the individual. For Freud, competition is responsible for making the processes of subjection and individuation progress. Because he sees no real alternative to progressive individuation he reads any movement that does not conform to this pattern as counterproductive at best. Yet pleasure that validates behaviour does not have to come from competing successfully. It can come from non-competitive successful exercises of skill available from performing, acting, gambling, and dizzy-play. Agonistic models do not definitively explain all human behaviour.

Despite Freud’s reductive reading of it, the infantile state does provide a deep-seated image of what it might feel like to be thoroughly safe, secure, and cared for, clarifying why people might desire to recapture it. This study proceeds as if this is the fantasy that haunts the power dynamics of citizenship: that the utopian state can and will provide ultimate safety, security and care for its utopian citizens whether or not they have earned it. The utopian state represents one way in which pleasure can be experienced collectively by large groups of people through socio-civic engineering; this pleasure is

more attenuated than, for example, the very personal, intense pleasure of sexuality, but it offers the hope of being sustainable. The fantasy of ultimate safety, security and care is ironic, however, because Western culture is so powerfully, probably irreversibly oriented towards individualism. As a motivation, the fantasy of ultimate care makes the vertiginous experiences of ceding agency and becoming indeterminate both specifically ludic and potentially attractive, because while it approximates a return to a state of ultimate security where there is no need for resistance, that return is necessarily temporary and conditional.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud proposes that the ego's tendency is to re-attain its earliest inorganic state, while the sex drive works to repeat the experience of the life cycle. The pleasure principle, he claims, is what regulates "the course taken by mental events."⁹ He argues that "[...] the resistance of the conscious and the unconscious ego operates under the sway of the pleasure principle: it seeks to avoid the unpleasure which would be produced by the liberation of the repressed" (14).

Freud contends that the ego instincts "exercise pressure towards death" while the sexual instincts exercise pressure "towards a prolongation of life [...]" (38). These polarizations—the sexual against the egotistical instincts, life against death—affirm

⁹ Incidentally, in Freud's view the pleasure of play and game cannot exist unless the player comprehends the "reality principle," which "does not abandon the intention of ultimately obtaining pleasure, but it nevertheless demands and carries into effect the postponement of satisfaction, the abandonment of a number of possibilities of gaining satisfaction and the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step on the long indirect road to pleasure" (4). Thus in order to play, the player must be able to differentiate between actions that are conducive to survival, such as the acquisition of appropriate food and shelter, and actions that are enjoyable but detract from the effort to survive. Choosing enjoyment over survival makes play possible, a condition that applies to human players but also to nonhuman players within the animal kingdom.

Roger Caillois's and Paul Milton's construction of vertigo as emblemizing a virtually life-and-death struggle (see footnote 6). By linking pleasure with negation, obliteration, or dissolution as Freud does, Caillois and Milton suggest how an individual can experience the prospect of interpellation into a politicized community as pleasurable even though, according to popular logic, some of her "individuality" must be lost in the process.

Elizabeth Grosz's work on corporeal desire in *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994) uses similar terms in its brief discussion of depersonalization. Working through Paul Schilder, Grosz proposes that

Depersonalization is a kind of psychical mimicry of the organic structure of dizziness. Its disinvestment in the processes of self-observation is a function of the narcissistic decathexis of the subject's own inclinations to voyeurism. The subject denies its own voyeuristic impulses, withdrawing from the pleasure of seeing so that seeing no longer has any value. The subject is now seen, or sees itself, with little or no libidinal investment in looking (or being looked at). (77)

Looking and being looked at are the hallmarks of Lacan's mirror stage which marks the subject's passing from the order of the real into the imaginary and symbolic orders, and their accompanying "sense of autonomy and agency" (44), so that depersonalization privileges what neither language nor subjectivity can address. A lack of libidinal investment in looking and being looked at suggests a lack of libidinal investment in language and subjectivity as well.

If narrative is a nexus of language and subjectivity, or if it is a type of cultural body shared by lusory participants in the narrative (narrators, narratees, narrated), then how is it sustained—how can narrative continue—when libidinal investment in its key

constituents drains away? Roland Barthes offers one possibility in *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973, trans. 1975) when he proposes that it is this very contradiction that provides erotic textual pleasure; for him, as will be clarified below, textual bliss is fuelled by the glimpse the text offers of the death of culture and of language. Texts of bliss challenge and unsettle the reader, he claims, and alter her relationship with language. For Grosz, the bliss Barthes finds in texts would play on the continuity between mind and body that she explores in *Volatile Bodies*; it would exploit the understanding that separating psychological from corporeal experience is falsely dichotomous.

Grosz theorizes that psychological and corporeal subjectivity stand in relation to each other much as both surfaces of a Möbius strip are one:

The Möbius strip model has the advantage of showing that there can be a relation between two 'things'—mind and body—which presumes neither their identity nor their radical disjunction, a model which shows that while there are disparate 'things' being related, they have the capacity to twist one into the other. This enables the mind/body relation to avoid the impasses of reductionism, of a narrow causal relation or the retention of the binary divide. It enables subjectivity to be understood not as the combination of a psychical depth and a corporeal superficiality but as a surface whose inscriptions and rotations in three-dimensional space produce all the effects of depth. It enables subjectivity to be understood as fully material and for materiality to be extended and to include and explain the operations of language, desire, and significance. (209-10)

For Grosz, this is “a model which resists, as much as possible, both dualism and monism; a model which insists on (at least) two surfaces which cannot be collapsed into one and which do not always harmoniously blend with and support each other; a model where the join, the interaction of the two surfaces, is always a question of power [...]” (188-89). If dualism and monism are to be resisted when conceptualizing collectivity as well as subjectivity, then the Möbius strip model is appropriate here as well. Sharply

distinguishing between the two is as counterproductive as the separation between mind and body. The citizen and the state should be thought as a continuum that can encompass harmony and disharmony, surrender and the exercise of power.

In *Seduction* (1979/trans. 1990), Jean Baudrillard theorizes that power is based on production and that it arises from an inescapably masculine economy. Seduction, he claims provocatively, is women's territory; it is the only alternative to production and the power of production because it shows them to be illusory, so that the ambiguous position of seduction in the Western cultural imaginary relates to the phallic economy's resistance to the destabilization of its power structure. As Baudrillard explains, "Seduction continues to appear to all orthodoxies as malefice and artifice, a black magic for the deviation of all truths, an exaltation of the malicious use of signs, a conspiracy of signs. Every discourse is threatened with this sudden reversibility, absorbed into its own signs without a trace of meaning" (2). This is achieved through the play with appearances, mimicry, through which feminine seduction shows masculine production to itself as a complex construction, a mirage built of layered illusions.

To contextualize his own theories Baudrillard refers repeatedly to narratives of seduction by Kierkegaard, Laclos and others. Baudrillard constructs seduction as an irresistible force that is specifically feminine, but is also trans-sexual in that that the non-feminine can access it as well. He asserts that "in the feminine the very distinction between authenticity and artifice is without foundation [...]" since "one cannot distinguish between reality and its models, there being no other reality than that secreted by the simulative models" (11). Because it belongs to the symbolic order rather than to the order

of the real, seduction becomes an irresistible and thus undefeatable force. Baudrillard sees it as playing out in a manipulative and often malicious contest of wills where the victorious seducer gains pleasure by depriving her target of pleasure.

The purpose of seduction as Baudrillard reads it is not sexual interaction, but convincing the target to lower her defenses, which is the proof that the seducer's skillful *trompe l'oeil* has been effective. It is not only that seduction defamiliarizes power, or that it shows power its own reversibility and its delusions, but that it reverses production. Pleasure has an incidental role in Baudrillard's theory as a byproduct of the interplays between power and its negation. Pleasure is occasioned by the agonistic interaction of the masculine and the feminine where, like the trophy that is its material symbol, it validates the victor and tantalizes or motivates the opponent, but is otherwise sidelined by Baudrillard in order to focus on the interaction between production and simulation.

For Baudrillard "*seduction represents mastery over the symbolic universe, while power represents only mastery of the real universe*" (8; Baudrillard's italics). His controversial construction of the feminine and masculine is indebted to his previously-established theories of consumerism, wherein commodity display is the only possible form of power within the real so that the display of power objects substitutes for power (see Douglas Kellner). As the province of the feminine, seduction reveals the illusions that construct the phallocratic economy and appropriates those illusions to its own ends.

In *Aesthetic Democracy* (2006), Thomas Docherty glosses the situation Baudrillard proposes:

Crudely put, and in an analogy with erotic seduction, I seduce you precisely by making myself into an object for your desires, such that you initiate the action that will bring us together; and at that moment, precisely when you believe yourself to be acting freely in what you imagine to be your seduction of me, you are in fact already in my power. As in erotic relations, so also in consumer relations. The logic here is clear: consumer society is one in which we believe ourselves to be free subjects precisely at the moment when we have lost all subjective autonomy and have instead become simply those objects that are the instruments of the desires of others. In this state of affairs, any “change” that we might feel that we initiate as a demonstration or enactment of our “autonomy” turns out to have been already programmed and decided for us in advance by others who hold a firm power over us. Further, such a condition precludes the possibility of our acting as citizens in any meaningful sense of the word. (xv)

Following John Dewey and Richard Rorty, Docherty identifies as the crux of democracy “the very possibility of ever going beyond ourselves, of ever accepting that we ourselves might change” (152). Docherty’s premise that “the aesthetic events in life condition the possibility of our having political relations or a society at all [...]” (149) shapes his exploration of whether and how citizens can have autonomy in a socio-political structure that systematically commodifies them.

For Docherty as much as Baudrillard, then, the political hegemony presents itself as aligned to the real-as-such, absolute and unamenable to change. This suggests that the problem for the citizen is to reach past the apparently impenetrable limits imposed on her by the workings of hegemonic power, to realize the alterities in herself that the hegemony prevents her from seeing—alterities that, for Docherty, only become perceptible through “aesthetic events” such as literature.

For Barthes textual pleasure is a less excessive form of bliss, both of which become available to the reader only when the text proves that it desires her. By creating a site of bliss, a region where the text offers to fulfill her personal readerly desires, the text

“cruises” her (4-6). Barthes contends that the text builds its eroticized site of bliss at the gap or seam between culture/language and its death, so that the reader’s pleasure is bound to the privilege of glimpsing the seam even while she is seduced by the possibility, promoted by the text, that this book has somehow been written especially for her. Her bliss is prompted by linguistic excess and supported by a voluptuous reading practice that both abrades and flutters deliciously through the text rather than applying itself to it with concentration (12). Barthes distinguishes the text of pleasure as promoting comfort; it “contents, fills, grants euphoria; [... it] comes from culture and does not break with it” (14). Contrastingly, the text of bliss “imposes a state of loss, [...] discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader’s historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language.”

Both Baudrillard and Barthes valorize artifice because its playfulness with form and structure emphasizes the insubstantiality of cultural products. In this context, Barthes also refers to the death of language, the tragic cessation of the means by which the human subject gains access to the Lacanian realms of the imaginary, the symbolic, the Law. Thus the pleasure and bliss of a text arise from its ability to suggest what lies inside *and* outside of subjectivity. That is, textual bliss gestures toward what is outside the premises that construct individuality as necessary and desirable to have, as valid and interesting to study, and as the predominant catalyst of change: “What is overcome, split, is the *moral unity* that society demands of every human product” (31; Barthes’s italics). Similarly, the bliss of seduction for Baudrillard involves the way it develops the split between

production and its reversibility, occasioning an interrogation of power in its psychological, social, political and economic forms.

For both Baudrillard and Barthes, skilled artifice breaks down an arbitrary standard, constructed by one as the masculinized function of production and by the other as “moral unity,” and for both parody makes the breakdown effective. In “What of Tomorrow’s Nation?” (1993), Julia Kristeva reflects on the national identity of her native France, also the home of both Baudrillard and Barthes. Agreeing with Ernst Robert Curtius’s observation that “Only in France does the entire nation consider literature to be the representative expression of its fate,” Kristeva theorizes that her nation’s identity is both stable and plastic because of “its devotion to the literary tradition” and its “taste for stylistic inventiveness” (44).

Her particular topic is an immigration crisis that provokes both xenophobia and a hatred-enabling concern with origins. The alternative she proposes to the crisis is the widespread adoption of “a generative utopian thought—a world without foreigners” (36). She writes,

Foreign to the unisex commonality of men, everlasting irony of the community, as the sorrowful Hegel so aptly said, women today are called upon to share in the creation of new social groupings where, by *choice* rather than on account of *origin*, through lucidity rather than fate, we shall try to assure our children living spaces that, within ever tenacious national and identity-forging traditions, will respect the strangeness of each person within a lay community. Women have the luck and the responsibility of being boundary-subjects: body and thought, biology and language, personal identity and dissemination during childhood, origin and judgment, nation and world—more dramatically than men are. It is not easy to avoid the snares of that condition, which could condemn us exclusively, through regression or flight from the superego, to one side or the other (nationalist or world-oriented militants). (35; Kristeva’s italics)

Kristeva's assessment of the significance of plasticity in the cultural identity of France, assuming it to be both accurate and not limited to France's borders, sheds light on the growing tendency of Canadian women writers to engage with the markedly artificial form of vertiginous metanarrative. Even if Canadians on the whole may be far from considering Canadian literature "to be the representative expression of its fate," the issue of nation arises in Canada Council's granting process, which will be discussed in more detail below. The granting process of an arm of Canada's federal government reminds writers that they are contributing to the writing of Canadian-ness even as they request the Council's support.

Like the nation- and tradition-conscious writers of France, then, Atwood, Moore, Brossard, Scott and others are building futures predicated on lucid choice, not tradition, origin or fate. Yet these futures are also inflected by lucidly chosen ludicism and arbitrariness. These writers use a form that plays refractively with the pleasures and seductions of the social, political, and psychological aspects of collectivity. At the same time, the pleasures and seductions of the textual sphere intensify the effect of critical lucidity. Academics are well aware of the impact narrative and text can have on identity; Paul John Eakin, for example, has traced how narrative affects individual identity just as Kristeva, Benedict Anderson and Rogers M. Smith, whose ideas will figure prominently in later chapters, explore the impact of narrative on national identity, while Docherty's *Aesthetic Democracy*, already mentioned, queries the relationship between cultural products and political identity.

Writers too play with that relationship with greater or lesser ingenuousness, and their testing of it provides nourishment for critical understandings of the concept of the citizen as experienced by readers and academics alike. Accordingly, Canada's humanities and arts scholars can profit from focused considerations of citizenship, which as a concept has linked with narrative since Plutarch or earlier in the history of ideas. The relation between citizenship and pleasure does not quickly come to the mind when thinking about the academic investigation into the postmodern civic subject, yet pleasure, very widely defined, is one of the privileges that the citizen-state relationship permits. Even such deeply problematic subjective experiences of pleasure as abusing a person sexually or committing murder do not sever the connection between citizen and state; on the contrary, the connection between citizen and state persists through all of a citizen's pleasures except those that relate to fraud or treachery against the nation-state. Exploring how narrative representations of citizenship, pleasure and play interact helps extend an understanding of each of those terms.

2.3 Narrative, Aesthetics and Citizenship.

The *Cambridge Dictionary of American English*¹⁰ defines the citizen as "a person who was born in a particular country and has certain rights or has been given certain rights because of having lived there," and citizenship as "the state of having the rights of a person born in a particular country." This basic definition omits the other part of the relationship, for the citizen's rights are linked to her obligations to her country, such as

¹⁰ Throughout this dissertation I choose to employ such online resources as the *Cambridge Dictionary* to clarify what knowledge of a topic might be accessible to a wide cross-section of the public. While using

abiding by its laws and paying its taxes. According to my reading, however, what dominates the concept of the citizen as it is currently being used by scholars in the arts and humanities involves the citizen's *obligations* to her fellow citizens and to those aspects of the nonhuman world that are perceived as vulnerable to or suffering from human contact. What recedes into the background are the issues of nationhood, and even more that basic condition of citizenship that dictionaries emphasize: the privilege of having rights, one of which must be the right to play.

Academics are theorizing the figure of the citizen in conjunction with the figures of the subject and the agent. Neither agency nor citizenship may ever fully replace subjectivity as a generic descriptor of the human individual, and yet the three terms resonate usefully with and against each other, indicating each other's limitations and strengths. The term "subjectivity" presumes a centrality of interest in the human as a field of study or topic of investigation; as politically-determined, as in being "subject" to a government or monarchy; and, linguistically, as being the entity that performs action.¹¹ But the subject of study performs no studies on its own account—it is passive—and it is not intended to gain in knowledge, implying that intellectual development is either irrelevant or difficult or impossible to achieve. As well, being subject to a political body implies a top-down power system where the subject as the weakest participant is essentially unable to change the situation to her own advantage. In Lacanian terms, the infant attains subjectivity only when she recognizes that she is a distinct being, separate

online resources this way is not fully satisfactory I found it helpful to establish "a baseline of common knowledge."

from the world at large and with needs that distinguish her from the world at large, so that the human subject is inescapably alienated.

Alternatively, the agent as “cause” is construed as an agent of change, which suggests she holds a considerable degree of power on a variety of levels including the ontological. She can also be a representative who acts on behalf of another, often larger entity. Because she often acts on behalf of other entities, for example on behalf of change itself, the agent is restricted in her ability to self-determine, to control situations, or otherwise to act on her own behalf.

The citizen, on the other hand, has a measure of control over her situation because she can choose to participate in the granting or withholding of the state’s ratification. She is also entitled to whatever rights and privileges the nation provides to its citizens so long as she does not violate any of the terms of citizenship by, for example, betraying or defrauding the nation (see “Loss and Revocation” in *Citizenship and Immigration Canada’s Citizenship Policy Manual* [2005]). Both citizen and state are limited in what they can do, legally and ethically, to harm each other; they are obligated to each other; and they profit from the privileges the other grants them. The mutual obligation and reciprocal vulnerability of the relationship entails that the means of interaction between citizen and state partakes of seduction, with each side indicating that the other’s power is a tissue of illusions and misdirections that obtains only so long as it is willingly endorsed.

An idea that receives wide lip-service is that art in general, and books in particular, can change the world—that cultural products can mediate between the possible

¹¹ These descriptions of agent and subject are indebted to the online *Cambridge Dictionary of American*

and the actual, transforming one into the other. Googling the phrase “art can change the world” produces several million hits, many in blogs and art zines, testifying to the currency of this facile concept (*Google* 03.01.2008). It is a problematic idea because “real,” “change” and “world” all resist easy definitions, perhaps especially within narrative studies, due in part to the thorough interrogations to which they have been subjected by theorists such as Jacques Lacan and Jean Baudrillard.

Be this as it may, it is part of the cultural imaginary that art can have a direct impact on culture—as the Google search attests; even more, this notion is part of the contemporary rhetoric that imbues the arts and the humanities with intellectual and cultural capital and that facilitates its support through financial capital. At one time it was not unheard of to teach certain Canadian texts helping to shape Canada’s inchoate “national identity.” Margaret Laurence, Roch Carrier, Ethel Wilson, Mordecai Richler, and Margaret Atwood are only some writers whose texts I was encouraged to study in such terms as a university undergraduate. Thus the experience of artistic culture can be understood, if problematically, as linked directly to the experience of participating in a national identity, and to the condition of being a citizen.

In the opinion of the irascible writer and editor John Metcalf, the 1957 inception of the Canada Council for the Arts made programmatic the project of nation-, identity- and culture-building through cultural production. In *What is a Canadian Literature?* (1988), Metcalf writes of Canadian literary culture that it is

almost entirely the creation of the State. It continues largely dependent on state subsidy. The State desires a literature because it seems to believe that a literature

is one of the marks of a mature and civilized country and because it seems to believe that the possession of a literature will somehow unify us as a people and define our national identity. (96-97)

Yet the ironic bent of Canadian narrative suggests that even state-endorsed efforts to impose cultural definition on Canada, its citizens, and its narratives will ironicize the relationship between reality and cultural artifact, or between lived experience and narrative. The state's nation-defining efforts will themselves question what such nation- and culture-building projects would produce.

While Metcalf is profoundly skeptical about the effects of the Canada Council's intervention in the art industry (97-101), it is not easy to discern how state intervention specifically in the Canadian literary industry has adversely affected either the country or its literature. Texts by such writers as Michael Ondaatje, Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro and others are available at airport bookstores across the world, and this wide-scale availability attests to their marketability. Although this may relate as much to technological and industrial changes as to Council involvement, the number of Canadian texts published annually is statistically greater than it was before 1957.

The academic study of Canadian texts, widely recognized as culturally diverse and dynamic, is also thriving across the world. Shani Mootoo, Rohinton Mistry, Bharati Mukherjee and many others produce narratives that are deeply indebted to cultures and countries besides Canada, and not all have been uncritical of the Canadian experience; nor have all engaged directly with the idea of Canada as a nation or as a culture; nor have they addressed the condition of Canada's textual culture.

Since Metcalf's text was released in 1988, published Canadian fictions reflect a country that privileges dynamic hybridity above civilization and maturity. They overwhelmingly participate in a ludic aesthetics that indicates an intense and pleasurable critical engagement with political, cultural, psychological and philosophical worlds. It is hard to see how the Canada Council or any other body of the Canadian political hegemony has had any self-serving programmatic effect on the country's literary industry.

If the ironic bent of Canadian literature could approach defining the "Canadian identity," then the "Canadian identity" would involve a perpetual and ironic hyper-awareness of disparities between word and action, intent and deed, imagination and reality, art and life, expectations and results. At the extreme, illusion and reality would always determine each other and be present within each other. Any orienting foundation or baseline would continually drop away, demanding that vertiginous aesthetics figure prominently in representations, constructions, and creations of both actual and fictional realities. Arguably this condition of dizziness is already present in a great many Canadian literary texts.

Metanarratives move toward the vertiginous when the worlds they describe show signs that the bottom can fall out of the process of world-building, especially where that process tasks cultural artifacts with producing national identity. Vertiginous metanarratives suggest that narratives can build their own referentialities and be self-sufficient within them, that citizens can mistakenly choose to engage meaningfully with illusions, and that states, nations, and corporations can, at will, hallucinate their peoples

into and out of existence. In *Fictional Worlds*, Thomas Pavel posits that actual writers and readers construct “surrogates” and import them into the fictional world to witness fictional events on their behalf (88-89); this situation intensifies in vertiginous metanarratives, where a series or continuum of surrogates is necessary to penetrate the successive layers of fictional worlds. The dependence on a system of surrogacy that can accommodate multiple narrative worlds suggests that there is a radical ontological indeterminacy around the bond between citizen and state.

Pavel notes that “one of the functions of fiction is to cultivate abilities such as perceptual alertness, rapid induction, construction of hypotheses, positing of possible worlds, moral sophistication, linguistic proficiency, value awareness” (1986, 141). These skills are necessary to the citizen, who is aware almost by definition that her fellow-citizens and their state are everywhere around her, watching and watching over her—just as she does for them—while she navigates the complex and populous real- and cyber-spaces in which she lives. The skills Pavel names are also conceptually familiar to many academics, so that they elucidate functions that pertain to what Pierre Bourdieu names “collective intellectual” in *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market 2* (2003; 20). This entity opposes the reactionary forces of globalization by “engag[ing] in a permanent critique of all the abuses of power or authority committed in the name of intellectual authority or, if you prefer, in a relentless critique of the use of intellectual authority as a political weapon within the intellectual field” (19). Thus the academic and the intellectual become key figures in the production of a practical utopia.

Canadian scholars in the humanities, perhaps especially within English Literature and Cultural Studies departments, are engaging directly with the question of what place the human sciences have within the contemporary world. On Thursday, May 17, 2007, a full-page advertisement in *The Globe and Mail* announced a 90-million dollar investment in the study of the humanities at the University of Toronto. "The humanities," reads the ad,

shape how we engage as citizens. By examining the cultural, historical, philosophical, linguistic and creative dimensions of human experience, the humanities help us understand the diversity and complexity of our world. In an age of shrinking distances and global competition, the humanities bridge cultures and build relationships.

Humanities scholars at U of T are helping the world fight racism, promote environmental sustainability and work for peace. In addressing questions of identity, suffering, human dignity and social justice, they offer new perspectives on the world's most pressing problems. (A12)

The relationship between Canadian civic identity and the humanities, specifically the literary humanities, also drives the TransCanada Institute, whose mandate as stated on its website is "to initiate a renewal of purpose and vision both of the study of Canadian literature and culture and of the role of Canadianists as humanists and citizens" (www.transcanadas.ca/institute.html). Through national conferences, print documents (journals and books), colloquia, workshops, collaborations, and providing research support at all levels from the undergraduate to the postdoctoral, the Institute explores the changing shape of the study of Canadian Literature, especially in relation to globalizing influences and other forces that "shape the nation, global relations, and the corporatization of higher education," the website states, linking the academic praxes of reading and writing directly and practically to "real life" civics.

Where they are represented as actions occurring within a narrative, reading and writing function consistently as figures for the decoding and the constructing of realities. People who read and write are directly engaged in the process of constructing possible citizenships because they participate in a possible but non-actual state of affairs, observing the ways in which it coincides with and departs from the actual world, the “real world” of experience. Donna Palmateer Pennee (2004) sees “the institutionalized history of literature as a key mode of delivery in civic education” (75). Pennee points to an heuristics of nationhood as particularly influential on what she, following Smaro Kambourelli and Len Findlay,¹² calls critical citizenship (77). Especially where, as Pennee suggests, discourses of nationhood enter in, fiction addresses aspects of the complex, web-like relationship between the individual and the collective that elude understanding. It is the undefined and mercurial aspects of this relationship that most require attention. In their play with multiplicity and polyvalency and in their self-reflexive representations of reading and writing, metafiction magnify the indeterminate aspects of citizenship and statehood.

A surprising number of Canadian novelists use the story-within-a-story structure, suggesting that gameful metanarratives have a particular resonance with constructions of Canada, or speaks to a uniquely Canadian critical citizenship. Canadian scholars in the humanities have been writing critical citizenship as a radical, interventionist strategy of redressing social, political and economical inequities both globally and locally (see especially Pennee, and also Len Findlay, 2000). Reading critically is a crucial aspect of

¹² At the time of writing, Findlay and Kambourelli are, respectively, the Director and Head of the

critical citizenship because it helps identify discourses and ideologies, wherever they fall on the spectrum between oppression and emancipation (or beyond it).

Even the specifically Canadian experience of narrative is not identical to what it was a few decades ago. At least until the 1980s, the Canadian identity was considered to both invite and resist definition via comparison to Britain and the U.S., to be a product of empire while not being an empire. In the last twenty years, however, through wider postcolonial inquiries that are not exclusive to Canada, the romantic enterprise of questing for a workable and acceptable national identity has shifted to the perhaps more critical and ironic project of asking what national identities are for, whom they serve, and whether they are necessary. Defining a Canadian identity can even seem counterproductive in a world where, as Bourdieu asserts, the idea of nationhood itself is markedly changing.

Marianne Gullestad (2004) contends that concepts of citizenship are too frequently indistinct from those of consumerism. The blurring, she writes, occludes “[m]any people’s need for direction in life, to see a clear role for themselves in society as well as a place in history,” and the lack of distinction permits a situation wherein “nostalgic ideas about social belonging” place an “individualizing rhetoric” under particular stress (222). Working through Toby Miller, Gullestad observes that consumer discourse constructs a human subject who “needs to be utilitarian and strategic and to think of her own good,” and to be “flexible, creative, and homeless.” The discourse of citizenship, on the other hand, constructs a human subject who “needs to be altruistic and

to think of the common good,” and who requires “community, togetherness, and stability” (222). Thus the imperatives of the consumer disagree with the imperatives of the citizen, even though both roles dominate the lives of those who live in industrialized countries, such as Canada.

The need to affect a world outside one’s individual psychological reality figures strongly in the rhetoric of the humanities’ research initiatives into citizenship (see above). By extension, one justification for experiencing art involves learning what art has to say about changing the world. Once Gullestad’s disparity between consumerism and citizenship is taken into account, the makers and users of art may seem to acquire an aura of altruism, of being focused on community, stability, togetherness and the common good to such an extent that the strategic, utilitarian, flexible, creative, homeless and self-interested elements of “consuming” or using art become subsumed within it. Consumers become politically engaged through the act of choosing which product to endorse through their purchases, inflecting the market and the industry.

Yet the fictions by Brossard, Atwood, King, Winterson and the rest that are under consideration here capitalize on the tension in art’s ability to further both civic and consumer ends. As I see it, they do so by engaging with artfulness via the embedding of narratives and fictional worlds within one another. By simultaneously maintaining and conflating distinctions, they achieve a stereoscopic vision that both fluctuatingly resolves several disparities of the human world as it was, is, and will be.

Citizenship, which can be gained, given up, or lost, is historically and geographically dependent, and this dependence becomes an issue in times like these when, as

Bourdieu contends, globalization is shifting and dissolving geo-political boundaries. These resonances of such boundaries have been in flux for some time, as have the conventions of narrativity that relate to place and worldhood, and both kinds of fluctuation are apparently some distance from ceasing. It is small wonder that Brossard, Moore, Scott, King, Bowering, Winterson and Atwood, among others,¹³ have produced worlds and narratives that reflect and amplify this flux by approximating the experience of dizzy play. They accentuate the geo-political flux by employing a discourse of seduction and sexual interaction that, as will be highlighted in Chapter 3, resonates compellingly with issues of complicity, contingency, and flux.

Bourdieu sees certain specific, practical improvements in global conditions as being “realistic utopias.” These are “realistic” for Bourdieu because he sees them as being realizable in the actual world; as such, they are among the utopias that Jane McGonigal’s immersive gamers, for example, might work towards achieving. According to Bourdieu, realistic utopias are those where a practical ideal for living together as a human community may be achieved through a collective effort that can

organize or orchestrate joint research on novel forms of political action, on new manners of mobilizing and of making mobilized people work together, on new ways of elaborating projects and bringing them to fruition together. It can play the role of midwife by assisting the dynamics of working groups in their effort to express, and thereby discover, what they are and what they could or should be, and by helping with the reappropriation and accumulation of the immense social

¹³ While it is not practical to provide a complete list of other writers who have produced this type of metanarrative, other books I once planned to discuss in these pages include Doris Lessing’s *Golden Notebook*, Salman Rushdie’s *Fury*, John Barth’s *The Seven Voyages of Somebody the Sailor*, William Gass’s *Willie Master’s Lonesome Wife*, Hubert Aquin’s *Prochain Épisode*, John Fowles’s *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, Lawrence Sterne’s *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, several more of Jeanette Winterson’s and Margaret Atwood’s fictions, Daphne Marlatt’s *Ana Historic*, Jorge Luis Borges’s *Labyrinths*, several of Shakespeare’s plays, and Sir Richard Burton’s *Arabian Nights*.

stock of knowledge of the social world with which the social world is pregnant.
(21-22)

Bourdieu's words sketch a realistic utopia in which, at the very least, people understand what their rights are as human citizens, can recognize who is being deprived of those rights, and will act to help redress the situation; equally, they understand what their responsibilities are as human citizens within their local and global communities, and willingly fulfill or surpass them. At the same time the states and corporations of a realistic utopia are enlightened enough to balance human need more advantageously with state and corporate policy.

Bourdieu's realistic utopia provides one concrete image of the kind of changes in the real world that, according to popular wisdom, narrative and other arts are capable of effecting. People who are practical, caring, perceptive and effective inhabit this utopia. On the whole they work well together and have learned to share judiciously. They inhabit a sociopolitical world that rewards their efforts by responding to them. The social aspect of this world contains and nourishes a hidden stock of social knowledge which, when shared, will facilitate the way humans interact with their world and each other. The achievement of birth (of nascent social knowledge, of fledgling social dynamics, of human potential) will not be an occasion for anguish, only celebration. This vision is clearly optimistic, no matter that Bourdieu bills it as realistic, because it constructs humans and their world as mutually responsive and mutually vulnerable, as able to shape and influence each other through what can be read as a labour—or play—of seduction.

There is much optimism in Winterson's *PowerBook*, Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and *Blind Assassin*, Brossard's *Baroque d'Aube* and *Desert Mauve*, King's *Green Grass*, *Running Water*, Bowering's *Caprice*, Scott's *Heroine*, and Moore's *Alligator*. Much of that optimism becomes accessible through the exuberance of a narrative structure that promotes dynamic fluctuations between fictional worlds, suggesting fictional citizens that are similarly capable of fluctuating dynamically, purposefully, and even enjoyably in the service of an improving world. The approaches through which I will explore these assertions are outlined and clarified in the following section.

2.4 Approach

This study will look at representations of play/game, seduction/sex, and reading/writing as reciprocal activities that illuminate the nature of citizenship. The following are the central questions that shape this study.

1. Play and Game – How does the experience of “delight” inflect narrative and the civic relationship between human and state? How are such experiences affected by constraint or its absence? Does the unlikelihood of reward have an impact on the understanding of delight? What particular challenges are posed by the intricate ontological play in which so many narratives engage?
2. Seduction and Sex – To what purpose is a fictional world represented as engaged in seducing its subjects/citizens? Where do readers see themselves reflected and erased? Is there a particularity to citizens' seductive acts that differentiates it from the state's interpellative call? What happens in the suspenseful gap before the citizen understands whether the state's call is constructing her as delinquent or

desirable? What does the process of seduction reveal about the illusion of power, understood in political, psychological, and artistic contexts? What happens if narrative representations of sexual interaction are read as privileging a dialectic of contact and communication over a dialectic of dominance/submission?

3. Writing and Reading –What is the function and effect of the embedded narrative?

How does it reflect on the act of writing, its motivations and effects, and its relationship to principles of citizenship? What can be made of digressions, recognizably gameful or not, that indicate where the writer has found room for paradox within the playful, seductive, erotic, and reciprocal interaction between citizen and state, fiction and world? How does enfabulation reflect on the motivations and effects of the act of reading and its relationship to the civic?

These areas often interblend, and wherever possible, special attention will be paid to sites of interblending between two or more of: play and game; seduction and sex; writing and reading. Taken collectively, they should illuminate how the pursuit of pleasure in its many complex forms—but especially when based on the not-yet-actual or on the non-actual—can affect the human subject/citizen.

“Chapter 3: Seduction in the Second Person” focuses on the effect of second-person narration in seductive metafiction. Jeanette Winterson’s *PowerBook* and Nicole Brossard’s *Baroque d’Aube* revise phallogentric seductive and metafictional strategies by pursuing potentials for women. The organizing principle of the chapter is the functions and implications of an aesthetic common to vertiginous metanarratives that plays on indeterminacy and fuzziness through embedded narrative; the chapter also establishes the

connection between aesthetics and civics. Jeanette Winterson's *PowerBook* appears here rather than texts by other British women writers as Doris Lessing or Angela Carter; its embedded narratives and technique of embedding provide a fertile entry-point into the current questions, sets off the particularity of the Canadian approaches, and offers evocative grounds of comparison with Nicole Brossard's work.

"Chapter 4: Lucid Ludics—Play, Writing, and Representation" continues to consider the sensualization of narrative, and incorporates an examination of lusoriness as exemplified in Nicole Brossard's *Le Désert Mauve* (1987) and Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976). Both of these texts overtly explore the replenishing capacity of play and narrative. Mélanie, of Brossard's *Désert Mauve*, is a character from the text's doubled embedded novel, and her movement toward maturity is complicated by writing and love. Maude Laures translates her narrative, and in the process brings her into closer proximity with full positive potential. Joan Foster of Atwood's *Lady Oracle* uses narrative as a means of self-inspection, employing it to win support from others and to identify a future course of action. In both, the ability of narrative to transform or rehabilitate people and worlds is a question that is deferred past the novels' last pages.

"Chapter 5: Irony and Canada's Trickster Citizens" examines selected texts by Canadian men and women, where the trickster plays a central role. A uniquely amoral and chaotic figure, the trickster combines sexuality, playfulness, and pointed self-interest, becoming a litmus test for the extent to which such interests can remain acceptable in conventional society. George Bowering's *Caprice* and Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* establish the groundwork for this line of inquiry. Gail Scott's *Heroine* and

Lisa Moore's *Alligator* feature female writer-protagonists who are also quasi-tricksters engaged in the struggle for the freedom to be full tricksters. Iris of Margaret Atwood's *Blind Assassin* explores the dark side of the trickster struggle. Irony, responsibility, and tricksterism are the organizing principles of the chapter.

"Chapter 6: More Books, More Play, More Sex, More Fun?" considers where Canadian writers may be moving next with regard to play, sex, and citizenship.

While many of the questions that will be engaged are specific to the chapter and/or texts, a number of common framing questions are encompassed within these approaches. Chief among these is the question of what is contributed to theories of (postmodern) citizenship by play/game and by textual narrative. How does game-playing relate to lived experience, can it really facilitate politicization, and how does it affect the construction and enactment of subjectivity? What does it mean to be a male or female player, or a male or female maker of game or narrative? What are the particularities of citizenship, play, reading and writing within disparate times and places? What forms might be taken by conformity as it relates to citizenship, and what consequences might conformity and collectivity have? That the study is motivated by a strategically optimistic impulse is made clear by the organizing principles of the chapters: its "emplotment," so to speak, strategically emphasizes levity because it understands levity as resistant to hegemonizing forces. Serious issues are often illuminated by playful approaches and complicated by seductive ones, and the ensuing study will explore the implications that result.

3. "The strange story of you and me": Seduction in the Second Person

3.1 Now You Are Being Read

Power is a product of discourse, and therefore has no empirical existence.

Seduction negates production, including discursive production, and including, therefore, all of power's illusory trappings. This is Jean Baudrillard's standpoint, as expressed in his 1979 text *Seduction* (trans. 1990). Play capitalizes on the fluctuations of power and its reversibility by exploring the effect of chance and will on situations where power is exceptionally vulnerable and volatile. Such situations include the negotiation of the relationship between citizen and state which, like the relationship between reader and writer or player and played, has a counterpart in the seduction-based relationship. The citizen who recognizes the utility of having ironic vision and a double voice, and who recognizes that having these qualities is a condition of contemporary citizenship, is a person who is equipped to negotiate the tangled reciprocal bonds between citizen and state. In a system built on artifice and illusion, knowing her own value but also her own limits helps a citizen know the extent to which she is playing the game, and the extent to which the game is playing her. At the same time, it challenges conventional understandings of power as a limited commodity that an individual can most easily accrue by competing successfully against others.

Judging from a variety of literary and political hits from *Oxford Reference Online*, the idea of "power" implies authority and influence; the ability to do or act; and the ability to change. On a social side, power involves the ability to pressure people into doing things they would not otherwise do. On an economic side it involves the productive

ability to bring things into existence that would not otherwise exist, and on a political side it involves the ability to subject, control, and make dependent. Acquiring material signs of power that stand metonymically for the power itself sometimes placates the desire for power but does not satisfy it to the point of laying it to rest.

The respective theories of philosophers Baudrillard and Giorgio Agamben derive from different areas of philosophy and are explicated with very different vocabularies, but both are concerned with the limits of power. Unlike Baudrillard, Agamben takes for granted that power does exist and is more than a convenient fiction maintained by the reigning hegemony. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1998), Agamben begins from Michel Foucault's two-part concept of power as he explores the connection between two problems—the problem of potentiality or power, and the problem of the growing indeterminacy of social and political ethics. Agamben observes that for Foucault power is not restricted to the juridico-institutional model through which “the State assumes and integrates the care of the natural life of individuals into its very center,” but also manifests in “the *technologies of the self* by which processes of subjectivization bring the individual to bind himself to his own identity and consciousness and, at the same time, to an external power” (5; Agamben's italics). Skeptical as to the legitimacy and possibility of Foucault's differentiation between types of power, Agamben contends that sovereign power, whose original activity, he argues, is “*the production of a biopolitical body*” (6; Agamben's italics), is founded on the fact that the political realm is not distinct from but inclusive of “*zoe*” or “bare life,” which he understands as “the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animals, men, or gods)” (1). *Zoe*

therefore differs from *bios*, which identifies “the form or way of living proper to an individual or group” (1). Agamben holds that as the current form of sovereign power contemporary politics is in fact founded on a “secret tie uniting power and bare life” (6).

As mentioned in Section 2.2 above, Baudrillard writes power as “*mastery of the real universe*” while seduction, or “*mastery of the symbolic universe*,” negates power (8; Baudrillard’s italics). Because power holds sway over “only” the real universe, understood as the chaotic realm of materiality, production, sexuality, and similar absolutes, power is essentially lesser for Baudrillard than seduction, which pertains to the symbolic order: language, intersubjective relations, and acceptance of the Law, all of which mediate how people understand and relate to the Real. Seduction plays on the genuine indeterminacy of the Real by calling attention to the human systems that constitute and regulate it, evacuating the Real of any claim to essential existence.

Agamben’s text explores power by investigating what confounds it: the system of human exceptions that brings the political into existence. Baudrillard’s text explores power as only pretending to hold dominion over the Real, a pretence whose hollowness is revealed by the ultimate pretence and masquerade of artifice. For Agamben, what is excluded, outcast, or banned by the state is that which most threatens the state’s ability to complete the sovereign act that defines its sovereign identity, that “realizes itself by simply taking away its own potentiality not to be, letting itself be, giving itself to itself” (46). Sovereign power, Agamben posits, pretends to exclude bare life from its dominion, for bare life is that which needs to be politicized (7), even while sovereign power can only exist with bare life as its nucleus. The state, then, exists by virtue of the fiction that

it rightfully wields the power to decide when life, otherwise supposed to be sacred, has gone beyond the pale and must be excepted from both inclusion and membership in the collectivity which the state rules. Thus the state, principally tasked with protecting the lives within its purview, survives on the principle that some lives can be excepted from this rule and that all lives are vulnerable to being excepted.

Baudrillard theorizes power as itself far more vulnerable than its opposite, seduction; the two exist in constant tension with each other, but of the two only power is ultimately reversible, and not, as Agamben contends, of its own free will. Baudrillard renders the movement from the benighted belief in power's reality to the comprehension that the symbolic order of language and representation reigns supreme as unmistakeable progress, a change from an inferior state to a superior and enlightened state.

The play effect under investigation in this chapter is the euphoric blurring and indifferentiation brought on by dizzy play, here strategically examined as an effect resulting from seduction's power-negating presence. While such indifferentiation can also result from the hesitation of the sovereign act between coming into being and not coming into being, as effected by the confrontation between the state and the individual who stands in a condition of radical vulnerability before it, Baudrillard's formulations offer a more extreme standpoint than Agamben's from which to view Winterson's *PowerBook* and Brossard's *Baroque d'Aube*, both of which concern themselves with transformative powers accessed through love and art. Additionally Baudrillard's use of seduction as a lens through which to read human experience is peculiarly relevant to these two seducing texts.

Baudrillard theorizes seduction as behaviour based on lusive artifice and the play of mimicry. Bringing the seducee to a state of euphoric surrender is one main goal of the disingenuous seducer, contends Baudrillard. Seduction challenges both the terms of production, artistic or otherwise, and the effects of production, and it is able to moderate the process whereby a citizen chooses allegiance to the state. In Sections 3.2 and 3.3 below, Winterson's *PowerBook* and Brossard's *Baroque d'Aube* construct the writer-text-reader relationship as forming a closed-type world that is uniquely separate from both extratextual reality and diegetic reality. Broadly extrapolating, this separation would indicate that personal artistic and political worlds supersede the problematic world of the public, yet in both Winterson and Brossard this condition is the means of catalyzing reciprocal changes in both spheres.

Similarly intimate fictional worlds feature in several other texts discussed in Chapter 5 under the category of tricksterism in this project, most notably Gail Scott's *Heroine* (1987), both *Lady Oracle* (1981) and *Blind Assassin* (2000) by Margaret Atwood, and again, if more equivocally, in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993). All of these demonstrate a consciousness of the reader's proximity, and this consciousness is part of what produces the sense of intimacy and separation.

Yet Winterson's *The PowerBook* and Brossard's *Baroque d'Aube* differ from these other texts in that they overtly romanticize and sexualize the intimacy of the relations between diegesis and exegesis and between reader and writer. The sexy romanticism acts metonymically to construct these texts' challenges to phallogocentric power as preternaturally "attractive" and "candid." While it diverges from Nietzsche's

ideal because it does bear a load, namely an obligation to be the means of retaining the seducing reader's regard, the play of indifferenciation, dizziness and blurring that these two texts adopt participates in Nietzsche's ideal for play in that it continually builds up, tears down, and rebuilds fictional worlds. This latter situation also applies in Brossard's *Désert Mauve* (1987) and Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, which will be discussed in Chapter 4 below; and significantly there too exegetic and diegetic play take utopian turns. But in *Désert Mauve* and *Lady Oracle*, narrative play catalyzes an open-ended, exploratory relationship between diegesis and exegesis rather than the intimate, romanticized one of *PowerBook* and *Baroque d'Aube*, explored here for the very particular sense of indifferenciating play that their shared trope of seduction enacts.

The romantic structures of *PowerBook* and *Baroque d'Aube* encourage a utopianist reading of the reader-text-writer relationship; it also relates to a utopianist projection of world citizenship where targeted allegiances, such as those that can exist among women and among lesbians, transcend arbitrary allegiances like those of nationality. The concept of a woman- and lesbian-friendly polity and aesthetic will be developed below with specific reference to Winterson's and Brossard's fictions. In the meantime, it is useful to expand on some important intersections among utopia, civic identity, power, seduction, and the narrative process.

In *Stories of Peoplehood* (2003), Rogers M. Smith contends that narrative is one of the two main ways in which nations build peoples. Well-chosen nationalizing narratives that seduce emotions and understanding, that persuade through logic and allusion, that valourize, reify and naturalize a particular version of nationhood and

citizenship provide a valid alternative to violence in achieving a people's endorsement of a state, cementing people's allegiances to it and convincing them to accept being shaped into a cohesive and compliant whole. Smith relates how, after a coup destroyed its connection to the Soviet Republic, the Kyrgyz Republic and its people "rebuilt" its national identity by consciously re-claiming the epic narrative of Manas, facilitated by the fact that the people had already embraced it in folk culture (1-10).

It is no great stretch to see that within nations like the U.S., England, France, and Germany "official histories" such as those found within school textbooks may be emplotted so as to instill pride and loyalty within their citizens, sometimes by adopting legendary figures from folk culture. Some of the qualities of these folk-heroes are valorized at the grass-roots level before being rehabilitated by political, intellectual, and cultural hegemonies. Iconic figures such as Davy Crockett and Robin Hood, for example, become "ideal citizens" because they are self-reliant, but also because they can innovate usefully with ideologies of civic responsibility and personal identity on large and small scales, in ways that benefit others as well as themselves. Thus Smith's "stories of peoplehood" can help seduce people into committed citizenship by encouraging them to perceive their places of residence as potentially utopian, and themselves as potentially ideal utopian citizens. The arbitrary link between myth and national identity becomes reified in part because the citizens themselves have provided the germs of it; folk narratives have helped define a fantasy of a communal utopia and have helped shaped its fantasy of an ideal citizen.

Reader-text-writer romances that play with utopian ideals, like those written by Winterson in *PowerBook* and Brossard in *Baroque d'Aube*, test the limits of the citizen's imperative to construct, interpret, and "be" her best possible social world. Roy Miki (2005) contends that the social imaginary is the territory of the cultural, and that the function of the embodied citizen involves performing the power and limits of the cultural. Civic engagement and its limits are also involved, because both texts are concerned with the status of women, lesbians, and other people not encompassed by the heterosexual "norm"; within the contexts of civics and politics, feminist and queer concerns have been especially volatile in their perplexing of the status quo.

For philosopher and critical theorist Thomas Docherty in *Aesthetic Democracy* (2006), aesthetics links civic with narrative experience through representation and transformation. Whether on the artistic or on the political level, representation, he observes, is "a trope that regulates the relations between the particular and the general, between the one and the many" (158). Docherty considers eighteenth-century philosopher Francis Hutcheson's position that beauty is "to be found and to be evaluated precisely in terms of the regulation of the general and the particular [...]" (Docherty 158), arguing that the shaping and ordering functions of both narrative and political representation are intrinsically aesthetic. Many examples of postmodern narrative are as concerned with the *limits* of beauty and truth as with their *nature*; Thomas Pynchon, Angela Carter, and Robert Kroetsch are only a few writers who consistently juxtapose the abject and the disgusting within an ironically lyric aesthetic. Postmodern aesthetics might then be considered as means of considering the extreme limits of beauty as well as beauty itself;

in other words, postmodern aesthetics encompass how the “beauty” of political and narrative representation can be converted, inverted, perverted, and reverted.

For Docherty, democracy involves a freedom of the cultural event rather than a freedom of choice:

The cultural event is that moment in our relations, in our perceptions or in the aesthetic, in which we see the possibility and potential for freedom; and the location for that, most often, is in what we call art: literature, poetry, painting, music, dance, sculpture. A democracy that is intent on establishing and furthering the freedom of subjects—subjects who know themselves always to be conditioned by the alterity to which art opens them—is the most fundamental form of democracy that we might have. A polity that degrades or ignores the aesthetic, or sees it as an arithmetical add-on to a social formation rather than a fundamental geometry that shapes the very possibility of our being social and free at all, entirely misses the point; and the consequence of that is not only a degradation of the concept of freedom, but also a reduction in actual freedom.
(x)

Docherty constructs political, aesthetic, and critical experiences as processes of becoming other. He writes, “If criticism is to respond adequately to its object, then the critic must be prepared to be changed by that object, to allow herself or himself to become other in the face of the object; and thus to place the object at the source or origin of a new subjectivity. The word that we give to this is *aesthetics*” (3; Docherty’s italics). For Docherty, aesthetics, democracy and criticism are all concerned with transformation, which he writes as the reciprocal situation of being altered by the process of making, and being changed by what one changes.

In literary material culture, the trope of seduction encourages the seducee especially to invest in processes that entail reciprocal change. Seduction blurs distinctions for all participants between carnal interaction, love, reading, and the act of constructing

meaning, but the seducer achieves exemption from the reciprocity of transformation by constructing herself as the vehicle of that transformation. Baudrillard constructs seduction as being inherently worldly and disingenuous: "Seduction ... never belongs to the order of nature, but that of artifice—never to the order of energy, but that of signs and rituals" (2). Baudrillard's seduction retains an "unexpected charm":

Everything returns to the void, including our words and gestures. But before disappearing, certain words and gestures, by anticipating their demise, are able to exercise a seduction that the others will never know. Seduction's secret lies in this evocation and revocation of the other, with a slowness and suspense that are poetic, like the slow motion film of a fall or an explosion, because something had the time, prior to its completion, to make [sic] its absence felt. (84)

The challenge for the seducer is to accomplish the "exhaustion of meaning" by abolishing differentiation (77-8).

At the utmost, abolishing differentiation requires that all boundaries of the self fall, that the self should recognize itself reflected so perfectly in the world that there is no more need to maintain those defensive boundaries. In *A Lover's Discourse* (1977/1978), Roland Barthes writes of love's annihilating powers:

The crisis of engulfment can come from a wound, but also from a fusion: we die together from loving each other: an open death, by dilution into the ether, a closed death of the shared grave.

Engulfment is a moment of hypnosis. A suggestion functions, which commands me to swoon without killing myself. Whence, perhaps, the gentleness of the abyss: I have no responsibility here, the act (of dying) is not up to me: I entrust myself, I transmit myself (to whom? To God, to Nature, to everything, except to the other). (11)

The seducer's task is to make her seducee feel safe enough to relinquish agency, to experience change by being the transfer rather than the message or the destination.

For Baudrillard, one way to achieve this involves the seducer's focused effort to reflect the seducee back to herself. "*To seduce is to die as reality and reconstitute oneself as illusion,*" writes Baudrillard (69; Baudrillard's italics); to seduce is to *become* "the mirror as an absence of depth, as a superficial abyss, which others find seductive and vertiginous only because they are each the first to be swallowed up in it" (68).

Baudrillard quotes from Vincent Descombes's *L'Inconscient malgré lui*:

What seduces is not some feminine wile, but the fact that it is directed at you. It is seductive to be seduced, and consequently, it is being seduced that is seductive. In other words, the being seduced finds himself in the person seducing. What the person seduced sees in the one who seduces him, the unique object of his fascination, is his own seductive, charming self, his lovable self-image... (68; Baudrillard's ellipsis)¹

The successful seducer identifies the seducee's best and most desirable self as the seducee sees it, then mimics it to reflect it back to her target.

In "Animal Sex: Libido as Desire and Death" (1995), Elizabeth Grosz provides a provocative groundwork for theorizing the eroticism of the sexual interaction that seduction sometimes produces. She theorizes carnal desire in terms of jealousy, and she uses metaphors of exploration and discovery to elucidate these ideas. Following Alphonso Lingis, she characterizes desire as the "contamination of one erotogenic zone

¹ I have presented the quotation in a more straightforward manner than Baudrillard does. Baudrillard cites Descombes as an example of what he reductively calls "impoverished" reflection theory. Baudrillard disparages the "mimetic exaltation of one's own image, or an ideal mirage of resemblance" (68). For Baudrillard, reflection theory contends that the superficially abyssal mirror of seduction removes the illusion of depth conveyed by the order of production: seduction negates production. He reads Descombes as too engaged with the order of production, and too entranced with the arrogant practice of imposing one's own resemblance on the world. Yet his distinction between exalting one's own image and the seductive situation of finding oneself the first to be swallowed by the mirror's abyss seems fine. The discovery of one's own image in a privileged position is at issue in both circumstances, and in both circumstances that image is defamiliarized by the alien context of the reflective surface. The potent emotional response that is suggested by Descombes' version is not necessarily absent from Baudrillard's.

or bodily surface by another ..." (287). The "interacting zones or regions," she asserts, can belong to different bodies and areas. "The relationship between these regions or zones cannot be understood in terms of domination, penetration, control or mastery, but rather in terms of *jealousy*, as one organ jealous of another, as the desire of organs and zones for the intensity and excitations, the agitations and tumultuousness of others" (288; Grosz's italics). Grosz cites A. Lingis: "Each organ envies the intensity of its surrounding bodily context, craves enervation, seeks incandescence, wants itself to be charged with excitations" (qtd. in Grosz, 288).

Corporeality characterizes this erotic jealousy. Grosz cites a metonymy which "makes a hand a sexual organ" that can be "in a sense 'jealous' of the pleasure it induces in the body it caresses, [and] also participates in the very intensities it ignites in a vagina or around testicles: it does not simply induce pleasure in another, for another, but also always for itself" (288). Incandescence, excitation, and intensely pleasurable caresses have figurative counterparts within the seducing reader/seduced writer analogy, where they relate to erotic jealousies of intellect, emotion, and ontology that bridge worlds. The psychological and sexual jealousy experienced by the writer-protagonists in Winterson's *PowerBook* and Brossard's *Baroque d'Aube* strengthens and intensifies their attachment to their reader-seducers. The jealousy is a symptom of dismal alternate realities wherein the writer remains comparatively inconsequential—never singled out in seduction, never ignited to incandescence, never brought to see herself as everywhere simultaneously and thus as commensurate with the world. This is a world in which a promising innovation on political systems is never recognized, so that its burgeoning potential withers on the vine.

Grosz's construction of carnal desire and love elides most binaries, retaining only "self" and "other."

Libidinal desire, the carnal caress, desire as corporeal intensification, then, is an interchange with an other whose surface intersects its own. It is opened up, in spite of itself, to the other, not as passive respondent but as co-animated, for the other's convulsions, spasms, joyous or painful encounters engender or contaminate bodily regions that are apparently unsusceptible. It is in this sense that we make love to worlds: the universe of an other is that which opens us up to and produces our own intensities; we are placed in a force field of intensities that we can only abandon with libidinal loss and in which we are enervated to become active and willing agents (or better, agencies). (290-91)

In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), Grosz cites Freud and Schilder to discuss the role of touch in providing the infant subject with an image of herself that necessarily takes account of the body, not only as a part of her self, but as invested with libidinal value on its own account (32). Grosz claims that the "stability of the unified body image" "must be continually renewed, not only through the subject's conscious efforts but through its ability to conceive of itself as a subject and to separate itself from its objects and others to be able to undertake willful action" (43-4). "Caresses" between a reader and a writer help both differentiate themselves within actual and possible worlds while recognizing—and investing with libidinal value—their obligation to act on behalf of those worlds.

Just how does a feminist reader seduce a feminist writer? The Vincent Descombes passage examined above suggests that the power of seduction is related to the extraordinary shock of gratification produced when the seducee realizes she has been chosen from a host of other people (Baudrillard 68). Following this logic, the reader can be said to seduce the writer by reading her text—by selecting one title by one writer from

among many that promise to satisfy her readerly appetites. While this is not an entirely satisfactory answer, due on the one hand to the practical distance arising between the reader and the writer and on the other to its naïveté, it is nevertheless an answer that is of interest to Winterson and Brossard, both of whom balance their aesthetics with their interest in their relationships with their readers. Whether individually or en masse, readers also challenge writers to produce exceptional texts. The Barthesian “*That’s it!* And further still: *that’s it for me!*” that expresses readerly jouissance (*Pleasure of the Text* [1975], 13) arises from a dual recognition that one is reading a text that surpasses one’s personal readerly expectations and exceeds one’s personal readerly desires.

Baudrillard claims that the feminine ability to seduce is valuable, since by seducing the seductress undermines the phallogocentric economy of production and power. In *Baudrillard’s Challenge: A Feminist Reading* (2000), Victoria Grace contends that, since it advocates the destruction of “masculine power,” this idea that seduction involves a reversion of androcentric power structures is part of Baudrillard’s uncompromising commitment to anti-essentialism.

[I]t is not that the reversion [of seduction] is best understood as only a simple swapping of places, whereby both terms [eg. male and female, or powerful and powerless] remain, but simply switched around. Reversion is rather an annulment of pretences to establish and fix the truth, real, desire, power. Casting reversion in this less singular way does not evoke a “bi-polar universe.” Indeed, the process of emergence and reversion can be viewed as a dual and cyclical movement, but this does not reduce it to exclusively two terms. There is no reason why we are only talking about two terms; what is clear is that there is no intermediary. (164)

For Grace, Baudrillard’s theories are based on the supposition that any ideology based on irresolvable dichotomies is, not only arbitrary, but even absurd. Seduction reveals the

arbitrariness of assigning greater agency to one pole or the other, since a naïve show of appearances can be enough to make that pole cede agency. For Baudrillard there is no reason to dichotomize and sexually differentiate ideology, nor is there a reason for power to be associated more strongly with the phallus than with the vagina. There is not even a real reason why power should be valorized in the first place. Power is reversible, not constant, so it can only complicate rather than resolving conflicts of economy, ideology, politics, desire, or anything else that is widely supposed to structure human interactions.

Jay Clayton (1989) discusses two trajectories of desire. One of these is desire's therapeutic potential, which "trusts that by disciplining desire we can create an enduring civilization." The other is desire's apocalyptic potential, which "look[s] to the polymorphous perversity of desire to overturn the very structures of society" (46).² Although these are not necessarily the only two positions from which a feminist and/or lesbian reader may seduce a writer, they indicate that she seduces her to participate in the construction of continuing pleasure, and to help overturn the structures that stand in the way. The seduction of a writer by a reader builds on the possibility that by indefinitely deferring the end of pleasure the writer both experiences and becomes endless bliss, and that by continuously overcoming obstacles she experiences and becomes success.

² Clayton uses Peter Brooks's approach to outline desire's therapeutic potential and Leo Bersani's to outline the apocalyptic potential. Both are problematic for our purposes because both are androcentric approaches that do not accommodate less rigid parameters. Brooks in particular has earned criticism from Susan Winnett (1990) for his phallocentric characterization of plot. Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray have contributed to feminist theories of plot that answer Brooks' by drawing explicit connections between women's physiologies and plot structure. Brossard's readers credit her with pursuing such an alternately-envisioned structure.

Where sex and/or seduction are invoked as analogies for the writer-text-reader relationship, the writer is often constructed as the seducer, exercising all her skills and wiles to bring her target, the reader, to the point of willing surrender. But by making their model-reader figures the seducers—not their writer-protagonists—Winterson and Brossard invert the relationship, foregrounding the centrality of the reader's role in the production of texts and participating in a radical feminist project. In *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition* (1991) Gayle Greene contends that feminist metafiction “relates the rewriting of old plots specifically to women’s search for freedom” (24). Eager and enthusiastic rather than reluctant and resistant, the “freed” contemporary reader written by Winterson and Brossard uses her sophisticated and subtle reading expertise to produce a meaning through the narrative that has not necessarily been predetermined by the writer.

Winterson’s *PowerBook* and Brossard’s *Baroque d’Aube* interrogate the construction of reader-text-writer interaction by constructing it in terms that evoke utopia.³ Different ways of reading worlds produce different ways of writing them, and Winterson and Brossard posit alternate ideologies in their worlds, ideologies that are inflected by the utopianism that often inflects queer-produced narratives (see Lisa Moore, 1995; also see pages 91 and 124 below).

Winterson came to maturity in England in the 1980s with new-wave feminism, and has been an “out” lesbian since her young adulthood, so that feminism, gender

³ What follows has been revised from material that was first presented to ACCUTE at the 2004 Congress of Learned Societies, then revised and published in *ESC* as “It’s Not Power, It’s Sex”: Jeanette Winterson’s *PowerBook* and Nicole Brossard’s *Baroque d’Aube*” (December 2004).

studies, and queer studies may be a more intrinsic part of her world than they are for even Nicole Brossard. Winterson's fictions reflect and even parody her own awareness of socio-political ideologies. Nicole Brossard, meanwhile, came to maturity in Quebec in the mid-twentieth-century, a time when the conservative values of the Catholic institution had a powerful grip on the province's social and political structures (see Karen Gould's *Writing in the Feminine* [1991]). Brossard's involvement in literary circles exposed her to political and psychological theories from France, and she had access to the ideas of such thinkers as Blanchot, Cixous, Irigaray, Kristeva, Althusser, Lacan, and Barthes. Along with rejecting conventional marriage in favour of confirmed lesbianism, she is a passionate advocate of lifestyles that involve writing, reading and thinking, and has written some of Canada's most innovative and challenging literary and theoretical texts. For Brossard, literature, sex, and sexuality are interlinked.

Utopianism is read as something of a commonplace within lesbian literary production, much of which yearns towards a stable state of joy and harmony, and it accords well with Winterson's and Brossard's perceptions of play as dynamic and productive, not reductive and destructive. These two writers, whose texts will be individually examined in the next two sections, use play and indeterminacy in conjunction with each other as tools for achieving the potential futures they write toward, frequently using terms that evoke financial, cultural and aesthetic capital. Both use sexual metaphors in conjunction with ludic metaphors in order to produce meaning and suggest ideas of dynamic exchange and excess. Exploring the body of a desired other and being explored by her; playing into an alternate possible world and being played by it;

experiencing and arousing desire for its value, its use value, its exchange value: such liminal experiences are instinct with tides of rules, obstacles, gratifications, and pleasure. They require a commitment, a contingent risk, and a leap of faith in the utopian ideal of a win-win situation, and in a utopian exchange in which there are no losers.

Both writers use textuality diegetically and exegetically to construct and explore alternate possible worlds. *PowerBook* uses written fragments to narrativize a romance between two lovers that is also a contract and also a narrative written on contract. Emphasizing the perplexed nature of this interaction between two loving women, Winterson constructs fluid fictional worlds that seep into one another, evoking the shifting ground of a responsive and volatile cosmos. Brossard employs space and time in service of the hologram, which is central to her concept of woman-as-subject in the process of changing and becoming—a process she works towards achieving in her readers through her performative narratives. Her narrative also plays the tropes of love, writing and commerce through each other, since her writer-protagonist finds physical and emotional love as she prepares, then promotes, a narrative written on contract.

Winterson and Brossard engage in a project with which feminists and post-colonialists have been perhaps especially engaged. Teresa de Lauretis in "The Technology of Gender" (1987) urged feminists to adopt "a practice of self-consciousness" that would increase awareness of insidious ideologies. Patrocinio Schweickart (1986) observed that the androcentric canon "draws [the female reader] into a process that uses her against herself. It solicits her complicity in the elevation of male difference into universality and, accordingly, the denigration of female difference into

otherness without reciprocity" (534). A feminist reading strategy, she says, requires readers who recognize that "[t]he reader can submit to the power of the text, or she can take control of the reading experience. The recognition of the existence of a choice suddenly makes visible the normative dimension of the feminist story: She *should* choose the second alternative" (540; Schweickart's italics). Similarly, once a citizen recognizes her own ability to exert control over the ways in which the state exercises its power, she should choose to do so. When the reader realizes her obligation to take control of a text, abilities that have traditionally been left in the hands of the writer come to her. She now exercises the seductive influence of interpretation, teasing and caressing the writer's text until it surrenders its complex multivalencies.

Winterson and Brossard construct their writer-protagonists as seducees, not seducers, a situation that is emphasized by the contract trope. Winterson's writing "I" composes romantic stories online for her lover, and Brossard's Cybil tries to replenish the ocean's literary significance at the request of her fan. Winterson's protagonist is consistently constructed as being the passive target of seduction, and Brossard's Cybil is targeted by Occident desRives, the model reader, in a similar fashion. "Cybil se laissait courtiser" by Occident, whose "style épistolaire l'avait ravie." Occident's approach is calculated and effective. She selects a flattering community of writers to provide a context of marine literature among which e-Cybil's work will show to advantage: "Dès sa première lettre, [Occident] avait su capter l'attention de Cybil en mentionnant les noms de Jules Verne, de Melville, de Léonard da Vinci, et de Joseph Conrad" (59). It is Occident who establishes the parameters for the textual product to be called La Vitesse

du Silence and ensures financial and administrative support for the ocean voyage, just as readers provide delineated markets and therefore financing for aesthetic products through investing their own incomes in the products that appeal to them. These conditions establish Occident as the text's model reader, embedded within the text to serve as an ambiguous example of an actual reader.

Because Winterson and Brossard reverse the standard relationship between reader and writer, the writer-protagonist is presented as being malleable, as being inscribed and fetishized according to the desires, wishes, fears and hopes of their reader/seducers. Not surprisingly, the overwhelmingly obvious area of intensification, fetishization, and eroticism is the area of narrative itself. That narratives within narratives proliferate in both *The PowerBook* and *Baroque d'Aube* attests to this. Where Winterson's narratives are supplicating, Brossard's are demonstrative, produced by the seductive contact of an engaged subject with the seducee's already energized intensities. As Baudrillard observes, "One cannot seduce others, if one has not oneself been seduced" (81). And in "Animal Sex" Grosz contends that "[t]he other cannot excite without the subject already being excited or excitable. The other cannot induce erotic impulses and caresses from the outside alone" (294). Brossard writes worlds where the writer-seducee is already caressing language, life, experience and form, so that the reader-seducer's advances are met with joyful recognition and enthusiastic acceptance.

The telescoping and enveloping aspects of Chinese box structure connote the sensual caress of reading. As these narratives move against each other, what Grosz calls "libidinal circulation" intensifies:

In this way, the subject's body ceases to be *a* body, and becomes the site of provocations and reactions, the site of intensive disruptions. The subject ceases to be a subject, giving way to pulses, gyrations, fluxes, secretions, swellings, processes over which it can exert no control and to which it only wants to succumb. Its borders blur, seep, liquefy, so that, for a while at least, it is no longer clear where one organ, body or subject stops and another begins. ("Animal Sex" 290; Grosz's italics)

Women experience eroticism through touch, she asserts, and all surfaces of the female body are sexualized. This opens the possibility that in feminist texts, the resolution of plot is not the only location of quasi-orgasmic experience when reading a feminist text. Grosz characterizes orgasm as an experience wherein the "borders" of the subject "blur, seep, liquefy" and become permeable. It seems likely that the "seeping together" of reading and writing subjects could follow such experiences as: an intensification of ideas or images to the point of overdetermination within a text; felicitous but unforeseen links between disparate ontological levels within a narrative; or the sensation of being read by the text. These processes will be the focus of Sections 3.2 and 3.3 which closely engage Winterson's *PowerBook* and Brossard's *Baroque d'Aube* respectively, foregrounding the way in which readerly orgasm blurs together reading subject and writing subject, citizen and state, consumer and producer, seducer and seduced.

3.2 "It isn't power, it's sex": Tools of Passion in Jeanette Winterson's *PowerBook*

Jeanette Winterson is known for the passionate intensity of her writing. She persistently plays with relationship patterns in text after text, and sometimes these patterns re-echo within the same text. *The PowerBook* (2000) is no exception. As a whole, *The PowerBook* moves between three distinct types of narrative. The framing narrative details an e-mail or chatroom communication between the writing I and an

unnamed woman. In structure this communication resembles a producer-consumer relationship: the writing I produces narratives, often fables; and the woman, here called you-the-reader because in the narrative she is identified only through the second-person pronoun "you," reads the narratives, objects, and places an order for a different story. There is also an extended narrative, set in contemporary Europe, that details a love story between you-the-reader and the writing I, as well as the sequence of discrete love fables ordered by you-the-reader and produced by the writing I. The economic merchant-client metaphor questions what Lisa Moore (1995) reads as a "love conquers all" rhetoric common to lesbian narrative (see Lisa Moore [1995]), participated in by Winterson's writing I.

Through narrative sensuality and blurring ideologies *The PowerBook* promotes a reading experience characterized by an aesthetic of vertiginous dissolution. A similar aesthetic marks each of the trickster narratives discussed in Chapter 5 below, with Margaret Atwood's *Blind Assassin* in particular adopting narrative strategies of dissolution and dizziness in service of its various political challenges. Winterson's narrative, like these others, de-stabilizes conservative values-based ideologies, notably ideologies arising from the intersection between marriage and fidelity. It also explores the uneasy conflation of consumer with civic functions within concepts of citizenship, in large part through the layering and interdependence of a sequence of narratives and fictional worlds, but also through the interaction between the reader, who also functions as both seducer and client, and the writer, or the seduced and the contractor. Yet Winterson's writing I distinguishes itself from the trickster narratives by evincing a faith

in narrative's romantic and transformative potential that is treated much more ironically by Atwood, Bowering, King, Scott and Moore.

Winterson frames the interaction between the writing I and you-the-reader sometimes as a dialogue between "you" and "I" and sometimes as the writing I's intimate, reflective monologue directed roughly toward the absent client, you-the-reader/seducer. The issue of power and who holds it haunts the narrative through you-the-reader, who presumes that power not only exists, but dominates human experience. The writing I on the other hand, already in an equivocal position vis-a-vis power, struggles to reveal some alternatives to power in sex and narrative, two forms that s/he brings to parallel each other. The resulting dialogue also dramatizes an issue within contemporary concepts of citizenship where, Étienne Balibar (2004) contends, a tendency to think humanity and citizenship as virtually coextensive obscures the fact that "*man [sic] is made by citizenship* and not citizenship by man" (321; Balibar's italics).

In contemporary debates, Balibar observes, citizenship as an idea has become universalized, less of a privilege than in earlier centuries and more of a "universal access, or a universal right to politics: a right not only to *political rights* (a 'right to have rights,' as [Hannah] Arendt said), but also to effective political participation" (312; Balibar's italics; all italics are Balibar's). This "*excludes exclusion*," he contends, so that neither "condition, status, [n]or nature" (312) can prevent a person from being a citizen. It follows that "modern citizenship thus institutes an equation, a reciprocity of perspectives, a coextensivity of the predicates of humanity and those of citizenship" (313). He points to a fundamental problem in the current concept of the human, which roughly equates

“communitarian man” with “man as proprietor” even though they are not identical (314). This describes the uneasy conjunction of political and consumer functions within the civic, a problem addressed by Marianne Gullestad (see Chapter 3.1 above), which itself reflects what Balibar terms an uneasiness between a Kantian liberal reading of citizenship as a fundamental right, and a Rousseauist republican reading of citizenship as based on “principles of popular sovereignty” (315-16).

The dialogics of Winterson’s *PowerBook* replicate this uneasiness. A writing I aligns roughly with Kant, yearning for experience outside an exclusive or agonistic power dynamics; and a you-the-reader, aligning roughly with Rousseau’s privileging of a flexible, fluid, but reversible power dynamic within civic experience, vacillates unpredictably (according to the writing I) between granting and withholding endorsement. Winterson writes two separate endings for her narrative, one “happy” and one “sad,” but ultimately the writing I and you-the-reader do not reconcile, suggesting how vital it is that negotiations between such imperfectly exclusive positions should perpetuate civic, narrative, and romantic experience. The difference-in-sameness message is conveyed partly through the distinctive world-types written for the embedded contemporary nostalgic romance, the embedded fables, and the framing narrative, although the writing I advocates the same idea in all levels: transformation of self and world through cultural moments made available by love, narrative and art.

The subjects of transformation in *The PowerBook* are refined to their barest essentials. The physical reality of the framing narrative in particular is very vague, with few of the visual and tactile details that anchor a fictional world and make it seem to have

mass and substance. The writing I writes few details into the writing room beyond a chair and the computer, initializing a “snow-globe” effect extending throughout the narrative. In its centre is a diorama of two people deciding how much they are in love, and the mood of this diorama shifts as the writing I moves it into different literary idioms (fabliau, courtly romance, children’s coming-of-age story). So intense is the focus on these two that all else seems excluded. The human ordering systems of religion, of politics, and of the juridicial are referenced and while they do regulate the lovers’ relationship, they are never witnessed in action so that within the narrative they seem to have no immediacy, but are reified and mystified instead.

With the exception of the space of the framing narrative, the barren room with the chair and the computer, the settings of the other narratives are rendered exotically. The nostalgic romances unfold in settings that are distinctly cosmopolitan and leisure-oriented, in situations wherein one or both of you-the-reader and the writing I are traveling away from their homes; these experiences are “special” vacation-type experiences outside the norm of quotidian life. The fables are set in Arthurian England, in Italy, in the Middle East, on the border between Nepal and Tibet, in a land of fantastic Bakhtinian inversions; in the hands of the writing I these “storied lands” seem to resist quotidian life and its civic privileges and responsibilities almost reflexively.

The civic aspects of daily life in Winterson’s text are suspended by the extraordinariness of travel and leisure time away from the accustomed civic arena of home, and in the *PowerBook* the civic sphere is further trumped by the chance, potentially transcendent experience of love. Presumably both you-the-reader and the

writing I experience the “stranger in a strange land” phenomenon, but to a minimal extent: while they are not citizens of the lands in which they travel, nor do they clash in any way with the laws of the lands they visit, indicating that on some level civic standards resemble each other across nations and it is indeed possible, perhaps easy, to become a “citizen of the world.” The real task, on the other hand, is to convince one’s true love to stay, a nearly impossible feat, and one which the writing I intends to accomplish largely through her virtuoso narrative skills.

In this text, the civic sphere recedes so far into the distance that it seems virtually nonexistent while the sphere of intense romance looms so large that it becomes omnipresent, infecting all narrative levels and almost all characters no matter how sketchily drawn. Especially within the nostalgic romance framework there is little to suggest a state presence be it restrictive or supportive, and it is the nostalgic romance that seems to direct responses to this text most clearly.⁴ The resulting sense of a restriction-free world strongly suggests that you-the-reader is free to be with whomever she chooses, since larger authorities have installed no viable interdictions that would prevent her from following her heart. Consequently, so the logic goes, if she chooses anyone but the writing I she is letting herself be ruled by arbitrary forces that she would be able to shrug off if the writing I could only show her the way.

⁴ The nostalgic romance seems to orient responses to the other narrative frames because it is very closely linked with the contemporary actual world, containing artifacts and geography like that of the actual world. Even the writing I can be read as “being” Winterson herself, who like the writing I lives above a store called Verde’s, has written a book called *The Passion*, and wrote a book with Mount Everest and George Mallory in it. Moreover, you-the-reader assents more readily to material in the nostalgic romances than to the fables; the gravitational pull of you-the-reader’s endorsement facilitates the actual reader’s corresponding endorsement.

Having succumbed to the seductions of you-the-reader, the writing I adopts her lover's techniques of seduction but transforms them into narrative form. You-the-reader's direct approach translates into the directly seductive second-person narration; you-the-reader's arousing physical touch becomes the "tailor-made narrative" which the writing I proceeds to construct: "The story is reading you now, line by line" (84). The struggle to prevent the romance from failing is fierce: "Break the narrative. Refuse all the stories that have been told so far (because that is what the momentum really is), and try to tell the story differently – in a different style, with different weights – and allow some air to those elements choked with centuries of use, and give some substance to the floating world" (53). The detritus of usage shifts away from the accustomed worlds and stories, settling on the new possible worlds that the writing I hopes to bring into existence whether through language and narrative or through intense will and effort.

Practically speaking, the central demand the writing I places on these new possible worlds is that within them her relationship with you-the-reader should become permanent. This one change, tiny yet vast, promises to catalyze a whole new world, freed from outworn convention and ready to shape new practices. The incomprehensible violence that political authorities exercise in the romantic fables, such as Arthur sentencing Guinevere to burn at the stake and when Paolo and Francesca becoming impaled by her husband's sword, will become irrelevant, and the forbidden love between the writing I and you-the-reader will be ratified and blessed in the simple act of making the "right" decision.

Yet this certainty too evaporates when it is fed back into the atmosphere of the frame narrative, that attenuated space where nothing seems real except the communication between two people joined by the internet and the story that floats out over it. It is never certain that these two figures have ever met in person in any framing world; the intense detail of the nostalgic romances fosters an assumption that those two women and the two women of the frame narrative are the same and have the same experiences, but this is not necessarily so. The writing I sees a ticket to Naples arise on her screen in the frame narrative, and the image connects to the dalliance in AnaCapri in the next chapter, but is this so because the writing I used the ticket to travel to Italy or is it because she used the clue to set the next story in Italy? The question is never resolved, forcing the implied and possibly the actual reader to choose her own resolution to the problem. Again, in the frame narrative the writing I reads on her screen that you-the-reader is coming to London yet the same question arises: is it a made-up visit imagined on contract or is it "real"? *The PowerBook's* narrative is constructed in such a way as to seduce readers theoretical and actual into making politicized choices that superimpose political stances regarding heterosexuality, marriage, love and lesbianism over aesthetic stances on the power of narrative to foster effective change.

The almost echoing empty framing narrative depicts the writing process of *The PowerBook*, so that ontologically speaking it is the originating and determining frame; as such it holds little that does not relate directly to the writing process. The comparative emptiness of this level suggests that communication and especially narrativization along

with writing—producing textual traces of communication and narrativization—are such significant components of experience that everything else fades into the background.

The writing I, who is never conclusively identified as either a man or a woman, sketches his/her location in a room above a store. The room seems to hold mainly the writing I and his/her desk, chair, and computer. The writing I thinks of many other material things in the course of his/her reflections—closets, bridges, and costumes, for example, all come up in the first few pages—but they seem distanced and phantasmal because the writing I uses nothing besides the desk, the chair and the computer, and everything else reads as comparatively irrelevant. Traces of you-the-reader manifest in the room in the form of text messages on the computer screen, yet there is no specific indication that the writing I and you-the-reader have ever met in the flesh, although the pressure and the proximity of the other narratives suggest otherwise to the actual reader. The fictional world of the framing narrative is remarkably empty, pristine, and almost sterile; it seems to invite the rich, dense, particular fictional worlds of the contemporary romance narrative and the pastiche love fables to press on and contaminate it, facilitating a reader-initiated elision that collapses together the writing and narrating I's of all the different levels, as well as all the you-the-readers. The pronounced differences in density and texture between the narratives' fictional worlds generate a clear impression of narrative that makes itself be read as physically and psychologically sensual.

The framing narrative provides a context for the other two narrative types, the contemporary or nostalgic romance and the embedded love fables. The nostalgic romance is set in contemporary times, being a history in four instalments, nostalgic in tone, of the

intermittent love affair between a writer and a woman reader. They reunite whenever their travel plans permit, but their meetings are rare and complicated because the reader is married and lives in a different city. The nostalgic tone of this narrative makes it clear that these lovers, both women, have either been separated for a long time or ended their affair. Its world is rich in geographic detail, and includes contemporary Paris, Italy and London, among other places. Even an abbreviated list of “actual world” items encountered by the narrating I of the nostalgic romance includes: restaurants, rivers, bridges, champagne, artichokes, Mickey Mouse balloons, frisbees, pizza, horse races, and statues of the Madonna. Here things stay themselves by and large. Artifacts are not metamorphosed through miraculous intervention, transcoding, or love, even though such changes are common in the embedded fables and are not ruled out in the framing narrative. It is largely the detail and emotional resonance of this particular narrative that encourages actual readers to conflate the narrating I of the nostalgic romance with the writing I of the framing narrative, and to conflate you-the-reader with the lover-reader.

The embedded fables emplot this same “doomed” or “impossible” love narrative within such folk-narrative forms as legends and fables. Most, but not all, are fictional, several take traditional narrative forms, and the mode of each, as Jean-Michel Ganteau (2004) points out, is the mode of romance. The first is a *fabliau* about Ali, a roughly medieval-era traveling tulip merchant of ambiguous gender; another is a children’s story about a contemporary orphan’s alienation from a Bakhtinian inverted world; another is the story of George Mallory’s love affair with Mount Everest. Others are high romances from Arthurian legend and from Dante.

Ganteau reads *PowerBook* as developing Winterson's ongoing project to break open and defamiliarize the romantic mode: "In Winterson's narratives, love stops being some sort of a hackneyed consumption of the same and becomes a respectful welcoming of the other based on the principle of accountability" (175). In her reworkings, Ganteau claims, Winterson "embarks on a dialogue with one of its [love's] modal and aesthetic others, i.e. the sublime. It opens itself to the absolutely grand and terrifying, it starts flirting with the unlimited. It reminds the reader of the intransigent nature of love." In this way Winterson revisits and expands the romantic preoccupation with the exotic, the mysterious and the transcendent (166-7). The second-person narration superimposes the exotic and mysterious romance mode on the potentially utopian reader-text-writer relationship, opening both wide to the potential for transformation.

In one sense, Winterson's writing I proffers her assemblage of stories like a love-gift to her seducer, but she also employs them defensively. She alters the tone and structure from one narrative instalment to the next, partly in order to retain the mercurial interest of the person whose intensities have awoken her own, and partly as a kind of reflex action to compensate for a "wound" inflicted on her by her capricious seducer. The whimsical and rambunctious joy of Ali-the-tulip-merchant's fabliau mutates into the tragically serious romance between Lancelot and Guinevere because of you-the-reader's withering judgment: "*That was a terrible thing to do to a flower*" (25; Winterson's italics). You-the-reader does not want a "vulgarizing" love even if it is couched in comic and fantastic terms. In Lancelot and Guinevere's story, the narrating I is much more responsible to these implicit terms of her/his contract with you-the-reader. S/he inhabits

the persona of Lancelot, a legendary hero whose valour, devotion to ideals, and physical exceptionality brought him friendship with royalty, the admiration of many, and a place in British mythology.

Having learned the hard way that you-the-reader will only accept fictional worlds in which love elevates, the writing I emplots Lancelot's story in such a way that love does not vulgarize but elevates. In order to retain her seducer's affection, the writing I reinforces and exaggerates this condition; like Scheherezade, she must write this structure intensely, obsessively, and plurally. Until you-the-reader states her intent to come to London, the writing I offers up narrative after narrative, attempting to forestall the loss of you-the-reader's affections. Even when they are united within the framing narrative, the embedded narratives reinforce how tenuous is the bond between seducee and seducer, and how much work the seducee must put into maintaining it. Separation and abandonment are always unthinkable and always immanent, complicating the contract and perpetuating the workload.

The embedded fables ludically engage with romance, and vary considerably in mood and content. Sometimes they reach for high comedy and sometimes for star-crossed tragedy. The several fables that are specifically about love involve a woman, her lover, and her husband; the fable about Lancelot and Guinevere with Arthur lurking off-page is one example. The idyllic potential within each embedded love fable is threatened by a figure who wields the power of convention: King Arthur sentences Guinevere to death, Francesca's beastly husband kills her and her lover, the child Alix's adoptive

father scoffs at her curiosity about the treasure and the wilderness, Mrs. George Mallory begs her husband to abandon Mount Everest and return to her and the children.

The textures of the fictional worlds of these embedded fables are highly stylized to match their narrative content. Together and separately, the embedded fables impute an artificial but epic resonance to the core romance of the writing I and you-the-reader, romanticizing the relationship and making it archetypal. Here the term “fable” refers strictly to *The PowerBook*’s miniature romance narratives, and follows Robert Scholes’s reading of fabulation in *Fabulation and Metafiction* (1979). He contends that fables emphasize form and craft, often carrying an impression of exaggerated artifice. He cites in particular an embedded “perpetual” narrative that details each trip a man makes across the river with individual sheep in his herd, which is framed within two other narratives, all of which reflect on each other while exaggerating basic narrative elements determined by the contract formed by each narratee’s demand and each narrator’s supply.

Like those that Scholes discusses, the fables embedded in Winterson’s *PowerBook* exaggerate structural elements like beginning, middle, and end, and quasi-extradiegetic ones like the reader-writer contract, but they are also as didactic. In each of *The PowerBook*’s fables there is a “moral” about the power of love to overcome all odds. As in Aesop, the addressee—here acrobatically encompassing you-the-reader, the implied reader, the ideal reader, and the actual reader—is intended to take that moral seriously and heed it in her own life. The attention to desire and sex within each of the embedded narratives connects with the acts of writing and of reading, making them equally artistic or “cultural” experiences.

As acts of intensified communication and interaction, love, sex, reading and writing read as virtually interchangeable in *PowerBook*: all are art and all are artful, all are shaped and shaping. The novel itself becomes an impassioned and highly sexed love lyric about the act of writing, where the text substitutes for the body of an imperious, changeable, inconsistently attainable beloved, the reader. Love, meanwhile, as both a “structural” emotion and a “structural” physical act—meaning that love is patterned and that it offsets patterns in other areas of experience—is every bit as sculpted, shaped, and produced as a narrative, a painting, a play, a dance. It is, moreover, equally capable of effecting transformation, of being “cultural” in the sense that Thomas Docherty specifies in *Aesthetic Democracy* (2006): “that event of perception—the root sense of ‘aesthetic’ (*aisthanomai*)—that calls a human subject to differ from itself, and to find or constitute its very identity precisely through the specific mode of that differing. It [culture] therefore names the possibility of a transformation, a change in our ordinariness that is occasioned by aesthetics or art” (xiii; Docherty’s italics). For both you-the-reader and the writing I the aesthetic experiences of sex, love, communication, and narrative bring about cathartic transformations without resolving their basic incongruity: their diverging positions on power.

For you-the-reader, sex, romance, and narrative in all of their forms are a means of playing out an agonistic politics; her requirement that love stories should elevate rather than vulgarize indicates a type of hierarchalization, a vying for a near-Darwinian supremacy and superiority. For the writing I it is possible for experience, especially

interactive experience like sex and narrative, to partake of a dynamic outside the agonistic because power is simply not always at stake.

In this space which is inside you and inside me I ask for no rights or territories. There are no frontiers or controls. The usual channels do not exist. This is the orderly anarchic space that no one can dictate, though everyone tries. This is a country without a ruler. I am free to come and go as I please [...].

Most of us try to turn this into power. We're too scared to do anything else.

But it isn't power. It's sex. (175)

The disagreement between the writing I's moral normativity and you-the-reader's egalitarian normativity is playing through. It will not be resolved, but it volatilizes the writing I's capacities for interaction, communication, narrative and love, and initiates the production not only of the *PowerBook* as narrative and as romance and erotic act, but as communication.

Throughout *The PowerBook*'s framing level, the writing I communicates with you-the-reader by e-mail, reflects about their situation, constructs the embedded fables and nostalgic romance narrative, and imposes order on the material. The writing I also makes editorial decisions, including the decision about whether and how to include the e-mail conversations within the complete text. The writing I is not necessarily identical to Jeanette Winterson,⁵ nor is s/he necessarily identical to the narrators of any of the embedded fables and nostalgic narratives. The narrating I's are fictional constructs that inhabit the fictional worlds of the embedded narratives, and have very specific realities that relate to their fictional worlds; the writing I seems abstract in contrast and lives in a

⁵ It should be admitted, however, that like the writing I, Winterson does live near the Thames in London, above a store called Verde's.

sparse, quasi-abstract world. Her main contact with the world is through the basically contractual and commercial relationship shared with you-the-reader.

The “writing I” is assigned neither a name nor a conclusive gender. In Winterson’s hands, the refusal to impose gender and/or name on the writing I challenges any preconceptions connected with such labels. While she is definitely female, the married lover remains as nameless as the writing I. In moments of harmony, the writing I often identifies you-the-reader in the second person “you,” while the third person “she” suggests distance. The lover is also the reader of the narratives that are made to her order by the writing I. Because she is constructed as “you” from her first appearance in the core narrative, an almost magnetic elision compresses the actual reader of *The PowerBook* into the model reader.

Winterson’s narrative engages directly with the reader’s status. It posits an implied reader who is “forced to take an active part in the composition of the novel’s meaning, which revolves around a basic divergence from the familiar” (Wolfgang Iser, *Implied Reader* [1974] xii). It posits a second ideal reader who will understand the text’s every nuance and resonance, and who will read the text exactly as the writer desires. It posits a third model reader who is written into the narrative’s self-reflexive ontology as a listener or reader, and who responds to the tale as if she were another character, serving as a model for the actual reader’s possible responses. In this *The PowerBook* resembles Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1997) and also Italo Calvino’s *If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler* (1979, trans. 1981), both of which employ the second-person narration as well.

The indeterminacy arises from the form of address; it is difficult to be sure exactly who the writing I is, there are several different you's, and it is not less difficult to be sure exactly which "you" applies to us at any given time. The proliferation arises because of the variety of narrative forms: e-chat, personal reflection, displaced autobiography, fable, fabliau, courtly romance, gothic romance, inverted Dickensian romance, travel romance, realist romance, etc. Each of these has its own distinctive type of fictional world, which inflects the narrative it hosts. Being stuffed into the same book makes each of these narrative forms infect the others' fictional worlds and narratives. Yet the framing narrative carries so little material detail that it seems abstract and detached. Considering that it contextualizes, organizes, punctuates, and frames all the rest, it offers the actual reader few opportunities to establish common ground between how things work in personal experience and how they work in the fictional world. It seems as if the actual reader is being encouraged to hold the *fictional* world, not the real world, in abeyance—a direct reversal of what usually takes place.

Complicating things further, Winterson's narrating I's actively intertwine male and female physiologies and psyches in more than one embedded fable, to the point that both writing I and you-the-reader fluctuate between genders. Here Lancelot describes his relationship with Guinevere as if both have male and female sex characteristics:

Your marrow is in my bones. My blood is in your veins. Your cock is in my cunt. My breasts weigh under your dress. My fighting arm is sinew'd to your shoulder. Your tiny feet stand my ground. In full armour I am wearing nothing but your shift, and when you plait your hair you wind it round my head. Your eyes are green. Mine are brown. When I see through your green eyes, I see the meadows bright with grass. When you creep behind my retina, you see the flick of trout in the reeds of the lake.

I can hold you up with one hand, but you can balance me on your
fingertips. I am not wounded unless you wound me.
I am not strong unless you are my strength. (69-70)

This passage clearly outlines the inseparability of the lovers. They are mutually supportive and mutually vulnerable in a quintessentially interdependent relationship. Missing is the cheeky joy of the Ali fabliau and also its sense of the eternal survivability of things; Ali and the princess encounter many obstacles, some life-threatening, but their embedded narrative closes on a note of community and perpetuation as the princess encourages Ali to share the pleasure of the flower with others in the harem. The differences in how the writing I and you-the-reader approach the narrativization of romance, including their own, points up an incompatibility in readings of love and love-based human relations, and within the context of Winterson's narrative the incompatibility remains unresolved.

Within *The PowerBook* you-the-reader is consistently represented as the seducer, despite the mutual interdependence that the writing I constructs. This directly counters the Iserian conventions that place the writer as the seducer, and the reader as a seducee who is either resistant or passive, gullible, and suggestible. In *The PowerBook*, you-the-reader determines the parameters of the romantic relationship, including not only when it will begin and end, but also when erotic contact will begin and end. In the framing narrative, until you-the-reader sends the email requesting a story, the writing I is passively "sitting at my screen" in a neutral, dormant state (3). In the nostalgic histories, you-the-reader makes the first personal confession by admitting that she distrusts

surprises (33-4); she initiates physical contact by taking the narrating I's⁶ hand and placing it on her abdomen (35); she introduces the topics of sex and lovers (35, 38); she escalates the seduction by kissing the narrating I (46); and, most importantly, she is the one to suggest a sexual encounter (55), using an intensity she later calls "begging" (108).

This pattern recurs in most of the romantic fables, where the narrating I is, again, acted on rather than active. Lancelot seems inevitably overcome by his love for Guinevere, Francesca is the passive but willing object of Paolo's seduction, the mountain simply exists until Mallory climbs her and brings her cosmic resonance. Since the various alter-egos of the writing I are so regularly represented as the more passive partner, narrative is re-cast, not as an artifact crafted by the writer according to her interests, politics and aesthetics, but as an artifact designed or at least activated by the reader's conscious choice. The fictional world produced by ascribing responsibility for the narrative to the reader reads as exotic and contingent because it suggests that this fictional world is allied with rules and strictures whose logic may not be transparent, even to an expert reader. Since the text presumes conventions, such as writerly authority, only to frustrate them, and since its fictional worlds do not operate only by rules known to the reader, *The PowerBook's* fictional worlds seem to be hybrids, resembling the playful hybrid realities of magical realism.

In an essay on magical realism, R.R. Wilson suggests that the extraordinary fictional worlds of such narratives are produced because two systems of logic invade

⁶ Only in the framing narrative is there a narrating voice that identifies herself as writing, experientially and professionally. The experience and consequences of writing are strongly emphasized in the framing narrative, but they are barely mentioned in the nostalgic romance and the embedded fables; the distinction is important enough to warrant a small shift in terminology between levels of narrative and types of I's.

each other and operate simultaneously within a narrative. “[M]agic realism is the name that one currently gives to the fictional space created by the dual inscription of incompatible geometries” (1995, 72). Winterson’s writing I writes you-the-reader as responsible for the narrative’s incompatible geometries, and for the uneasy ludic tension produced by supporting both logics simultaneously. The fictional worlds of the love fables differ inherently and radically from each other, from the nostalgic histories, and from the framing narrative. The nostalgic histories and the framing narrative also have their own unique and independent logical systems.

In Baudrillard’s terms, this situation is “hyperreal,” a “real without origin or reality” (“Simulation and Simulacra” [1988], n.p.). Baudrillard contends that “When the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning” (n.p.). The nostalgia that permeates Winterson’s twentieth-century love story revolves around the no-longer-accessible blissful companionship experienced with you-the-reader/lover. The writer constructs this companionship romantically, as brightening and ordering all other experience. The world of representation, which the conventional reader assumes is limited to the pages of the book, has in fact invaded actuality. Because it has specifically invaded her own relationship with the text and its writer, the shift is all the more disorienting, even threatening. She is not just reading about a magic realist world, but suddenly sees that her own world has always subsisted under the same contradictions.

The various narratives of *The PowerBook* downplay politicizing identifiers in order to archetypalize the romance, and they also echo the significantly de-personalized atmosphere of the framing narrative. In the nostalgic romance that details the affair

between its narrating I and you-the-lover, the only figures that register on the narrating I's attention are fellow-tourists and working-class figures who cater to tourists. They mostly supply local colour, and reinforce the transient tourist status of the narrating I and you-the-lover. Even people closely connected to the pair, including you-the-lover's husband, carry no names, ethnicities or professions.

The love fables do specify profession but in each case the profession seems determined by the content of the fable, so that again personal information about the character is subordinated to the narrative's theme. Ali the resourceful salesperson is in a picaresque fabliau (9-22). Nobles Lancelot and Guinevere from the Arthurian cycles (67-74) and Dante's Francesca and Paolo (123-29) are all in chivalric romances. Alix the adopted orphan is in a carnivalesque inverted childhood romance that hearkens back to Roald Dahl (137-46). George Mallory and his passion for Mount Everest are in a cosmic romance, complete with the joyous laughter and spiritual vibrations that accompany a supranaturally romantic death (149-52). Giovanni's profession is not mentioned—he is only identified as a traveller and the godson of a pope—but in a fable about abundance, lack, and knowing one's world, his experiences are those of a resourceful merchant or diplomat (221-22). The refusal to employ politicizing identifiers in *The PowerBook* playfully defers one conventional means by which readers establish emotional connections with these characters.

When you-the-reader announces her impending visit—"I'm coming to London" she writes, "I want to see you" (161)—the integrity of the contextualizing fictional world is compromised. Although traces of her, her messages, have appeared in the framing

narrative, she and the writing I have not met physically; when they do meet, the framing narrative and the nostalgic narrative converge, belatedly permitting the conflation of lovers that the implied reader has already achieved. Soon, the nostalgic romance ends in two mutually contradictory ways: once with you-the-reader leaving on a train to rejoin her husband, and once with her escaping the train to run laughing through the streets with the narrating/writing I (205-06). The double ending makes it impossible to miss the artifice or “story-ness” of this narrative, and the nostalgic history has become enfabulated. The nostalgia it perpetrates is an impossible longing for a relationship that has always been simulated, and it clouds perception to the point that the simulation looks like the genuine article. The fabulative aspects of Winterson’s nostalgic romance emphasize the constructedness of all experience, even experience that seems unmediated, and its nostalgia ensures that artifice will continue to confuse those who search for the real.

Baudrillard asserts that “[i]n this impossibility of isolating the process of simulation must be seen the whole thrust of an order that can only see and understand [in] terms of some reality, because it can function nowhere else” (“Simulacra,” n.p.).⁷ The order Baudrillard discusses here seems limited; it seems almost as insufficient as the quasi-masculine power of production he discusses early on in *Seduction*, and which he sees as vulnerable to the point of being utterly undone by the “evil” (because it undoes production and the status quo) feminine power of seduction. But it remains the only order

⁷ The Stanford University website that posted Baudrillard’s essay on the web did not correct a few errors generated by letter-recognition scanning software, usually involving a substitution of “m” for “in”. For the sake of convenience, I include the corrections in my quotations, identified by square brackets.

available to most readers, if not all, because the ability to distinguish one thing from another—reality and simulation, male and female, right and wrong—seems basic to human intelligence. Baudrillard continues,

Parody makes obedience and transgression equivalent, and that is the most serious crime, since it cancels out the difference upon which the law is based. The established order can do nothing against it; for the law is a second-order simulacrum whereas simulation is a third-order simulacrum, beyond true and false, beyond equivalences, beyond the rational dist[in]ctions upon which function all power and the entire social stratum. Hence, failing the real, it is here that we must aim at order. (n.p.)

Simulation and parody form the source of order; but do they form the ground from which order can rediscovered, or must they be targeted before order can be recovered?

Baudrillard does not significantly explore any options to a reality-based order, but his theories consistently indicate that such an order is already extinct, and that the order we are left with is exactly the only alternative. It is not that we must learn to operate within it, for we already are. But as citizens of this brave new simulacrum, it is incumbent on us to recognize that we are doing so, so that we can also recognize both the obligations and responsibilities we bear it, and the measures we need to take to ensure its freedom to survive and our own. And in *The PowerBook*, Jeanette Winterson simulates for her readers exactly that recognition.

For Winterson, while there may be a power differential in the reader-writer-text relationship, that is not its defining characteristic. The need to explore the alternatives that are produced by blurring power differentials is far more important than “winning” or “losing” and competing for trophies. And while the need to explore these alternatives is urgent in itself, the pleasure involved in doing so is not only a perk on the side, but an

indicator that this is the correct path to take. The text's overt discourses of desire, of an epic, all-or-nothing love, accentuate how urgent is the necessity to recognize and act on these needs and obligations.

In "Teledildonics: Virtual Lesbians in the Fiction of Jeanette Winterson" Lisa Moore points out that Winterson's recurrent theme of all-consuming love is typical of "lesbian fiction, in which 'all for love' is a recurrent theme and romantic obsession a structuring form; such themes and forms have characterized the important interventions lesbian novelists have made into the hegemony of the heterosexual love story, in the process creating their own canons and conventions" (1995: 106). What Moore calls Winterson's "perhaps disturbing faith in the transforming powers of romantic love, a Romantic investment in self-knowledge and sexual obsession" (105) relates to the writer-text-reader relationship, but also to Baudrillard's simulation-reality paradox.

In *The PowerBook*, the writing I's empathy is with the seduced writer who is doomed to live without her beloved seducer-reader. The seducer-reader is, in contrast, an enigma, and it is, finally, impossible to understand why she chooses to reject the accommodating and devoted writing/narrating I. As mentioned earlier, Winterson incorporates much play into her constructions of gender, making it difficult to assign a specific sex to *The PowerBook*'s writing I; the equivocal status of Ali and his/her tulip genitalia is a case in point. Nor is this ambiguity restricted to sex. In Muck Midden land, Bakhtinian principles of inversion hold sway: "love is a hazardous liquid" (142), coins are called trash (145), and prosaic department stores like Woolworth's and Marks and Spencer's are known as "den[s] of vice" and "iniquity" (194). Alix's narrating

perspective is credulous, and she interprets the world using her adoptive parents' inverting frame of reference until even her mother's key to treasure becomes "just another six inches of rust in a house rusted with rust" (196). Ali's optimism is contagious, making his tale optimistic; Alix's fate is made to seem tragically predestined despite the presiding air of carnival.

In the other fables, love and death are tragically interrelated. Lancelot and Guinevere, Francesca and Paolo, Mallory and the mountain he loves: none of these can truly be together until the world's obstacles are removed by death. With death, the lovers become inseparable and are cosmically validated. Impaled with Paolo by her husband's sword, Francesca thinks "No one can separate us now. Not even God" (129). When Mallory scales Everest for his third and last time, both he and the mountain experience cosmic sex. At the peak of the climb, Mallory feels he was mistaken to feel he was winning at a game of climbing. Instead he is winning at playing music: "The mountain was one vast living vibration " (151). Laughing with joy and exertion, his body "natural to the mountain" (150), he becomes "[a]s seeming-still as the mountain he was becoming" (152). By the time his body is found seventy-five years later, "his back and shoulders [are] naked and white and changed into part of the mountain" (151-52). Facilitated by his death, the lovers' union between mountain and climber has moved beyond the figurative into the literal.

Passions in *The PowerBook* cause major alterations in form and state in their fictional worlds. Ali's need brings on a transformation from flower to phallus; the stubborn denial of the Muck Midden parents makes things become their opposites; all six

of the lovers die and leave their worlds. Even Giovanni's story (221-22), the only embedded fable that marginalizes love—his lover merits one sentence before the story moves past her—shifts the political and economic foundations of his world. Melancholic about his beloved and his life, Giovanni makes a discovery that helps end a stressful trade situation between his own Catholic Italy and Turkey. The alum that Italy needs is available in large supply right beneath Giovanni's feet. In *The PowerBook's* worlds of fable it is possible for human experience to bring change.

Love is recognized less easily in the contemporary nostalgic history than it is in the love fables. In this fictional world, love is complicated by contingency in the form of loyalties to husbands or the heavy emotional freight imposed by previous love affairs. Love is unsatisfactory and insufficient. This is a world of stasis, where change is as transient and superficial as a tourist's visit, and serves only to accentuate the inescapable permanence of the status quo: things stay as they are. In the *PowerBook's* contemporary nostalgic history, love "fail[s] to generate new discourse", as Marianne Børch puts it (1999; 43). The romance, then, shifts slightly. It still bears the "all for love" inflection Moore identifies, but it also emphasizes the urgent necessity that love be sought, even though there may be no reciprocity: "My search for you, your search for me, goes beyond life and death into one long call in the wilderness. I do not know if what I hear is an answer or an echo. Perhaps I will hear nothing. It doesn't matter. The journey must be made" (79).

As the narratives progress, the fables, the nostalgic history, and the core narrative move unevenly towards the realization that the object of the quest is impossible to find

because it has always been there. Giovanni da Castro concludes his fable with the words “Everything I had sought had been under my feet from the beginning” (222); the facing page holds the phrase (presented in large font): “The world is a mirror of the mind’s abundance” (223). This image reverberates through the writing I’s memory of Paris after a rainfall:

It was as though the streets had been silvered into a mirror, and we could see the buildings and the statues and our own faces multiplied by the glass pyramid of the Louvre and the smooth flat mirror of the rain.

[...] The past had been drowned, but we had been saved. In the multiple possibilities of the mirror we could have taken any direction we wanted.

Drops of rain fell from the hem of our coats and from the falling weight of your hair. Each one was a complete world, a crystal ball of chance that held our future. Let them fall. There were so many, so many chances, so many futures. When I brushed away the rain from your forehead, aeons broke back into the waters where they were made. We were universes dripping with worlds. All we had to do was choose. (230)

The PowerBook’s fables suggest that human effort can bring change. Its nostalgic romance indicates that human reluctance ensures stasis. Its framing narrative advocates a continuing dedication to the process of encouraging change and improvement, and in the end it is this position, which Winterson binds to a moral perspective on human, aesthetic, and civic experience that regards these types of validation as always already universally in place. You-the-reader’s more communitarian perspective becomes allied with agonistic ideologies; this is placed by the *PowerBook* in a position of contingency, reversibility, and unsatisfactoriness because this is the element that eventually vanishes from the narrative.

Effort, risk, and dedication; love, story, and process: combined, these tools of passion open a channel to the transformative energy generated by aesthetic experiences

that embrace lover and beloved, reader and writer, language and narrative, world and citizen. Jeanette Winterson simulates this epiphany in *The PowerBook*, because, as her writing I puts it, somehow, someday, her seductive reader will read it, and the reading will bring about a chain effect cathartic transformation of art into love into life into experience.

In *The PowerBook* the privileged perspective holds that civic identity is an inherent part of being human, so that being aware of ideological arbitrariness and working to transform it on an intimate person to person, or writer to reader, basis is enough to actualize that civic identity. The danger in this perspective, as Lisa Moore and others have indicated, is complacency; while equating citizenship with the human confers basic rights on each individual human, in practice many humans are effectively denied a civic identity, human rights, humanity.

Generously extended, the dual promise of catharsis and transformation offered by *The PowerBook* would cause the human identity of each reader, and each person with whom that reader interacted, to be not only confirmed but publically, ideologically and politically enforced; and that promise would cause each human thus "made" by the catharsis of this or any other aesthetic experience to be transformed into a full world citizen, responsible to the world and protected by it, always simultaneously ruling and obeying (see Balibar 320). While Nicole Brossard's *Baroque d'Aube* is in sympathy with this perspective in principle, and sympathizes also with interrogating conventional agonistic power dynamics, its more communitarian approach offers an alternate

perspective to Winterson's on the conjunctions between human experience and citizenship.

3.3 "Vivre dans ton vertige": Nicole Brossard's Triptych

While Nicole Brossard engages with civic identity and plays with fictional space as Winterson does, and although she too privileges utopian potential, her project reaches in a different direction. Karen Gould (1990), Alice A. Parker (1998), Susan Knutson (2000), and Dawn Thompson (2000) explore how Brossard works toward causing actual change within the minds and perceptions of her readers through a narrative approach, based on the hologram, that models the transformed woman and brings her into existence in the reader. Brossard's literary holograms, as Thompson explains, are produced by her unique use of the triptych structure from which the hologram will arise, and by her *scènes blanches*⁸ which illuminate and enliven the hologram, enacting the transformation. While it will not be a particular focus here, Brossard's anti-conventional use of language also plays a part because it is designed to disrupt autocratic language patterns. This putatively brings readers to form new connections, new linguistic patterns, and even new thought processes that are not shaped by phallocratic ideologies.

Brossard is one of Canada's most innovative and politically engaged writers. Her ludic writing aims to alter the way readers relate to their world on a cortical level by dismantling the linguistic and narratological units that have shaped that relationship. In *Baroque d'Aube*, she writes a triptych of writers within a triptych of narratives, inserting

⁸ Like Dawn Thompson, I have opted to use the original French phrase, even though others including Barbara Godard use the English "white scene." By now, the phrase "*scène blanche*" seems inseparable from Brossard's very specific intentions for this technique.

one fictionalized narrative between two a-fictional narratives, in order to model and perform her chosen changes. The fictionalized narrative is a *künstlerroman* tracing the development of a writer who struggles to give her material an acceptable narrative shape. Winterson's writing I is intensely responsive to her seducing reader; the progress of Brossard's writer is similarly inflected by her contact with other writers, readers, artists and thinkers. The other two frames of Brossard's triptych are indeterminately fictional narratives that may or may not be about this writer's other possible selves. Together, the three frames offer a portrait of women in the process of changing, whose changes are a direct result of their relationship with people, language, narrative, and the world.

In the three-part structure of *Baroque d'Aube*, each successive part seems more authoritative than the last, so that the writing I of "Un Seul Corps" seems to be responsible for writing *Vitesse's* Cybil, who seems to be responsible for writing the Cybil of "Hotel Rafale". When *Baroque d'Aube* is read in strict linear order, each of the three parts increases in resonance as the scope of each embedded narrative increases. "Hôtel Rafale" covers one day, one city, two lovers, and one category of aesthetic product, specifically music; *Vitesse* covers months, continents, many different characters and multiple aesthetic products including literature, visual art, virtual reality, music, architecture, and film; "Un Seul Corps" covers a voyage of unspecified length and indeterminate geographical scope, at least half a dozen characters, and references the book of *Vitesse's* journey experience as a narrative that addresses only one episode of a continuing and varied life. Life experience has been transformed into an aesthetic

commodity and a means of generating intellectual transformation, but life itself continues to accumulate new experiences, and will probably generate more intellectual artifacts.

As it stands, the seductive contact that prevails in *Baroque d'Aube* only partly involves sexual interaction between characters. The surfaces that rub against each other even more insistently than this are the surfaces of the different narratives themselves, whose differing tensions produce different vacancies and frictions, and a corresponding impression of enfolding. This refers not only to the text's three parts, but also to the smaller narratives folded within them. A short list of these smaller narratives includes: La Sixtine's miniature *künstlerroman*, which tells of her growth into musicianhood and lesbianism; Irène's account of sharing a mourning period with a friend; Occident's abstract disquisitions on marine life; the co-operatively told story of the Demers brothers and how they came to devise their virtual reality program; the virtual reality program itself as its own narrative; and the many fragmentary narratives of "Un Seul Corps." On every level of this text and dominating each embedded narrative emerges a concern with art, aesthetics, and crafting, and with the people who engage in these processes at all levels of human experience.

Claudine Potvin (2005) identifies *Baroque d'Aube* as one of several Brossard novels in which the figure of the museum is key.

In these novels, rather than a simple illustration or a gloss, the work of art is inscribed as structural element or principle of composition of the text. In what I consider to be a text-museum, the art object finds itself as part of the narrative through the narrator, a character, a series of motifs, or is described/located within the story as a reference, a form of explanation, a meaning. This is to say that I situate myself in a verbal order, in the *ekphrasis*, since the mention of, or allusion to, the visual has primarily a narrative function. The interpretation of a

specific image (real or imaginary), present in or suggested by the text, as well as of the creative process, is determined essentially by the narrator's voice and gaze. (101; Potvin's italics)

Baroque d'Aube, as Potvin notes, does return frequently to images of the museum, partly through the woman in red, and partly through the beauty of La Sixtine (Potvin 109). The frequency with which cultural artifacts including novels, poems, and paintings are mentioned lend weight to Potvin's thesis. Both art in process and finished pieces of art are the reason that La Sixtine and Cybil, then Cybil, Irène and Occident, then the writer and translator spend time together. Each of the women has an opportunity to discuss her own creative processes; most discuss a specific piece of art as well, although somebody else might have made it. In most cases they construct art as transformative whether or not it is finished, and the narrative voice of *Baroque d'Aube* reinforces this construction.

Potvin contends that Brossard uses the museum to "[rethink] art and literature, engaging with the art object in a dynamic conversation and a productive dialogue" (105). The text, she asserts, "tends to perform as a possible museum capable of generating images whereby the museum assumes control over its own representation" (110). This emphasizes a control/representation dialectic. In Brossard, however, the independent life of cultural artifacts suggests woman's movement from object-hood to conscious subjectivity. Potvin's position is interesting in that it enables *Baroque d'Aube* to be read as dually hologrammatic. It generates a recuperative hologram that, reminiscently of Docherty's understanding of transformation as a reciprocal process, redesigns the reader's cortex at the same time that it offers a hologrammatic structure through which

“women circulate in writing as in museums, deconstructing and rethinking the narrative, as well as historical and literary models” (105-6).

This pattern of development is consistent with Brossard's other ficto-theoretical texts. While *Picture Theory* (1982/1991) is probably the Brossard text best known in this context, her other narratives follow similar principles and are similarly constructed. Brossard contends that the toxins of conventional patriarchy blind, deafen, and paralyze women in particular, although all humans are diminished as a result. Prototypically, phallographic culture reads the female as anomalous, defective, diseased. Its toxins prevent women from healing themselves of the “infirmity” of being female. Instead, it leads them to consent to and even perpetuate their own debilitation. For Brossard, the antidote to patriarchal toxins involves intensive exposure to reading, writing, and women who can think beyond androcentric principles. If it is a civic problem because a phallocracy has in the past attempted to reify and occult the feminine, denying it access to political validity and juridical recourse, then the production processes of making and using art reverses the processes of reification and re-opens access to the civic realm and its corollaries for any people who interact with art and have been disadvantaged by phallographic practices. Books change the world by changing the minds that perceive it. The minds that are most likely to change the world by permitting their perceptions to change are those that engage with challenging, politically-aware texts like *Baroque d'Aube*. Minds like these may have a privileged position from which to transform other minds, or at least to open them to transformation.

In *Baroque d'Aube*, Occident says as much early on in her attempts to woo Cybil into participating in this project. She contends that "la science est à la merci des blocs de fiction qu'elle rencontre sur son chemin, vous savez ces masses étranges qui obstruent le passage des pensées. Seuls les artistes ont le pouvoir de les rendre transparents ou d'en modifier la résistance. Oui, c'est ça, les artistes transforment les blocs de fiction en courants de pensée" (83).⁹ Here "fiction" seems to stand for "misconception." Like people, fiction needs to be transformed in order to transcend that obstructive level and become useful.

At a Salon du Livre, "Nicole Brossard"¹⁰—a fictionalized version of writer Nicole Brossard that appears in the novel intermittently—reinforces Occident's position while discussing women's subjectivity:

Dans une certaine mesure, nous sommes condamnées à élucider l'insoutenable posture qui est la nôtre au milieu des images que reflètent notre exclusion, notre fragmentation, au milieu des contradictions qui ne sont pas nôtres, mais dont nous faisons les frais et qui nous plongent dans l'ambivalence, la double contrainte, la culpabilité, le doute, l'autocensure. Inutile de prendre la parole pour renforcer les paysages du *statu quo*. C'est par la fiction de l'Homme que nous sommes devenues fictives, sortons de la fiction par la fiction. (125-26)

"Fiction" here can move beyond the status of obstructive false assumption and help change itself into the means of transformation. Brossard's strategic assertion that women are fiction takes Lacan's controversial theory and not only revises it, but turns it against itself. It shows how fiction and women are both fully capable of exceeding restrictive,

⁹ It should be noted that I consulted the English translations of Brossard's texts as well as reading the original French.

¹⁰ "Nicole" or "Nicole Brossard" indicates the character, while Brossard (without quotation marks) indicates the writer Nicole Brossard.

obliterating definition. According to Thomas Docherty's formulation cited in section 3.2 above, wherein aesthetic experience transforms a human subject into her other and is not only an essential part of being human but actually enables the existence of democracy (see Docherty xiii), women as fiction—here seen as a shaped and emplotted representation of human experience—would be capable in themselves of transforming people and providing catharsis. Transformative potential is accentuated through Brossard's intensive repetitions of the triptych structure.

The structure of the triptych is essential to the process of expelling toxic misogyny in this narrative. One model triptych is embedded into *Baroque d'Aube*, specifically a photographic triptych by Irène Mage. Le Triptyque Cruel¹¹ is a work Cybil has seen in exhibition, since she has attended two of Irène's shows: "Toutes ses photos étaient en noir et blanc. Elle ne lui connaissait qu'une seule oeuvre en couleurs, qui l'avait d'ailleurs rendue célèbre: *Le triptyque cruel*. À gauche, Montréal illuminé, au centre, un parc, une robe rouge allongée sous un arbre, à droite, un jonc et un coup de poing américain sur une table de cuisine. L'oeuvre avait été commentée mille fois" (60-61; Brossard's italics). Cybil first sees this work at one of Irène's shows. Later, it hangs in reproduction on the office wall of oceanographer Occident desRives, the woman who commissions the book from Cybil and Irène (82). There it speaks of Occident's regard for the work and, by extension, for its producer Irène.

¹¹ Underlined (rather than italicized) titles identify works that exist only within the framing text, and nowhere else.

In *Le Triptyque Cruel*, the juxtaposition of three apparently unrelated images speaks of the way such things can produce, if not a narrative, then an extraordinary impression of, or insight into, the relationships people have with their worlds. The three images of city, park, and kitchen table comment on each other. None of these images exists in a vacuum because they contextualize each other, producing an impression of dynamic process. At times Cybil constructs an environment of writers around her writing self. These include "Nicole Brossard," Victor Hugo, Gertrude Stein, Marcel Proust, and Victor Hugo (55, 78, 64) among many others. This contextualizes her, sketching a vibrant and dynamic community of past and present writers around her, and indicating the scope of the writing projects to which hers will be added. Context and community are as central to writing and making art as they are to citizenship. The ambiguity of the title of Irène's triptych, combined with an apparent disjunction between the three images, suggests the nature of the viewers' challenge, which involves reciprocal contextualization: recognizing and accepting contexts identified by others, but supplying one's own independent contexts as well.

The more obvious structural triptych of *Baroque d'Aube* resembles the multiple narrative levels of Winterson's *PowerBook*. *Baroque d'Aube* is divided into three parts. The first is "Hôtel Rafale" (9-47); its protagonist is named Cybil Noland. Her profession is not specified, but her affair with a young woman nicknamed La Sixtine (a pun on the woman's youth and beauty) provides the material for the narrative. The second part is an embedded narrative about the production of a text (49-199), itself in three parts: "Rimouski", "Buenos Aires", and "Le futur *dark*" (Brossard's italics and English).

Although Brossard does not assign it an independent title, for convenience's sake this embedded narrative, the central frame of the triptych, will be called La Vitesse du Silence, abbreviated to Vitesse. This is the title that Cybil thinks about giving to the ocean narrative. The protagonist of this segment is also named Cybil Noland; she is a writer who has agreed to collaborate with an artist, Irène Mage, to produce a text about the ocean. The concluding narrative, "Un Seul Corps Pour Comparer" (201-260) simulates journal excerpts written by an unnamed writing I. The journal details a publicity tour for her recently published text, and her translator accompanies her on tour.

On a more figurative level, there is also a triptych that involves a triangulation of writers. Brossard uses several writer figures in *Baroque d'Aube*, blurring the lines between who writes what. The Cybil of the embedded narrative Vitesse reads herself first and foremost as a writer. She refers repeatedly to texts she has produced and is producing. She meets a character named "Nicole Brossard" who discusses writing with her. The second writer is an enigmatic woman who is never named, but manifests both in the embedded narrative, Vitesse, and in "Un seul corps pour comparer." She has a red coat, visits a museum, and has an apartment in London; when in her apartment, she writes. These four identifiers—coat, museum, apartment, and writing—are the only things that identify her as the same woman throughout *Baroque d'Aube*. Because of the dense indeterminacy around her, it is impossible to tell whether the red-coated writer is a product of Cybil's imagination, whether Cybil is a product of hers, or whether the two situations have melded in some way. Indeed, all three alternatives seem possible at once. The writer-in-red, therefore, enjoys a peculiar ontological status within the narrative and

within the writer triptych, being simultaneously inside and outside the fictional realities that harbour her. She seems to function as a micro-hologram herself, since disconnected facets of her experience are interspersed throughout the text but are never bound together so as to make her presence recognizable as a narrative.

Her most emphatic appearance is also her last appreciable appearance. Cybil has just returned from her first session with the virtual reality program and has thrown herself into her current manuscript. She visualizes the red-coated woman striding through Hyde Park towards a speakers' corner, where she orates: "*My life is all about life. Language is alive in my throat. Can you hear the vibration? My voice has been severely damaged by a dream. I used to dream among dreamers. The dreamers have left. I am now left by myself to listen at my broken voice*" (181-82; Brossard's English and italics). The Hyde Park woman reappears obliquely in "Un Seul Corps". While reading her own text over the radio, the writing I remembers a book-filled studio, fragrant with tea, overlooking Hyde Park (221). This memory is left vague, but it does evoke a suggestion that the writing I and the Hyde Park woman are the same, and further that both of these are "the same" as both Cybils.

The final writer figure is she who generates the journal in "Un Seul Corps." She too remains unnamed, but is clearly not identical to the writer-in-red since she refers to her in de-familiarized terms similar to Cybil's. She may be a later version of Cybil, but this connection remains indeterminate. She can be read simultaneously as the same as Cybil and different, a connection that marks the third frame of both the narrative triptych and the writer triptych, uniting them.

Ideally, the engaged reader connects these dots across the narrative, arriving at an intuitive understanding of the self in process; this connection would likely have to happen over the course of several focused readings, since it seems unlikely that a single reading would suffice to accomplish this for even a seasoned Brossard reader. Still, the indeterminate ontological status of the Hyde Park woman, in particular, is a single narrative fibre that seems to magnetize the other narrative threads around it. It re-orientes and re-organizes the trajectory of the narrative, altering its perspective just enough to produce a pronounced change, as if it were a flash of a sudden brief ability to see in four dimensions or more. It prescribes the need to read in a different way, and suggests a possible method.

Because indeterminacies proliferate around all three writer figures, it seems that they should be read as neither completely distinct nor completely identical.¹² Brossard has built an oscillation among them, and none of them, not even the fictionalized “Nicole Brossard,” holds ascendancy over the others for long, regardless of how intensely or how long the narrative moves around her. Referring to *Picture Theory*, Dawn Thompson notes that

Brossard’s ‘characters’ do not mirror autonomous identities, but rather contribute to ‘l’évanouissement de la personne’ (115). The attempt to follow the characters through the plot or to hold them together, like holding words together as unities, is what causes many readers to get lost in this text [*Picture Theory*]. Signs, things and persons are no more than relatively autonomous subtotalities, continually undergoing transformations, as phonemes disengage and are reconnected across the network of the text.... This text is structured non-locally; because of its spatial

¹² Because Brossard does not affirm that the Cybils are identical, the Cybil of “Hôtel Rafale” will be called Rafale-Cybil, while the Cybil of *Vitesse*, who will receive the greatest attention, will be called simply Cybil, and the woman of “Un Seul Corps à Comparer” will be called the writing I.

form the reader can flip to any page, any word, or any phoneme in the rereading. (39-40)

The unusual ontological status of the writer in red, then, is a cue that a different reading strategy is needed. Coherent, focused character development is not on the agenda, while the necessity of ex-centric reading strategies is. This, along with the disappearance of the subject/person, is desirable, since both subjectivity and reading practices have been limiting and restrictive.

Brossard's ficto-theories require a different and ludic reading technique, a willingness to let go of conventional ways of reading and representing character development. Potvin cites Foucault's understanding of "the musem as one of Western culture's privileged heterotopias (concrete or realized utopia), along with the library, the university, the road, the garden and other spaces" (104). Brossard's characters also develop in utopian but alien-seeming ways, especially the women, some of whom attain a privileged position of intellectual and emotional liberation as well as enlightenment. They achieve this by means of a process that draws on psychology, community and an almost mystic female energy. The women in *Picture Theory*, for example, travel to an island where they spend time reading and relaxing together. Thompson contends that such experience strengthens many of Brossard's women. The women are away from men and misogyny, they are free to read and write away from male voices, and the nearby minds and bodies of other women form an alternate, nurturing community. Under such conditions, women burst the bounds of definition, becoming more and other than fiction.

As Susan Knutson notes, Brossard aligns herself with Monique Wittig's position that patriarchal language has had a powerful impact on reality (16-17), and it needs to be retaken and reformed by women if the project of shaping reality more equitably has any chance of success. Knutson observes, "the technology of hologram production parallels the mechanisms necessary for semantic deviation which liberates 'the magic of words'" (17). Thus, "[d]rawn from the dreaming of lensless photography, fibre optics and virtual reality, the hologram is a high tech fantasy of women's being in a post-patriarchal age—a new picture theory of nature, reality and life" (115).

Thompson's description of the hologram—it is an image that is resolved from blotches and whorls by a beam of light, and that eliminates horizons by permitting infinite perspective (22-3)—bears some similarities to Baudrillard's simulacrum. Both are based on copies, and both interrogate the primacy of the "real" and the "original." Both exist and survive because they re-code originating material, both make the originating material inaccessible, and both privilege the second-order functions of simulation and representation. And both permit one to move around within a constructed environment. The hologram, however, seems to be a more spectacular experience because it is extreme and temporary, relying on the presence of beams of light, where the simulacrum belongs to the everyday, having usurped reality. And for Brossard the hologram is a figure of renewal, while for Baudrillard the simulacrum remains a more enigmatic figure, offering many possibilities but foreclosing on others.

Thompson notes that "[t]he light source for the inscription of Brossard's

hologram is the sexual intimacy of '*la scène blanche*' in which '*une telle abondance de lumière effrite le regarde*'" (23; Brossard's *Picture Theory* [27] is quoted). The *scène blanche* is an explicit narrative representation of lesbian sex, and as Brossard writes these scenes, much of the eroticism is located in the language she uses as well as in the emotional and physical experiences she represents. Brossard uses the *scène blanche* to energize the narrative and to engage the reader's physical and linguistic responses, as well as her emotional and intellectual ones. Thompson and Knutson both characterize Brossard's narratives as moving a-linearly in a series of waves and light-bursts. The movement is propelled largely by the erotic *scènes blanches*, but also by an equally important—because ecstatic—experience of reading. As Thompson puts it, "The *jouissance* shared between two women in *les scènes blanches* is also inscribed into the act of reading this text [*Picture Theory*]. The experience of the hologram, then, like that of *jouissance*, may only be expressed as: 'That's it! [...]' (29). The eureka moment of recognition completes the picture, transforming the hologram into a simulacrum because imagination has been vertiginously de-limited.

The passage from Roland Barthes (1973; 73-4) that Thompson references describes the "eureka" moment as being produced by the reconciliation of two types of reality, one which must be decoded and one which is obvious. For Barthes, the reader's "That's it!" shows she has reached the limits both of what can be named and what can be imagined. She expresses bliss at reaching this limen between the two realities, the hidden and the obvious. Brossard's project of affecting cortical processes through her hologram narratives relies upon these activities as both orgasmic and transformative. Like those of

Winterson's *PowerBook*, the fictional worlds of *Baroque d'Aube* are hybrid, responsive and flexible, and they are receptive to influences from outside it. They also reach for the ability to embrace and nourish those same outside influences. What follows summarizes the points that contribute to Brossard's holography and virtual reality. As Knutson describes holographic space, perspectives are neither fixed nor isolated, and there is no fixed horizon. Subjects do not stay fixed within holographic space, and, Knutson points out, there are likely to be many subjects within that space, and not just one (114-15). Events occur in bursts and waves instead of in the orderly, building progression of tension-and-release, and holographic space works toward surrounding the reader rather than contenting itself with being part of the narrative spectacle. In a fictional space built on these principles, readers have few ways to orient themselves within the narrative. Narrator, "main character," and climax vanish, along with the accustomed horizon between the fictive and the actual. Even the innocuous "event" is redefined.

In *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben posits that the very vulnerability of human life to the actions of other humans politicizes human experience; it substantiates the idea of power and perpetuates the exercise of power, which depends on the vulnerability of life for its existence. Brossard's narrative strategies de-familiarize such basic poles as these. Diegetically speaking, the characters of *Baroque d'Aube* encounter violence frequently as they walk through the streets of Buenos Aires, or they encounter it in the words of people they visit, as happens in Cybil's encounter with James Warland (116-19); in "Hotel Rafale," the first Cybil consciously avoids certain neighbourhoods in order to avoid the violence associated with them. Violence is perverse in Brossard as is anything that

commodifies vulnerability, and her protagonists go to great lengths to avoid being contaminated by it; they also work towards negating at least the predatory aspects of power, freeing it to operate differently in the world—for example as an energy source such as the *scène blanche* that is designed to energize the narrative on a macro level. Assigning new functions to the basic narrative techniques of point of view, characterization, and plot begins to reconfigure narrative itself whether it is fictional or not. Reconfiguring narrative techniques reaches toward configuring a new world where human vulnerability and the political co-exist independently, displacing power into an alien realm.

To read in such a space, Thompson suggests, entails being willing to help enact the hologram by actively reconstructing the whorls, blots and splotches to build the living, growing, changing new form of women's subjectivity. But enacting is also performing, and performing is also becoming, so that to enact the hologram is also to become it: a growing, changing, polyvalent subjectivity, without horizons, capable of taking in whole waves and bursts of experience and using them to fuel metamorphosis.

Baroque d'Aube continues Brossard's project of emancipating women from patriarchal misrule through a hologram that enacts this emancipation even as it represents it. The middle of the narrative triptych, *Vitesse*, is formed by the chapters called "Rimouski", "Buenos Aires" and "Le futur *dark*." It reads as a stand-alone tale, being self-enclosed within a beginning-middle-end structure. It is also coherent on its own as a narrative, having definite reasons to begin (a new project, a new acquaintance, a new journey), to end (death of friend, end of journey), and to be written (representing and

taking stock of an uncommon experience). It contains many named characters, moves through a number of specific settings, and includes action, suspense, and drama. At its close, e-Cybil is actively planning how to write the story of her ocean voyage. This makes it possible to read Vitesse as being exactly that narrative of Cybil's ocean voyage re-constructed after the fact, instead of as an unmediated "true" experience-in-progress of an actual fictional world.

In contrast, the other two frames of the narrative triptych, "Hôtel Rafale" and "Un seul corps pour comparer," read as less constructed, less fictional, and more abstract. The fictional world of "Hôtel Rafale," for example, is ambiguously fictionalized. While it is coded as artificial because it stands symmetrically framed by two *scènes blanches*, the "Hôtel Rafale" narrative follows the natural structure of a day that offers no conflict and thus no "plot." It reads like an experience-in-progress, and its fictionality is imperfect because the narrative is incomplete. "Hôtel Rafale" could also be an embedded narrative: Cybil is writing a story about Rafale-Cybil and La Sixtine, but she is doing so from within the world of Vitesse and thus she is able to produce a different version from what we find in *Baroque d'Aube*. Further, Cybil's version of the story is peopled by characters named Philip Roth, John Irving, Audrey Thomas, etc., who do not appear in the pages of *Baroque d'Aube*'s "Hôtel Rafale." The fictional status of Rafale-Cybil and La Sixtine, then, ebbs and flows according to the attention that Vitesse's Cybil directs towards her text-in-process.

Both "Hôtel" and "Seul Corps" open and break off *in media res*. "Hôtel" opens and ends as the original Cybil is embroiled with La Sixtine in a *scène blanche*, while

“Seul corps” opens at a random point in a publicity tour and closes as the unnamed writing I steps out of a cab at her own home. When they end, little has been “resolved” in either “Hôtel” or “Seul Corps,” and the absence of ending also makes both seem less story-like and more realistic. “Un Seul Corps Pour Comparer,” which details a publicity tour for a published and translated book, is the least fictionalized and the most abstract narrative of the triptych. This segment of *Baroque d’Aube* is written in journal format, but it is not “intimate” in a conventional sense. It contains reflections produced by the publicity tour, largely about writing, translating, and communicating, but it does not express internal angst, detail a quest for identity, or spill juicy secrets, any of which might be expected of a journal embedded in a mainstream Jude Devereux romance.

As a *künstlerroman*, *Vitesse* revolves around the experiences of Cybil as she hones her writing craft. Early on, she revises part of her text about Rafale-Cybil, La Sixtine and the Hôtel Rafale, but much of the embedded narrative explores the circumstances under which, in cooperation with photographer Irène Mage, she is to produce a text about the ocean. The sponsor of this project, oceanographer Occident desRives, accompanies Cybil and Irène on their ocean voyage aboard the ship *le Symbol*. Her presence provides some friction and offers Cybil and Irène one alternative to resist.

Like Winterson’s seducing you-the-reader, Occident functions as a seducing model reader and as a connoisseur of aesthetic products, but does not herself write or make art. It is her enjoyment of reading Cybil’s books that leads her to contact Cybil in the first place, and she identifies herself as a fan in the letters she writes. Writers she mentions reading besides Cybil include Herman Melville, Joseph Conrad and Jacques

Cousteau among others (59). She represents the appreciative, informed, cultured and supportive reading audience that makes both writing and visual art possible.

Occident is also instrumental in generating Cybil's next book. She establishes the parameters for the project, embodies in herself a possible implied/ideal audience, assembles the needed equipment, finances and personnel, and otherwise facilitates the ocean journey. All of this bears a figurative relationship to the ways in which a consumer public empowers aesthetic producers. As a model writer, then, Cybil's interaction with alternative model artist Irène and with model reader Occident carries a particularly heavy freight of significance.

But Occident's vibrant potential has apparently been cruelly amputated by a hostile phallocracy. This is accentuated by the livid scar on her face, rendered as *balafre* in French which is translated in the Collins dictionary as "gash" or "slash." Suggesting as it does female genitalia, this wound, complete with suture marks, resonates with Luce Irigaray's discussion of lips that are free to move as opposed to lips that are sutured together. Occident's inner distortion is amplified further by Cybil's discomfort with her. Cybil dislikes waiting at Occident's office, and when she catches a whiff of Occident's cologne, which she thinks is a man's cologne, she moves away from her across the room to autograph books for her (82-3). She is not fully in step with "her" reader, and in fact completely loses sympathy with her at some points in the journey.

For her part, Occident sends mixed messages. When she woos Cybil into joining the project, she mentions people who have written about the ocean in order to seduce her into joining them. Yet all of these, without exception, are men (59), and while some of

them figure in Cybil's list of authors read as well, they are arguably proponents of a phallocratic modernism. This community of writers to "live up to" constructs an androcentric environment for lesbian Cybil, contrasting with the writing community—headed by "Nicole Brossard"—that she habitually pictures for herself. Occident also becomes autocratic once the journey is underway, forcing Cybil and Irène to spend time researching the ocean in a shipboard library instead of experiencing it first-hand (135). When the research ends, she restricts them to virtual reality programs about the ocean, so they still have not experienced the ocean directly. Most notably, she panders to the men in authority on board the *Symbole*, to the extent of insisting that Cybil and Irène attend a showing of pornographic films along with the all-male crew (160).

As perhaps the most professionally passionate of the three women, Irène offers a third option for engagement and enthusiasm. Irène functions as a second model artist, and her approach to producing art comments on Cybil's. According to Occident, a non-professional expert in art and literature, both artist and writer are capable of producing extraordinarily compelling and thought-provoking work, and both are capable of touching readers or viewers in similar ways. As producers of aesthetic items, both Irène and Cybil are concerned with the relationship between expression and representation, and as lesbians who are aware of androcentrism they are interested in feminist and lesbian political perspectives. They are familiar with each other's work before this project, indicating that they come from the "same community" literally and figuratively, and share a common purpose and a common ground.

Irène and Cybil become sexually involved, but generally they engage in sex in the space between one chapter and another (94, 128, 165), so that their sexual interaction is not represented within the pages of *Vitesse*. Therefore there are no *scènes blanches* in *Vitesse* to enliven the hologram. Knutson observes that “[a]s the ‘*scène holographiée*,’ the *scène blanche* is critical because it is there that the lesbian body, language and energy fuse and ‘l’utopie l’intégrale’ [...] becomes visible” (133; Knutson’s emphasis; *Picture Theory* is quoted). *Vitesse*’s unrepresented sex scenes may sign a kind of negative holography, where absences hint at presences, and where the hologram is suggested by the shapes that caress its contours. In *Vitesse* the *scène blanche* is represented only laterally through this negative space and through allusion, achieved when Cybil gets back to work on her narrative about Rafale-Cybil and La Sixtine. This suggests that, like the *scènes blanches*, at this point and in this frame of the triptych, utopia remains accessible through allusion and negative space.

Cybil experiences and profits from quintessentially Brossardian benisons. She is rejuvenated by her interaction with the city of Buenos Aires as she walks through its streets, and she experiences “joie” at a tango concert (121). A conversation with “Nicole Brossard” at a Salon du Livre in Buenos Aires restores her flagging spirit: “A chaque réponse optimiste de Nicole, tu chasses la dangereuse pensée que les mots sont plats comme des autocollants remplis d’oestrogène et de testostérone servant à prolonger artificiellement l’élan de vie” (126).¹³ When Cybil interacts sexually with Irène at the end

¹³ Brossard uses second-person narration in this chapter, so that “tu” here refers to Cybil.

of this evening, “[l]a chaleur pénètre dans ton corps de romancière [...]” (128). Sensuality elides differences between the subjectivities of the writer and of the body; what warms and arouses the one does the same for the other. As sensual warmth melts the differentiation between the writer and the writer’s body, there seems little to stop it at the borders of the text, and it can melt differentiation between the reader and the reader’s body. This suggests the corporeal jealousy that Elizabeth Grosz posits (see section 3.1 above), a phenomenon that presumably helps alter cortical functioning, which is the goal of Brossard’s holographic narratives.

Eventually Cybil takes Occident to task for the restrictions she has imposed: “Par votre volonté, la mer nous sera devenue plus étrangère et inaccessible qu’avant notre départ.... Vous avez prétendu nous rapprocher de la réalité pour ensuite nous précipiter dans un monde d’artifices” (188-89). At this point she does not see that it is necessary to live in a world of artifice in order to live a story. Part of the project, as Occident sees it, entails emplotment, entails constructing subjectivity, entails mediation. Occident asserts that she is commissioning this project to re-acquaint the reading world with the ocean’s fading metaphorical significances, and to replenish the ocean’s meaningfulness. She understands that “un livre doit nous enseigner” (189). One way to expose Cybil to the ocean story she must teach is to put her into that story, or, to paraphrase Cybil herself, to “seed the story’s elsewhere in her like a dream.” The book as a whole will benefit from the extra layer of artifice experienced by its writer and illustrator.

Cybil is disconcerted to find herself inside such an artificial and constructed world. Karl E. Jirgens terms Brossard’s fictional worlds the “subjectless spaces of

dissolution" (156) that result when "form is flexible, and meaning provisional" (161). Periodically Cybil experiences what she calls "*double temps*" (84, 123, 139, 171, 179). Double time, as Jirgens sees it, "includes the narrator's 'fictional' perspective and the author's perspective as she writes the fiction" (163). When Cybil asks "Nicole Brossard" about this, "Nicole" tells her:

la sensation d'un double temps, d'un double *dire* qui te plonge dans une angoisse indicible. Du revers de la main, faisant cavalièrement fi de ton désarroi, elle affirmera que chacune doit affronter seul l'épreuve du dire "je veux dire sa partie difficile. Il faut se faire à l'idée qu'une phrase bien écrit ne camouflera jamais l'air idiot que donne le sentiment de pouvoir vaincre la mort; *so tape the creative energy around your waist like a safety belt and forget about fear.*" (126-27; Brossard's English and italics)

"Nicole's" pronouncement addresses the activity of writing, rather than the anxiety-generating experience of being written that plagues Cybil specifically when she is not writing. If not writing makes Cybil feel anxious and artificial, the obvious remedy is to write, and also to live. Through writing, Cybil comes to see her resistance to the anxiety of double time as an act of subversion against the patriarchal order that has pressured women into constrictive roles, making fictions of them without their consent.

Occident's health is far too compromised for her to survive until the book she has sponsored begins to be produced, let alone until its completion. She dies the night before the ship docks, hours after a sibylline apparition addresses the three women on the deck. However ironic or tragic, Occident's death provides Cybil with a specific person to envision when remembering the sibyl's command (or prophecy): "Tu écriras ce livre, au milieu de la nuit, mêlant ton ombre aux ténèbres, liants les morts et les vivants, tous les mots nécessaires et le trop vaste du désir" (190). To write the book will require Cybil to

make connections, not distinctions, whether reasoned or instinctive: "Tu refuseras de choisir entre la voix, la nuit et la mer, t'enduisant de leur parfum, de leur immensité que réveillent le corps dans l'abondance des serments d'amour" (190). The perfume and vastness produced by these resonant entities awakens the body to the immensity of potential, the world unbounded by horizons that is the realm of the hologram.

Cybil will also find herself writing *Occident* while she writes the book, and perhaps reconciling some of the distortions that *Occident* embodied. Her resentment of *Occident*, the ambivalence she sometimes registers towards her and Irène, that is, toward her reader and her co-artist, and her tottering writerly self-confidence, are recast in the light of *Occident*'s death. Brossard's narratives challenge conventional plot structures. She avoids representing the conflict that "makes" plot because her narratives are about establishing and maintaining harmonious communities of women. But Cybil can now recognize that she is free to live such harmony, and to perpetuate it in her work.

Because she has experienced dystopic energies in *Vitesse*, Cybil encourages her readers to access the transformative space between the actual and the possible, and be ready to change. The sybil's voice energizes the hologram, paralleling the scène blanche of "Hôtel Rafale". Versions of this energizing "light" also appear in "Un Seul Corps Pour Comparer;" early in the publicity tour, the translator's expression of wonder at the power of the writing I's prose enacts a similar kind of hologrammatic projection within the writing I:

Oh! oui m'est resté dans la tête comme une expression de joie, une sorte d'empressement à guetter le plaisir brut de la vie, à se faire plaisir d'un but dans la vie. Un oui on aurait dit coulant de source vers un ailleurs meilleur. Oh! oui

entre ses lèvres m'a fait retrouver un plaisir ancien. Comme à l'époque une série de petites ruades au bas du ventre et le monde se met à prendre des proportions harmonieuses, des allures gaies qui réconcilient avec la vie en réclamant leur dû de mots doux et musclés. (213)

Even a powerful pleasure can arrive gently. Brossard's writing I feels motion in her womb even while the world around her shifts into a harmonious configuration, suggesting not only that holographic women can generate new holograms, but that each hologram is herself hosted, held and nourished by others in an infinite regression. The convention of differentiating self from world looks specious and trivial from this perspective, so that it is not the world that threatens to overwhelm the self, but the self that can renew the world.

Nicole Brossard's *Baroque d'Aube* constructs its fictional world as non-definitive, malleable, permeable; the subjects who inhabit her fictional spaces are similarly nondefined, malleable and permeable. Designed to be dynamic catalysts, they essay to practice what they preach, effecting the gradual transformation, woman subject by woman subject, of the extratextual world. The spaces and subjects of Brossard's fictional worlds model her utopian conception of the actual world she inhabits. Seeing her world as desirous of change, transformation and catharsis, she sets herself the challenge of helping to satisfy that desire through her fictions. Her fictions are intended to link the best possible futures with the best possible candidates to bring such futures to pass, thereby contributing towards the mutual transformation of both. While the success of her project is difficult to assess, depending as it does on the subjective responses of actual readers,

the demanding sophistication of Brossard's strategies of constructing worlds and subjects requires a demanding and sophisticated strategy of seduction.

3.4 Conclusions

In narratives by Winterson and Brossard, particular hope for the world attaches to people who read and/or write. These are people who are practiced at causing and/or enacting what William Connolly calls "the experimental detachment of the self from the identity installed within it" (qtd. in Pennee [2004], 80). They are people who would be willing to consider Donna Palmateer Pennee's suggestion that "it's how we get from *identity* to *identifying with* that is crucial, from a state of being to a process of being and becoming, a process that includes the processes of being citizens, of being interventionist diplomats" (80; Pennee's italics). Revisiting a statement by R. Radhakrishnan, Pennee asserts that "*majority* subjects" as well as minority subjects can (and should) "produce a critical and deconstructive knowledge about nationalism," and that engaging with narrative can enhance the process of acquiring this critical knowledge.

The writer-protagonists of Winterson's *PowerBook* and Brossard's *Baroque d'Aube* use narrative to interact with the cultural and civic social imaginary of the fictional worlds they inhabit. The ability to explore these parameters is itself pleasurable, which is seen again in Brossard's *Désert Mauve* and Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, discussed below in Chapter 4. The narratives the writer-protagonists construct are designed to extend the aspect of human interaction extradiegetically, by inverting the perceived hierarchy between narratee and narrator. This is exacerbated in *PowerBook*

and *Baroque d'Aube* by the second-person narration that Winterson uses constantly and that Brossard uses more intermittently.

But the response of the social imaginary to these efforts differs from one narrative to the other. Arguably, the efforts of Winterson's writing I leave barely a trace on the civic social imaginary of her world. As a traveler she is subsumed into the larger group of tourist, and to all intents and purposes has no more effect on the civil societies she visits than does any other anonymous tourist. Her interaction with one other traveler, you-the-reader/lover, rocks both their worlds for a time but ends by producing a bifurcation of possible worlds—one in which the lovers separate, and one in which they stay united. Brossard's Rafale-Cybil leaves scarcely more of a trace on her world's civic social imaginary than does Winterson's writing I. Readers may understand her affair with La Sixtine to be more transformative than that of Winterson's writing I and you-the-reader, partly because Brossard writes the erotic interaction in enough detail that La Sixtine "seems more real" than Winterson's you-the-reader. But for readers experienced with Brossard's texts, these *scènes blanches* will add further transformative resonance to the reality effect gathering dynamically around La Sixtine. In addition, the erotic interaction between the two women promises to bring profound changes to the world's civic social imaginary as another woman awakes to a more philogynistic world.

For each of Brossard's protagonists, there is little division between the civic and cultural aspects of the social imaginary. Those who affect one affect the other as well. Arguably the least productive and affecting of the three protagonists on the level of *Baroque d'Aube*'s narrative, Rafale-Cybil has a profound effect on La Sixtine.

Winterson's writing I focuses on particularities, and Brossard's writer-protagonists do so as well, but in Brossard's narrative, collective identities play a strong role. Her non-traditional construction of characters and her project of revising narrative into non-androcentric forms means that her characters operate on a macro level more recognizably than they do on a micro level. Her women characters work as representations of women, but there is something of the archetypal about them as individuals. They seem to be more easily understood in relation to other women than they are on their own. This is a part of Brossard's hologrammatic approach to narrative.

Writing about the particularities of hypertext fiction, Jon Dovey (2002) explores the idea that fiction can be three-dimensionally spatial rather than simply linear (140), operating as much on intuitive and associative linkages as on sequential logic. Narrative becomes "a space rather than a succession of events" (140). Brossard's fictions work towards such a re-conceptualization of narrative, even though they are in the quintessentially linear form of the book, and not in hypertext. While the narrative is separated into parts, and while the protagonist of each part differs in particulars of experience and behaviour from the others, *Baroque d'Aube* is supposed to operate both processually and en masse. Its characters are supposed to model possible realities for its readers, and readers are supposed to be affected by the experiences they read about as they happen, but the changes enacted within the reader by the hologrammatic construction of the narrative are supposed to be actual, lasting changes in the reader's cortex. This operation does not cease before the reader finishes reading the narrative, and

so in some ways depends on the narrative being held, whole and complete, so to speak, within the reader's mind.

Dovey proposes some questions that help producers of hypertexts design the experience. These include planning the "registers of juxtaposition," specifying the quality of montage that will be available to users, and identifying thematic links and echoes to be experienced (143). Following the establishment of this "vertical" axis of narrative, comprising "character, action, feeling and theme" (139), limits are imposed on the number of pathways through these juxtaposed thematic registers, reintroducing "a degree of linearity" (143). *The PowerBook* and *Baroque d'Aube* both approximate the experience of hypertext by deprivileging linearity in favour of theme and feeling, and also by subverting the idea of narrative climax, in Winterson's case by revisiting particular narrative paradigms repeatedly within the course of the text, and in Brossard by replacing phallogocentric conceptions of climax with more philogynistic versions. The registers of juxtaposition within the two narratives remain quite distinctive. *The PowerBook* employs a distinctly fantastic and fabulous register, manipulating legends to coincide with the writing I's own experience with you-the-reader. This confers a sense of timelessness and inevitability on all aspects of the relationship, including the eventual separation, but also on the hope of a more permanent relationship to come.

In Winterson the fantastic mythologizes desire, while in Brossard, desire humanizes the fantastic. What Dovey calls "the registers of juxtaposition" of each text employ very similar elements to very different effects. In Brossard there is a sense that utopia is almost at hand, while in Winterson it seems never to be near enough. Winterson

also imposes a more conventional type of linearity in her narrative, since the three registers of narrative—framing, nostalgic romance, and fables—are fragmented, then re-ordered in a conventional narrative order. Brossard's triptych structures are internally coherent, not fragmented, and the order of them seems arbitrary, as if they could be read in any order to roughly similar effect. Incidentally, this is also somewhat true of the segments within "Un Seul Corps." The arbitrariness of the structure delimits the number of pathways through Brossard's thematic registers. In Winterson, desire is renewable and multiple, but the number of people who reciprocate the writing I's desire seems tragically limited, so that love becomes an exclusive relationship. In Brossard, desire is multiple and inclusive, not exclusive, and can embrace ontologies as well as individuals.

In Brossard, desire brings strength and energy, while in Winterson it inspires innovation. Both of these writers and their writer-protagonists resist the Lacanian understanding of desire as lack; here desire becomes potential, the hesitation between several options for being and not-being, and it relates to plenitude more than scarcity. In *Homo Sacer*, Giorgio Agamben writes,

Potentiality (in double appearance as potentiality to and potentiality not to) is that through which Being founds itself *sovereignly*, which is to say, without anything preceding or determining it (*superiorem non recognoscens*) other than its own ability not to be. And an act is sovereign when it realizes itself by simply taking away its own potentiality not to be, letting itself be, giving itself to itself. (46; Agamben's italics)

As potentiality, desire provides the foundation for the sovereignty of the desirer and the desired. If vulnerability is subject to it, it is the vulnerability of that which is subject to change.

In *The PowerBook* and *Baroque d'Aube* sovereignty attaches to the ability to transform. Winterson's writing I has a world to transform through words and a vast amount of narrative patterns into which she can breathe new life; you-the-reader resists "changing the story" much as she resists being transformed herself, and in thwarting her potentiality to be new she thwarts her own sovereignty and remains an elusive fiction to be constantly sought by the writing I. Brossard's Cybil transforms the fragile and brief bare life of Occident by completing the project she commissioned, ensuring that her influence will survive while her body did not. The cathartic experience of the ocean voyage aboard *Le Symbole* challenges Cybil's experience of desire by casting it as both lack and potential—she is denied access to the ocean that is her subject as she is forced to engage with the representations of the oceans that she has been tasked with changing. If the writing I of "Un Seul Corps" is any model for her path, Cybil's transformation of textual representations of the ocean will be transformed again via interactions with readers, whether she herself interacts with her readers on reading tours and at salons or whether they interact with the text she has produced.

Winterson and Brossard, and also their writer-protagonists, intend their narrative play to be transformative or at least enlightening. The utopian potential subtending both texts implies that both perceive the necessity for change. For Winterson, a combination of storytelling and intense love promises to be the catalyst. The situation is quite similar for Brossard, except that the intense love need not be attached to a single person, but can and should attach to all members of a specific group. This group includes all women and men

who are willing to think past phallographic and misogynistic ideologies, and put “philogynistic” ideologies in place instead.

As a British fiction, *The PowerBook* places England and London within a complex network of other countries, cities, and times. The cultures of the nation and city are complex: traces of the Arthurian, the mercantile, the artificial, the progressive, the material and the ineffable are clear within it through the Arthurian romance the writing I revises for you-the-reader, the shifting store called Verde’s that anchors the writing I’s physical location, the artificiality and evanescence of Verde’s wares (secondhand goods, disguises, stories), the streets and vehicles that continually indicate the next destination, the mud bed of the Thames in which the buried artifacts of long-ago London continually resurface, and the now-present, now-absent waters of the Thames itself that mark the city and connect it metaphorically and literally to its own history.

Similar conditions mark Canada and Montréal in *Baroque d’Aube*. Like Winterson, Brossard locates Canada, especially Montréal, on a complex backdrop of places that includes the ocean, Rimouski, London, and Buenos Aires. In “World Famous Across Canada, or Transnational Localities” (2007), Richard Cavell discusses Canadian literature less as a canon than as “an institutional (statist) and thus economic (cultural/industrial) phenomenon that came into being at a specific historical moment, investing it thereby as an object of material and cultural study rather than as a reflection (however displaced) of an ultimately undecidable nationalism and of a literature that refuses to be located” (85-6). While *Baroque d’Aube* situates itself within the Western hemisphere, specifically North and South America, it resists representing any particular

country or city as rigidly definitive of Western cosmopolitanism. Buenos Aires is a place of spectacle, of erotic interaction, and of art, especially music; Montréal shares these qualities as a place where art displays and literary salons abound. In Vitesse Montréal is clearly Cybil's home and the place where she habitually writes; this city suggests security and nourishment, as if it were the fertile soil from which art springs. Yet she can write as well on shipboard and in La Plata, so that location does not restrict artistic ability.

What is distinct to Montréal and to the province of Québec in Vitesse is the network of friendships that contextualizes Cybil and supports her writing. Within "Un Seul Corps" Québec is the geo-social space traced by the book tour, a place where people respond passionately and enthusiastically to all arts including literary arts. Here technology in the form of radio technology and transport technology generally promotes human interaction, and retail spaces are often bookstores and restaurants that cater to the wellbeing of the mind and the body.

Citizens of this Québec are enormously responsive to art and to human interaction. The world Cybil experiences in Vitesse responds to these as well but with more reserve. The crew of the *Symbole* interacts with "mainstream art" in the form of porn films and presumably the same reading material in the same library that the writer and artist consult, and the men's response to this art is largely mysterious. Except for the Demers brothers and Occident herself, there is minimal interaction between the crew and the two passengers. The ship docks at Buenos Aires and the passengers are free to roam, but contact with city dwellers is evanescent and, in the case of James Warland, far from nurturing. The ship's last stop before returning home is La Plata, where Cybil stays at a

hotel and overhears discussions of film while she sits down to shape the book *Occident* commissioned from her. The mysterious shifting presence of the woman in red injects images of London and Covent Garden into the actual space that Cybil inhabits. Within *Baroque d'Aube* Cybil's book as an example of Canadian literature does resist location, for both its construction and its subject span many places and cultures. Further, Canada's nationalism does resist decidability in this narrative: as a nation Canada is barely referenced here in favour of the province of Québec and two of its urban centres, Rimouski and Montréal. Taken as a group the people of this Canada are shown in "Un Seul Corps" to respond at least as powerfully to the elsewhere of the writing I's newly-published narrative as they do to the streets and buildings that they actually inhabit.

The people of this particular geo-socio-political space, then, hold the actual world and the world of potential in rough equivalence, and in so doing they hover on the cusp of letting their potential be or not be. They hover on the cusp of sovereignty, perhaps even actualize their own sovereignty, and they do so because of the pleasure made available to them by the writing I's art. For Agamben pleasure such as that accessible by laughter, eroticism, struggle and luxury is a means by which people give themselves to themselves (61), so it facilitates the ability to be and not-be that marks sovereignty. The writing I's narrative art catalyzes desire and awareness of potential; this narrative art permits a widespread refreshment of political, social and cultural engagement.

Brossard's fictions work towards a re-conceptualization of narrative, operating both processually and en masse. Its characters are supposed to model possible realities for its readers, and readers are supposed to be affected by the experiences they read about as

they happen. Yet the changes enacted within the reader by the hologrammatic construction of the narrative are supposed to be actual, lasting changes in the reader's cortex. This operation does not cease before the reader finishes reading the narrative, and so in some ways depends on the narrative being held, whole and complete, so to speak, within the reader's mind.

In Winterson the fantastic mythologizes desire, while in Brossard, desire humanizes the fantastic. In Brossard there is a sense that utopia is almost at hand, while in Winterson it seems never to be near enough. Winterson also imposes a more conventional type of linearity in her narrative, since the three registers of narrative—framing, nostalgic romance, and fables—are fragmented, then re-ordered in a conventional narrative order. Brossard's triptych structures are internally coherent, not fragmented, and the order of them seems arbitrary, as if they could be read in any order to roughly similar effect. Incidentally, this is also somewhat true of the segments within "Un Seul Corps." The arbitrariness of the structure delimits the number of pathways through Brossard's thematic registers.

In Winterson, desire is renewable and multiple, but the number of people who reciprocate the writing I's desire seems tragically limited, so that love becomes an exclusive relationship. In Brossard, desire is multiple and inclusive, not exclusive, and can embrace ontologies as well as individuals.

Reading and writing are activities that merge desire with responsibility, and they produce ideally engaged citizens. Artifice and reflexivity challenge the status quo and reveal its contingent nature. This is a liberating experience for writers and (model)

readers, because it constructs the human experience as a playful one. For Winterson and Brossard, play is a directed activity, and its purpose is to consider utopia and how to bring it near. In Winterson and Brossard, desire is utopian, which means that responsibility involves utopia as well. The narrative texts of recent postmodernism produce citizens for whom desire and responsibility are one. The desire and responsibility of both reading and writing citizens is presumed to involve bridging the gap between what is and what could be. The means by which narrative play can be levied to build such bridges, as appearing in Brossard's *Le Désert Mauve* (1987) and Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976), is the subject of the next chapter.

Within the cultural imaginary, the assumption is that any cultural artifact that helps shape text, reader and world will be minimally influenced by self-interest or sinister ulterior motives. There is also an assumption that the maker of the artifact is sufficiently aware of self and culture to achieve this competently, so that the community of literary citizens that results from reading her text is genuinely empowered to generate a better world. The ability to promote this semblance is part of a writer's arsenal of seduction-oriented tools, and will be more closely examined in Chapter 4 with special attention to how arbitrariness and gratuity as expressed through playful narrativization affects the situation. The trickster appropriates these techniques and tools, bending them to her own purposes, parodying both the means and rationalizations of world-transformation in the process, as will be the focus of investigation in Chapter 5.

4. Lucid Ludics—Play, Writing, and Representation

4.1 Play, Citizenship, Postmodern Worlds

Critiques of Nicole Brossard's and Margaret Atwood's fictions rarely take their playfulness sufficiently into account, even though by the time of writing, over four decades into their literary careers, the intense playfulness of these writers should be evident. The sheer variety of forms and approaches they adopt in their writing testifies to their lusory attitudes towards textual production, as does their delight in constructing of multiple narrative ontologies with clear degrees of fictionalization. Nicole Brossard's *Le Désert Mauve* (1987) and Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* (1976) feature writer-protagonists—three of them in Brossard's case—that provide examples of playful citizens who are aware and welcoming of reciprocity in their relations with language, narrative, and fiction on the one hand, and with ideological and political entities on the other.

The reciprocal challenges posed by each writer-protagonist's aesthetic approach and her need to write politicized narrative are integrally connected to fantasies of transforming the non-actual into the actual and vice versa. This means that each writer-protagonist performs particular ideas about what it means to be an engaged citizen, and about how writers can deploy their particular form of engaged citizenship to benefit the collectivity. The play of their art volatilizes and confounds these fantasmatic ideas by emphasizing their contingency, at the same time that the fabulative resonances of the narrative worlds they inhabit work toward making the same ideas programmatic and compelling at the same time.

For Brossard's twice-fictionalized teen writer-protagonist, Mélanie, a writer's citizenship involves exploration and growth, and she inhabits a civic world which is above all a resource that becomes the more beneficial when human intelligence and creativity intervene in it. Brossard's two adult writers, Laure Angstelle and Maude Laures, share this conviction especially with regard to the shaping potential of intelligence and creativity, but the civic worlds of these two women are established environments that are not susceptible to exploration. These worlds occupy opposite poles, one of which offers hostility and resistance to women's interventions, and the other of which requires women's creative and intelligent interventions as a palliative to toxic conditions. Meanwhile for Atwood's Joan Foster a writer's citizenship is intrinsically playful, experimental, volatile; it is capable of catalyzing unpredictable change because of the more or less arbitrary representational choices it makes. Joan sees her civic world as a material resource, as the foundation on which she builds her texts, and this permits her to function contrarily as the *interpellator*, rather than the *interpellated*.

Brossard's three writers, Laure, Maude, and Mélanie, and Atwood's Joan Foster are writers who are changed by the worlds they write as much as they change the worlds they write. Their play and their realities interrogate and transform each other. This reciprocity makes them what Thomas Docherty (2006) calls "aesthetic democrats" (see below). In these two novels the issue of responsibility is also in play, less as an inevitable countermeasure to the ludic than as a potent presence within the landscape that cannot help but influence the game. Atwood's Joan and Brossard's triptych of writer-protagonists simultaneously challenge and follow the principles of responsibility that

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identifies as endemic to the reciprocal bond between citizen and state, since the state is responsible for shielding the citizen from certain dangers while the citizen is responsible for supporting the state financially and abiding by its laws.

In her essay "Responsibility" (1994), Spivak characterizes responsibility as that which "annuls the call to which it seeks to respond" (19). She formalizes this in the following statement: "It is that all action is undertaken in response to a call (or something that seems to us to resemble a call) that cannot be grasped as such" (22). Spivak's characterizations hearken back to Louis Althusser's call to interpellation, but her discussion focuses on the individual's situation rather than the state's, presenting responsibility as the ability of the citizen to extract a response from the state. Because responsibility is anticipatory in quality it strives to answer the state's interpellative call before it is voiced, whether the call prefaces disciplinary or laudatory action or accompanies the intent to assimilate. For Spivak, responsibility is a means of foreclosing on obligation by anticipating it. Responsibility can be seen as cooperating with the ludic impulse by foreclosing on what interferes with it. Although the two impulses participate in different orders, the effects of responsibility exceed its bounds, infiltrating and contaminating what seeks to abject it, even as the ludic itself continually makes and breaks the forms it finds.

In *Aesthetic Democracy* Docherty, like Spivak, reads responsibility as essentially anticipatory. He observes that for Emmanuel Levinas, the human sense of responsibility is catalyzed by the face of the other: "it is the fact that the other may die that calls me to

response; and response is of the essence of an autonomy that is based not on the establishment of a selfsame identity for the subject but rather on the realisation that the subject is always already grounded in a fundamental alterity" (32). Aesthetic experience uses exceptionality to accentuate alterity and accentuate responsibility:

The basic point about art, about the bringing into existence of something that is contingent, is not only a neo-Hegelian freedom, but also the establishment of something that exempts itself from rules or from the law. Aesthetics, indeed, might even be renamed exceptionality in precisely this sense that aesthetics draws attention to a rule precisely in and through the presence of that which breaks the rule, the artwork itself. The aesthetic democrat is she or he who makes precisely such an exception of herself or himself in the event that we call representation, that altering of the self that marks change, growth, even living itself. (159)

He concludes, "Aesthetics makes possible history as the experience of altering the self [...]" (160). Docherty does not limit access to aesthetic experience only to writers, artists, actors and so forth because he reads the users of art, as well as its makers, as participating in the transformative process of art, agreeing to be changed by art through their transformative interaction with it.

Reciprocity is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* as "The state or condition of being reciprocal; a state or relationship in which there is mutual action, influence, giving and taking, correspondence, etc., between two parties or things...." *Reciprocity* is also a "Mutual or correspondent concession of advantages or privileges, as forming a basis for the commercial relations between two countries[.]" and "[i]n the Kantian philosophy: Mutual action and reaction." The three definitions apply equally well to the type of action that characterizes play as to the type of bond that connects state and citizen, thinking particularly of Étienne Balibar's observation that in the twenty-first

century academics in the humanities conceive a "citizen" as "always *both* ruling and obeying" (2004, 320; Balibar's italics). Docherty's position on the "artification" of people and materials engaged in the aesthetic process, on the connection between history and art in volatilizing the human self, does not specifically address game as a means of aestheticization on a par with literature, theatre, sculpture and so forth, but game belongs within that context just the same. It too is a cultural event in that it calls human subjects to differ from themselves and to construct their identity in terms of that difference (Docherty ix), and it too is firmly grounded in the play of "a trope that regulates the relations between the particular and the general, between the one and the many" (158); that is, representation.

In the actual world, the world that lies outside of and frames textual and ludic experience, game and play are aesthetic representations of experience that incorporate participating humans into themselves as artifacts: players "enter" the artworld of play (or the playworld of art?), responding to it, interacting with it, changing it as they are changed by it. In the serially-embedding metanarratives under study, play manifests in the form of proliferating narratives where the generating or framing ontology spawns a complex of embedded narratives throughout itself. In these metanarratives, narrative play is a cathartic element that foregrounds and challenges the constitution of narrative by making it differ from itself.

Where Jeanette Winterson's *PowerBook* (2001) and Brossard's *Baroque d'Aube* (1995) use narrative play to challenge the commonplace perception of textual power dynamics by revising the reader-writer relationship, *Le Désert Mauve* and *Lady Oracle*

challenge it by revising the relationship between lived experience and playful/aestheticized experience. They also challenge the fabulist enterprise by testing narratives that interlock, expand, and comment on each other.

Fully extended to apply to *Le Désert Mauve* and *Lady Oracle*, the concept of seducing-reader/seduced-writer established in *PowerBook* and *Baroque d'Aube* might situate the reader as the playmaker, and the writer as the player. Yet the romanticizing and sexualizing strategies used in *PowerBook* and *Baroque d'Aube* are differently rendered in *Le Désert Mauve* and *Lady Oracle*, whose fictional worlds gravitate less toward the presence of a seducing other. Here, the ambiguous fictional worlds invite open-ended tropes that relate to exploration as much as seduction. Trickster-writers in Canadian fictions, to be discussed below in Chapter 5, operate as if no viable boundaries separate sex, play, narrative and politics. The writer-protagonists of *Le Désert Mauve*, Mélanie, Laure Angstelle, and Maude Laures, and the writer-protagonist of *Lady Oracle*, Joan Foster, do experience some boundaries, but in the critical process of constructing narrative all three challenge the limiting function of those boundaries. The concept of responsibility remains a concern with all three of these writer-protagonists, where it operates as a flash-point for world transformation in *Le Désert Mauve* and for personal metamorphosis in *Lady Oracle*.

The use of embedded narratives marks both *Le Désert Mauve* and *Lady Oracle* as fabulative texts. In *Postmodernism: Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991/1992), Fredric Jameson argues that renewed attention to intensive storytelling and fantastic historiography marks a "release and euphoria of the postmodern" (368).

[H]ere the making up of unreal history is a substitute for the making of the real kind. It mimetically expresses the attempt to recover that power and praxis by way of the past and what must be called fancy rather than imagination. Fabulation—or if you prefer, mythomania and outright tall tales—is no doubt the symptom of social and historical impotence, of the blocking of possibilities that leaves little option but the imaginary. Yet its very invention and inventiveness endorses a creative freedom with respect to events it cannot control, by the sheer act of multiplying them; agency here steps out of the historical record itself into the process of devising it; and new multiple or alternate strings of historical events rattle the bars of the national tradition and the history manuals whose very constraints and necessities their parodic force indicts. Narrative invention here thus by way of its very implausibility becomes the figure of a larger possibility of praxis, its compensation but also its affirmation in the form of projection and mimetic reenactment. (369)

Jameson's interrogation of fabulation as a means of compensating for the inability to make history plays on the ideas of potency, exhaustion, renovation, and proliferation. It also points up that fabulation's affective charisma can be a means for inciting within the reading mind a "jealousy" for the world and for the process of writing it. As Elizabeth Grosz constructs the caressed organ as inciting jealousy in other organs (see Chapter 3.1 above), so the ludic postmodern incites a validating jealousy that plays on constructed, artificial, and simulated worlds—models of the worlds that an engaged critical citizenship is supposed to produce.

Consider Benedict Anderson's definition of nationhood. In *Imagined Communities* (1983/1991), he defines the nation as "an imagined political community" that "is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6; Anderson's emphasis). His discussion continues:

The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic,

boundaries, beyond which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind. The most messianic nationalists do not dream of the day when all the members of the human race will join their nation in the way that it was possible, in certain epochs, for, say, Christians to dream of a wholly Christian planet.

It is imagined as *sovereign* because the concept [of nationhood] was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. Coming to maturity at an age of human history when even the most devout adherents of any universal religion were inescapably confronted with the living *pluralism* of such religions, and the allomorphism between each faith's ontological claims and territorial stretch, nations dream of being free, and, if under God, directly so. The gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state,

Finally, it is imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. (7)

There are clear parallels between Anderson's conceptualization of nationhood and the conditions of experiencing reading as a diffuse, collective, and identity-shaping activity. It is one of Anderson's central points that print capitalism blossomed as current concepts of nationhood began to develop, and that the former contributed to the latter in no small way. And while few people may be willing to die for the sake of texts, a great many more will readily claim their willingness to live for the sake of texts in some form.

Thinking play within the parameters of citizenship as part of what citizenship suspects but allows, emphasizes both the artfulness of play and the tendency to read it as acting within a chaos/order spectrum. Catherine Bates (1999) characterizes play as paradoxically creative and illusory at once. As noted in Sections 2.1 and 3.1 above, Bates observes that theorists such as Schiller and Huizinga read play as an attempt to impose order and harmony on chaos; others, like Friedrich Nietzsche, see order and progress as

the egotistical, self-aggrandizing illusions of the human, revealed for what they are by play. Since illusion is all there is, the only reasonable response to it is "to make a virtue of it" (Bates 50), so that in a Nietzschean world, art is the greatest good, and pointless play, like the act of building sandcastles only to knock them down and begin the cycle anew, is the ultimate act of creation (52).

Brossard's *Le Désert Mauve* and Atwood's *Lady Oracle* can be read productively through the reciprocities of serially-embedding narrative play, which advocates working toward a better world in both instances. In these two texts, the writer-protagonists challenge socio-political convention by choosing to adhere to an arbitrary system of aesthetics. Not unexpectedly, they design that system to support and enhance their own interests, which they pursue with dedication. In so doing, they inhabit the territory of players: the borderland between reality and simulation, between responsibility and irresponsibility. In some lights, traces of the trickster are discernible within these two players; Joan in particular offers a kind of heedless ludicrousness that seems endemic to both the trickster and the screwball, and her story resembles the type of cautionary tales in which the trickster is often found. This makes these two texts an admirable introduction to the issues to be explored in the next section, which focuses on the trickster as a fallible, self-interested, lusory and ludicrous figure of arbitrariness. Yet Mélanie, Laures, and Joan do not attain the full-scale, anarchic, destructive potential of the trickster, permitting an exploration of a lusory citizen who stops short of destabilizing the very foundations of the socio-political world.

The exegesis is intricate in *Le Désert Mauve* and *Lady Oracle*. Like Brossard's *Baroque d'Aube*, both narratives hold other full or fragmented novels embedded within them, troubling narrative and ontological commonplaces, and further challenging the complexities of reader-writer, or citizen-state, relations with their lusory attitudes towards narrative. *Le Désert Mauve* is a complex novel that foregrounds the activities of reading and translating. A young writer named Laure Angstelle writes Désert Mauve, a novel set in Arizona that is embedded in full at the opening of *Désert Mauve*. Half of its chapters narrate a teenage woman's movement into a vibrant new world, differentiated from her world of origin by her first love experience and her first attempts at writing. The other chapters detail a day in the life of a sinister man called l'homme long, who, at the end of that day, kills the young lesbian's new lover as the couple dances in a bar. Maude Laures, a professional woman in mid-career, reads this novel and finds it unforgettably compelling. The story of how she translates it from French into French during a Quebec winter occupies the centre of the text, and her playful translation concludes it.

Following a triptych structure like that of *Baroque d'Aube*, Brossard's text consists of: Désert Mauve by Laure Angstelle, itself a two-in-one novel, one about the teenager, Mélanie, and the other about l'homme long; a narrative called "Un Livre à Traduire" about Maude Laures reading and translating Angstelle's text, within which Laures' reading notes are embedded; and Mauve, l'Horizon, Angstelle's narrative as translated by Laures. In this case, the two framing ends of the triptych reflect and comment on each other while enclosing a centre that narrates a process of narration/translation. In *Baroque d'Aube* on the other hand, the connection between the parts of the

triptych is more metaphysical, suggesting aspects of a writer who is the same but different throughout the narrative.

Like Brossard's *Baroque d'Aube* and *Le Désert Mauve*, Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle* is a *künstlerroman*. In a roughly linear chronology that weaves together the present and the past, romance novelist and poet Joan Foster tells the story of her life, loves, and writing to reveal the tight interrelationships among these levels. Part of her ostensible purpose is to piece together and narrativize the puzzle of why she is alone in Italy, writing a romance novel in which she no longer has faith, and torn between hoping that her husband will come and hoping he will stay away. Scattered throughout are fragments from the Costume Gothic romances she has been writing under her aunt's name, as well as excerpts from a volume of poems she published under her own name. Atwood writes Joan playing among discourses, primarily the Gothic discourses she adopts in her writing and the screwball discourse within which she frames her own actions. Because Joan disregards the contradictions of these discourses and avoids reconciling them, and because a narrative aporia obscures the degree to which this is a conscious choice, she stands forth as simultaneously lusory and ludicrous, a played player whose playful intent seems always already dubious and indemnifying.

The narratives made by these writer-protagonists play against a field in which there exists, according to Jameson, a lingering ambivalence toward the function and purpose of art:

Art ... yields social information primarily as symptom. Its specialized machinery (itself obviously symptomatic of social specialization more generally) is capable of registering and recording data with a precision unavailable in other

modes of modern experience—in thought, for instance, or in daily life—but that data, reassembled, does not model reality in the forms of things or substances, or social or institutional ontology. Rather, it tells of contradictions as such, which constitute the deepest form of social reality in our prehistory and must stand in for the “referent” for a very long time to come. (151)

A symptom, of course, manifests without conscious choice, and only as a signal that something has gone wrong. The specialized self-referential machineries of *Le Désert Mauve* and *Lady Oracle* are symptomatic of contradictions arising within the perceived relationships between art and life, play and reality. The social information that these two texts provide on the condition of being a citizen of a postmodern world illuminates the tension between real life and artful play, but also suggests the two are not separable.

In Brossard, the order of development is clear: Angstelle’s Desert Mauve is what Gerard Genette would call the hypotext, with “A Book to Translate” forming its hypertext and Mauve, l’Horizon marking the transformation of both. The hypotext in Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* is a few pages in the notebooks of Fraser Buchanan, blackmailer of celebrities. The pages hold point-form evaluations of Joan’s body and personality, along with brief details of the occasions where Buchanan has observed Joan with her lover, the Royal Porcupine. Reductive in tone, and both calculating and manipulative in intent (293), these pages inspire Joan’s scheme to fake her own death and go to Italy, but they also prompt her to write her own story once she is there. Joan’s vexed reliance on both Gothic and screwball discourses transforms her every move into parody, so that all aspects of her excessive, lusory, quasi-confessional, and autobiographical metanarrative parody the misogynist, cynical, faux-detective jot notes Buchanan has penned, which reduce her to her bank account and adulterous indiscretions. In *Désert Mauve*, sexuality

and writing also interconnect since, in both Angstelle's and Laures's versions, Mélanie engages in a romance on the same day she begins to write.

The "reality"-fracturing presences of Brossard's and Atwood's lusory writer-citizens speak to Spivak's discussion of responsibility and citizenship. Spivak discusses the complexities of being responsible in a world where "the covert and overt violence practiced by the ideologic and systemic manipulation of rational principles, such as due process, human rights, and democracy" (26) tends to press-gang individual, citizen-level responsibility toward complicity and contamination. The burden of model behaviour, then, tends to rest on the shoulders of a citizenship that must include resistant, innovative player-citizens, like Mélanie and Joan, along with apparently more conventional authority figures, such as their parents and Brossard's Maude Laures. This demands that the citizen be flexible and able to compromise, even equivocate, as well as possessing ironic vision and Bakhtinian double-voicedness. Mélanie, Laures, and Joan are liminal figures, occupying the threshold between player and played, seducer and seduced, victor and victim, and they explore the dynamics of power's inescapable reversibility. These fictional figures inhabit the discursive tensions that hesitate between resisting and desiring hegemonic assimilation, using and abandoning the hegemonic power to assimilate, being complicit with the hegemony and subverting it.

The willingness of Mélanie, Laures and Joan to gamble with the responsibility/irresponsibility dialectic makes them instrumental for interrogating a number of different dichotomies in innovative terms. Their irreverent, nay, lusory attitude towards responsibility both facilitates and enlivens an interrogation of the dichotomies that

underlie the condition of being a citizen and a writer. Their lusoriness sharply interrogates the question of why “good citizenship” demands responsibility and accountability when it is far from self-evident that strict adherence to these principles necessarily produces a healthy society. While the figure of the trickster, which will be examined in Chapter 5, provides one challenge to easy assumptions about the citizen-state relationship, an examination of playful tendencies in Brossard’s and Atwood’s texts provides an opportunity to explore such assumptions in a form less heavily freighted with cautionary elements. The state’s informal manifestations in society are only imperfectly responsible and accountable, and its official registers—government, justice, and so on—are prone to error. Where the state is flawed, rigid adherence to arbitrary, oversimplified principles like responsibility and accountability may not be conducive to the citizen’s survival.

4.2 ‘Habile, je l’étais au jeu du discernement’: Nicole Brossard’s *Le Désert Mauve*

Several commentators, notably Catherine Campbell (2005) and Susan Holbrook (2005), observe that worldhood is bifurcated in Nicole Brossard’s *Le Désert Mauve*, where differing systems of worldhood co-exist uneasily. They connect this bifurcation with Lacan’s theory of language and the Real, and with distinctions between feminine and masculine experience: “For Brossard women have a closer connection to their physical experience of the world. Men, by nature, are more attracted to the words and the power they represent” (Campbell 140). In Campbell’s reading, *Désert Mauve* “advocates taking a place inside language at any cost” (155). Between the lines of Brossard’s text, Campbell observes, is a suspicion that “[a] person who does not exist within reality

created by words does not exist at all" (145). Thus in Brossard's *Désert Mauve*, the altruistic urge itself is redoubled within itself, comments on itself, and revises itself. If an essential part of the experience of play is behaving as though reigning ideologies have been suspended and replaced with new ones, then the women who achieve this state in Brossard's texts not only enter a play-type world but succeed in making it real. The potential for text to contribute to a utopian, philogynistic world inheres within Brossard's project of textual holography, but also within each of the differentiated texts that *Désert Mauve* contains.

This imperative is illuminated by all three of *Désert Mauve*'s writer-protagonists. The most fictionalized one, Mélanie, is the youngest, and has the least experience with writing and narrative. The least narrativized one, Laure Angstelle, originally writes Mélanie and her story, but appears within *Désert Mauve* only as Laures imagines her. Maude Laures, who reads the narrative about Mélanie written by Angstelle, has perhaps the most intensive experience with narrative. She reads and is compelled by Angstelle's narrative about Mélanie, an experience that propels her into the act of translation. Her experience of translating Angstelle's *Le Désert Mauve* is narrativized in the centre of *Désert Mauve* under the title "Un Livre à Traduire."

Brossard constructs Mélanie as a figure of play. This characterization, which extends across Angstelle's original through Laures's translation, is both psychological and intradiegetically ontological, for Mélanie's close association with play is accentuated by her resistance to familial ties and by her physical freedom to drive to the desert, visiting different cities and different motels. The playfulness may in part relate to

Mélanie's age, since as a fifteen-year-old she is by far the youngest of the writer protagonists explored here. The artlessness and passion of her narrative plays up her youth to some degree, because it is framed in the first person in Mélanie's own voice: a voice whose breathless intimacy constructs her narratee as a peer, a friend, and a confidante, much like Mélanie's cousin Gracie.

Monika Fludernik (2003) distinguishes between teller narratives and reflector narratives, categories that correspond roughly to first and third person narratives respectively, in order to clarify the quality of the deictic shift corresponding to each approach. Mélanie is understood as the teller of her own tale, not as its "reflector." This positioning elides the distinction between her fictionality and that of her writer, Laure Angstelle, who is after all another character, even if Brossard does not narrativize her appreciably. Mélanie/Angstelle inserts little between experience and its narration, as if little or no time elapses between the events and the relaying of them to the narratee. Playfulness permits her to confront a number of rifts between actuality and potential, reality and fiction.

Mélanie's narration also challenges distinctions between fictionality, actuality, and narrativity. In "Semantics, Pragmatics, and Narrativity" (2004), Marie-Laure Ryan tentatively proposes a "scalar" rather than binary conception of narrative based on a series of nested conditions. The most semantically-based conditions top the list: "1. Narrative must be about a world populated by individuated existents. 2. This world must be situated in history and undergo changes of state. 3. The changes of state must be caused by [sic] external events, not by natural evolution (such as aging)" (np). Under

these terms, it is unclear for some time whether, taken on its own, Mélanie's narrative is indeed a "narrative." Externally-generated changes of state are few and far between, just as they are in the *scène blanche* of *Baroque d'Aube*'s "Hôtel Rafale", the very first section that describes the lovemaking of Cybil and La Sixtine as a continuous event. In Angstelle's Désert Mauve, externally-generated changes of state include: Mélanie's first encounter with the desirable geometrist Angela; Mélanie's visit to Gracie to communicate her excitement; Mélanie's first date with Angela; and the sudden shock of the murder. The preceding and connective material arguably constitutes an a-narrative representation of Mélanie's own "natural evolution." The Gracie interlude partakes of this quality since the details it communicates tend to involve the conditions of things as they are and have always been, including the initial basis for the friendship. This interval does not read as momentous, but as a somewhat banal but reassuring (to Mélanie) connective that contextualizes the young woman's experience. Even Mélanie's first sight of Angela seems peculiarly run-of-the-mill, since it seems notable only because her mother has mentioned this woman a few times.

What does ensure that Mélanie's experience is read as narrative is its rhythmic interruption by chapters from l'homme long's narrative. These sparsely-detailed fragments provide a stark contrast to Mélanie's breathless, passionate, and raw communication of her own experience. As teller, Mélanie constructs her narratee to be a familiar and sympathetic companion who shares her passions and her understanding of such concepts as "beauty" (such as the appeal of the desert, for example). The depersonalized l'homme long, on the other hand, is told by a non-specific narrator, whose

understanding of the narratee is radically non-specific. This narrator strips *l'homme long*'s fragments of emotional resonance. This stripping interferes with what Fludernik, following Genette and others, constructs as the narratee's tendency to shift her deictic centre into alignment with the protagonist; in other words, it intervenes with emotional or psychological connections readers (embedded or actual) would "normally" expect to make with *l'homme long*. Thus *l'homme long*'s experience reads as intensely "closed off:" the narratee has restricted access to his thought processes—especially to any explicatory thought processes—and is left to understand this figure almost exclusively through sparse descriptions of his body and its actions. In *l'homme long*'s sections there is a basic and profound disconnect between narrator, narrated, and narratee that emphatically does not apply to *Mélanie*'s situation.

The extreme contrast between the two approaches actively imposes narrativity on each narrative. Each narrative becomes a narrative largely through its proximity with the other, enforcing a degree of interconnectivity and perverse interdependence on them. There may in fact be a moment of hesitation regarding the narration in *l'homme long*'s segments, for it is far from clear that *Mélanie*, who is beginning to see herself as a writer and to represent experience in her journal, has not written these segments herself. The segments are set in the desert motel topos with which she is so very familiar, are sparse enough to resemble preliminary character notes like those generated by Maude Laures in

Le Désert Mauve's midsection, and can be read as attempts to understand a gender with which she has had little direct contact in her almost exclusively woman-inhabited world.¹ These fragments seem to detail a middle of experience with no appreciable beginning or end: they begin with l'homme long's crossing of the threshold into the room, do not encompass the fact of his egress, and sketch only one externally-effected change in state: the arrival of the photo-filled envelope that fills him with elation.

L'homme long's experience is not resolved into a comprehensive and cohesive whole any more than Angstelle's version of Mélanie's experience is. But in the end it more strongly resembles an a-narrative fragment than does Mélanie's experience; it seems to exist in a strange space that resists the fictional/narrative realm in favour of the anti-fictional/anti-narrative realm of the abstract, "pure" concept. In this way, Brossard continues her challenge to the Lacanian distinction between the Real and its opposite, which he connects to his distinction between men as existing within the Real and women as subsisting outside it.

Concerning *Le Désert Mauve*, Campbell reads the desert, the *topos* where Mélanie feels most comfortable and at peace, as a region outside language. In both Angstelle's and Laures's versions, Mélanie must leave the desert behind before she can appropriate language and reality for her own pleasure. This process relies on the presence of a facilitating sexual energy, which has clear connections to the *scène blanche* discussed with reference to *Baroque d'Aube* in Section 3.3 above. Leaving the women's

¹ It did not come fully clear to me, for example, that Mélanie had not written l'homme long's portions as a creative writing effort until the interpretations of several other scholars convinced me otherwise.

realm of sensual experience for the realm of language will require new strategies of interaction.

A discourse of sexuality is powerfully allusive in such situations, because sexual interaction binds blunt physical contact with a mode of communication that is nonverbal but reciprocal. Yet, as Catherine Bates puts it, language intervenes between the subject and direct experience of the Lacanian real. Further, language is a radically flawed medium that is only randomly capable of communicating meaning (1999; 163). To try to access reality through language is necessarily a playful activity, riddled with pratfalls. This process willingly engages with a chaos/order dynamic suggested by Lacan's language-reality conundrum. Mélanie wishes not to be restricted to a corporeally-determined world; she wants access to the realm of free-playing signifiers that Brossard herself manipulates with such finesse.

Mélanie craves what seems to be offered by language, but she must gain it by making it fit her. She works toward doing so by approaching language, reality, and sexuality with a lusory attitude. Campbell constructs this process in terms of emergence that suggest both coming-of-age and coming out of the closet: "Melanie, despite her frequent returns to the desert, is in the process of coming out of the desert, the darkness and the silence in order to assume a place inside language" (142). Angstelle, and through her Brossard, insist on language and text as means of changing the world. The world of play in *Le Désert Mauve* vacillates between the Real and the Irreal, the realm of language and the realm outside language, what Mélanie has and what she desires. Play is shifting, responsive and intuitive, and although she does not see it, it seems to be located within

Mélanie rather than outside her. This irony, combined with the ironic necessity to change the Real with language and thereby make it fictive—"The moment language enters, fiction takes over" (Campbell 152)—moves Mélanie toward the position of a player of a postmodern game.

This ironic juxtaposition of language, the Real and the ludic is consistent with Louise Forsyth's observation regarding Brossard's approach to writing:

[Brossard's] poet's awareness of the domains of all that has not yet been spoken and her particular sensitivity to motion and energy as essential components in the experience of space have led her to oppose vigorously all systems which dictate that the paths which have been followed in the past must be followed in the future. She is a whirling, free-floating figure, an explorer using words to mark the fresh lines of each new trajectory. (335)

Forsyth explains that vertigo is implicated within the two co-present axes that animate Brossard's writings (342-3). As such vertigo can be experienced externally and internally, and is produced by the conjunction of the vertical axis of silence and white inner spaces or voids, and the horizontal red axis of surface, distance, horizon and context.

Navigating the "forcefield" around this conjunction has a direct impact on the narrative, as Forsyth points out: "The eye of the narrative presence in Brossard's texts simultaneously watches and participates fully in the dynamic tension and complicity created between the two poles. She reflects on it and in it. She is carried away by it into new spatial dimensions. She registers it in her memory and captures its fleeting forms in her words, giving meaning to her existence and structure to the textual space she inhabits" (343).

As original and “translation,” Angstelle’s Le Désert Mauve and Laures’s Mauve, l’Horizon both oscillate diegetically between Mélanie’s story and l’homme long’s.

Original and translation both “manifest a certain ambivalence” about the difference, if any, between fiction and reality, and the spiraling motions that especially abound in Mélanie’s narrative emphasize the ambivalence. While the two narratives contrast each other in many ways, they correspond in that both write Mélanie’s story as a first-person narrative from the perspective of a highly developed and quite articulate personality. Her cousin Gracie seems engaged with life and language; her parents Kathy and Lorna are engaged sexually; and Lorna seems to be engaged with language. Yet through both Angstelle and Laures, Mélanie reads as being exceptionally engaged with life, sex, and language, as if she were constituted by them to a greater extent than the other women are. The fact that she is engaging with them all at the same time only partly reads as a function of her youth and a necessary stage in her coming-of-age. Mélanie’s exceptionality reads as a function of a precocious Brossardian instinct that language must be buttoned together with life and sex to forge the kinds of experience she craves.

Contrastingly, l’homme long’s story is told in the third person with surreally minimal detail. He is barely realized, as discussed above, and avoids engaging with the wider world except through photos and magazines. Nameless, l’homme long is a two-dimensional representation of Robert J. Oppenheimer, inventor of the atom bomb (see McGahan, also Brossard [1998]). In Brossard’s strategic hands, he is unregretful, focused on violence, and addicted to his own reputation as an innovator, regardless of the human destruction his innovations bring: the photo-filled envelope brings elation to him because

they demonstrate the actuality of the visions that grip him—visions of cataclysmic explosions. His static linearity resists and emphasizes Mélanie's dynamic, spiraling mobility. Many of these characteristics remain consistent between Angstelle's Le Désert Mauve and Laures's Mauve, l'Horizon.

The counterpoint supplied by l'homme long's narrative also points up the wildness, freedom, rebelliousness, and heedlessness so often assumed to be characteristic of North American teenagers. On these counts, fifteen-year-old Mélanie is definitely a typical teenager. She understands herself to be a captive and a slave of definitions she does not choose, especially "child" and "daughter" and "woman." Each of these definitions locks her out of another world that she can see and hear but not enter. Angstelle's Mélanie describes her mother Kathy's motel home in almost claustrophobic terms, emphasizing its banality and dinginess. She cannot bear Lorna because she sees Lorna as a liar who tries to impose her own exhausted perception of the Arizona desert on Mélanie's dynamic perception. And the teenager seems both repelled and compelled by the physical affection she sees the two women display.

Lori Landay (1998) identifies the main strategy of trickster women as working "to seduce, charm, interest, and most importantly, *change*" their oppressors (3; Landay's emphasis). Mélanie is conscious of being oppressed, but her youth inflects her comprehension of the source of the oppression so that at first she mistakenly locates it within her parents. This, combined with *Le Désert Mauve*'s extraordinary structure, contributes to Mélanie's ambivalently tricky but definitely playful progress. It is not Mélanie alone who will transform her oppressors. The energy of her story, as it moves

from Angstelle's original through the process of translation towards its status as Laures's translated text, will also play a part, as will the entire three-part narrative, as it is decoded and taken in by the extratextual reader. Acting in concert, these cooperating components will not transform the reader—the reader is not the problem—but will transform obstacles erected by androcentric and phallographic ideologies into currents of fresh thought, as Occident phrases it in *Baroque d'Aube*.

Milena Santoro identifies an explicit link between writing and sexuality in *Désert Mauve*: "Melanie's writing, her awakening 'conscience des mots' (26) is explicitly linked with her sexual desire, for the same evening that she stays awake until dawn absorbed in "l'écriture comme une alternative parmi des images" (27), she also brings herself to orgasm: 'mes doigts là, c'est ça, là, *yet* vacille, m'amuse, m'envas' (26)" ("Feminist Translation" 126; Brossard's italics). The experience affects Mélanie throughout that night:

Cette même nuit, la conscience des mots fit le tour de mon sentiment, l'enroula, le fit tourner à contresens. J'eus l'impression de mille détours, de gestes graves dans la matière. La sensation de vivre, la sensation de mourir, l'écriture comme une alternative parmi les images. Puis la réalité devint un IMAGE. Je m'endormis à l'aube, ficelée dans mes draps, *objet* de l'image. (26-7; Brossard's emphasis)

In an experience characterized by a dizzying movement of spins and turns, her writing transmutes Mélanie into the thing that reality is about. Perceiving that reality is itself an image or semblance that refers to still another ontology, she comes to understand through the friction of writing, sex, sense and nonsense that she is reality's referent. She is at the vortex of realities, spinning gently at their point of convergence, and the act of writing affects her situation. She, apparently, is the catharsis that Real-as-text will effect.

With one foot in the “real” desert outside language and the other in the “written” fictionalized desert, Mélanie is able to visit or withdraw from both at will. The suddenly-perceived relationship between writing and sex produces a vertiginous bliss in Mélanie that exacerbates her new-found ability to affect her world through words, an ability that is suggested by the vacillation between reality and image. In Angstelle’s rendering, Mélanie experiences no triumph and no fulfillment despite her intense desire to play dynamically in a brave new world of writing and sensuality. This is because Angela, with whom she has just begun a romantic friendship, is killed by a sniper—l’homme long, by implication—and dies in her arms on a dance floor. Angstelle’s narrative ends at the moment of death, leaving the murder unresolved and Mélanie traumatized. Through Angstelle, Brossard writes the situation between Angela and Mélanie as far too tragic to merit a casual or ironic treatment. “Angstelle’s” narrativization suggests that change tends toward the banal or the destructive. Laures’s reading and translation will respect this trauma, but will also move toward an ontology that can accept the trauma, transform its source, anticipate healing, and promote joy. It offers a non-actuality of positive change as a palliative to a banal trauma.

In “The Spiral as Möbius Strip: Inside/Outside *Le Désert Mauve*,” Karen Conley (1995) contends that “In Brossard’s text, the reader is given the disquieting sense that outside the curving thread of this narrative, Angstelle’s and Laures’s protagonist, Melanie, lives outside of chronological time, choosing to become visible only within the narrative’s particular timeline” (150). Conley here echoes an impression of the

uniqueness of Brossard's protagonists that others have also remarked.² Referencing Brossard's "From Radical to Integral," Conley suggests that positioning Brossard's women characters outside phallogocentrism indicates "that their strength lies in their capacity to move from one dimension to another (from the inside out of their experience and vice versa), and to shed light onto areas traditionally regarded as beyond the purview of meaning" (148). *Mélanie's* narrative/s unlock an explorable time-space that can re-frame ideas about how reality is constructed, and about how postmodern subjects/agents/citizens construct and are constructed by reality. *Mélanie's* strong romantic attraction to an intelligent and vibrant woman strengthens her understanding of a world that is not entirely determined by phallogocentrism.

Described by *Mélanie's* mother, Kathy, as a forty-year-old professional geometer who converses animatedly with male engineers, the alluring Angela Parker seems to be the final challenge in *Mélanie's* quest to become real. Part of the challenge involves understanding and endorsing what Angela attempts to share—the ability not only to discern between appearance and reality, but to recognize the problematic reality of a phallocratic economy, and to transform it into mere semblance or appearance. Because sexual interaction, engagement with the world, and the ability to discern and transform have not yet become a full part of her actual experience, this 'realistic fiction' remains a fiction for Angstelle's *Mélanie*, at least until much later, when she realizes Angela has died in her arms.

² See also Brossard's interview with Beverly Daurio, called "Patriarchal Mothers." There Daurio observes, "For me, reading *Le Sens apparent* was like having my skin removed and entering another woman's body, seeing and experiencing without those usual signposts of narrative" (1998: 43).

An increasing anxiety about the physical strain of sending and receiving words precedes Mélanie's breakthrough into textual production:

Le *saguaro* vacillait, réel et irréel. Le *saguaro*, les mots, tous mes réflexes étaient au ralenti et bientôt il n'y eut plus de jour, plus d'aube, plus de route, plus de cactus, à peine l'instinct de penser que les mots ne sont pourtant que des mots.

Dans le boîte à gants, il y avait sous le revolver un petit carnet dont je me servais pour inscrire la date des changements d 'huile et autres détails se rapportant à l'entretien de l'auto. Un crayon du garage Helljoy, trombone improvisé, retenait les pages décollées. Alors j'ai écrit sur ça, j'ai écrit *ça et encore ça et plus, ça m'excitait, ça m'a pris comme ça s'peut pas d'écrire tout ça avec les explosions dans ma tête, de petits sentiers crayeux dans les canyons. Je connais l'épiderme parcheminé des grands cactus à l'agonie, tout ça, l'animal creusant sa trace.* (26; Brossard's italics)

The text she produces becomes the liminal space that blends reality and unreality. She writes the experience she is living as she lives it, making writing and experience the same thing, and making reality by writing it. Writing and reality become indistinct where they meet, like one of Lacan's *points de capiton* where signifier and signified conjoin, suggesting that Mélanie has now come into what Baudrillard might see as the full power of womanhood, namely the ability to perplex the boundaries between surface and depth, artifice and reality (10).

This environment she is writing, the present moment, places within Mélanie's grasp the reality from which, character-like, she has been separated until now. "Depuis que j'avais écrit dans le carnet d'entretien, je voyais vraiment la réalité de près" (27). As a producer of text, Mélanie's perceptions change: "Il n'y a pas d'altérité, seulement une alternance dans l'apparence" (32), and later,

C'était en alternance la réalité puis le désert avec des longueurs dans la pensée. Des parenthèses à l'approche des villes. Oui, j'étais fascinée par la réalité et plus précisément par sa dimension impossible. La réalité n'est toujours que la possible

accompli et c'est en quoi elle fascine comme un désastre ou offense le désir qui voudrait que tout existe en sa dimension. (37)

Mélanie now reads the ability to vacillate, to be present and absent at the same time as a defining condition of reality, and once she employs her ability to produce texts she can perceive and navigate the fluctuating borders between the desert, desire and reality.

Thus a figure of play circumvents the Lacanian exclusion of women from the Real, the Imaginary and language through a performative declaration that the defeat has always been possible and has now been accomplished. In this way Mélanie takes "reality" and makes it hers, appropriating it much as games appropriate reality. In adding multiple alternatives to phallocratic binarism, she fulfils Occident desRives's desire, in *Baroque d'Aube*, to transform language's conduit into a blueprint. In so doing, Mélanie opens up a complex network of choices, paths, and narrative alternatives. Yet in the end l'homme long short-circuits Angstelle's Mélanie's game. His ontology refuses to co-exist comfortably with hers.

Angstelle's l'homme long does not traverse the borders that Mélanie does, seemingly because he does not write and he does not love. L'homme long is remorseless and degenerate, a caricature of the human. With regard to language, he parrots words and phrases, and has a ballpoint pen to write with. He looks at a porn magazine as well, and reads a book, and he also carries folders filled with files. Beauty of several sorts appeals to him, specifically vacuously conventional and sentimental beauty such as "les petits sentiers et l'odeur de la rosée" (29), and he is not completely immune to the charms of language. Yet unlike Mélanie, he retreats to a motel room that seems almost

psychotically spare and reductive. Here he is protected from immediacy, vitality, and the unexpected. He seems satisfied to remain here, and ignores anything outside, beyond his memories of the mysterious explosion.³

L'homme long's transformative process, unlike Mélanie's, is catalyzed by his narcissistic fantasies instead of through writing. His superlative uniqueness comes to the forefront, and not his connection to other living entities. This prepares him to achieve what Susan M. McGahan (1992) interprets as a violent misogynistic murder. While Angstelle's narrative leaves this indeterminate, commentators generally agree that it is l'homme long who aims the gun at Angela then pulls the trigger. McGahan notes that Brossard does take pains to construct him as "a gross parody of male heroism" (108), a type capable of such senseless bloodiness. Brossard supports this interpretation, confirming in an interview that "[i]n the book [*Le Désert Mauve*], the act comes from a physicist, a man of knowledge, who's got everything; in our society he's the 'perfect guy'" (1998: 47). The act in question is Angela's murder, and presumably the murderer is "our society's perfect guy" because, like Robert Oppenheimer, he is a professional and successful intellectual who has profited in many ways by his invention. Brossard strategically makes him an extreme example of sterile male intellect and suppresses his capacity for remorse in order to emphasize the dissociation between this model of citizenship and those offered by Angela, Mélanie, Angstelle and Laures.

³ In an interview with Beverly Daurio, Brossard states that she chose the Arizona desert as a setting because it was the site where the first nuclear bomb was detonated.

Having emerged from his fantasy, then, l'homme long is ready not only to read but to do battle: he defeats his own sensual response to reading, he defeats his anxiety about the explosion, and he obliterates his opposite, the vibrant, social, intelligent professional woman Angela. He actualizes the positive changes he has come to wish for in his own insular world, and Brossard's *Désert Mauve* narrativizes his wish and act as stemming from banal illusion and misdirected power. L'homme long ponders reality and language no more than he ponders his own nature, a contemplative lack suggesting that he reads all three as coextensive—particularly since his avoidance of reflection contrasts so emphatically with Mélanie's intense reflection. He cannot but be self-centred as long as reality and language are mutually entangled with himself; he can transgress no boundaries.

"Un Livre à Traduire" sets Angstelle's *Désert Mauve* on its ear. Its presence in Brossard's *Désert Mauve* automatically transforms the reading of Angstelle's narrative since now it must be understood as a fiction, a crafted artifact. The "authenticity" both of Mélanie's narrative and of l'homme long's is destabilized, and the models of citizenship and art that each endorses become parodic. The midsection of Brossard's text deictically relocates *Désert Mauve's* various and largely indeterminate narratees—the one Mélanie presumes for her narration, the one implied by l'homme long's fragments, and the newly-asserted narratee/reader of Angstelle's text, who is not fully coextensive with the other two. Brossard now binds together and situates these divergent narratees within the specific persona of model expert reader Maude Laures.

“Un Livre à Traduire” details the interaction of Maude Laures with Angstelle’s Désert Mauve: her responses and reactions, her decision to translate the text, her experience of the process of translating, her reading notes. Angstelle’s Désert Mauve is differentiated from other layers of narrative within Brossard’s text by such standard publishing-industry markers as its own pagination and title page, complete with the publisher’s name and logo. Laures reads it as a fictional text whose generic characteristics include a loosely contemporary setting, a murder mystery (see McGahan), a coming-of-age narrative, and an abortive *künstlerroman*. For Laures, Angstelle’s narrative is so engrossing that it permits no intrusion of another sense of reality, altering the possibilities for narrative *jouissance*. As an instructor at a young women’s private school, she seems to have already internalized the altruistic imperative.

On reading Angstelle’s narrative, Laures experiences narrative *jouissance* of such an extraordinary kind that it arouses the desire for more, urging her towards her extraordinary project “pour que Maude Laures abrite cet immense espace à découvert, recouvre chaque mot d’un autre mot sans que le premier ne sombre dans l’oubli. Probables modulations. De l’oubli, de la réplique, recouvre la raison” (65). Angstelle’s Désert Mauve shakes Laures’s perceptions, and she hopes to amplify and further disseminate this unsettled perspective. By completing her translation and bringing into balance the sense of reality of Angstelle’s fictional world and her own, she will come to her senses and help her readers come to theirs.

Conley writes of the novel’s midsection, “Un Livre à Traduire,” that it “functions as the frontier between the other two, which mirror each other inexactly like the night

desert and sky on either side of the horizon. It separates and binds, acting as a metaphor for other inside/outside distinctions thematized in the novel, particularly that between chronological and non-chronological time, and the liminal state that distinguishes rationality from the non-rational" (144). The play of translation transforms not only the space and texture of the narrative but helps transform Laures herself. The before-and-after narrative about Laures suggests the extent of her transformation. The "before" portion foregrounds her hesitant and uncertain struggle towards a translation strategy, while the "after" portion depicts a confident Laures, who is engaged not only with her task but also with language, seriously and expertly playing with Angstelle's materials.

Laures's project parallels that of Pierre Menard in Jorge Luis Borges's short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*" (1962). Menard chooses to generate afresh some parts of *Don Quixote*: "His admirable intention was to produce a few pages which would coincide—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes" (39), without copying them. When he does achieve his goal, the text is inherently different from Cervantes's text, and much richer according to the narrator. Cervantes, the narrator asserts, had composed his text largely because he was a soldier with literary leanings who needed to pass the time, where Menard composes his chapters as a poet and a scholar whose writings interrogate literary conventions, engage in and extend metaphysical debate, participate in cultural production, and are fully embroiled in critical discourse. This is an essential part of the project: "To be, in the twentieth century, a popular novelist of the seventeenth seemed to him [Menard] a diminution. To be, in some way, Cervantes and reach the *Quixote* seemed less arduous to him—and, consequently, less interesting—

than to go on being Pierre Menard and reach the *Quixote* through the experiences of Pierre Menard” (40). Further, as the narrator points out, Menard is notorious in his world for ironically arguing the exact opposite point of view from the one he actually espouses (42), so that it is possible in some measure to understand his re-writing of the *Quixote* as a consciously contrary effort.

Maude Laures’s decision to translate Angstelle’s text into French from the original French is as quixotic and absurd as Menard’s choice literally to re-write parts of the *Quixote*. Menard’s project makes historicity absurd; as he tells the narrator, “The final term in a theological or metaphysical demonstration—the objective world, God, causality, the forms of the universe—is no less previous and common than my famed novel” (39), and the narrator glosses one of Menard’s passages as an assertion that history originates reality, rather than forming an inquiry into reality (43). Laures’s project makes absurd the concept of the text itself as a space where deference determines writer-reader interactions, but it also destabilizes the intersection between narration and language. Brossard initiates this challenge in a single page, at the same time as she pressures her reader to shift her deictic centre away from its vexed alliance with Mélanie against l’homme long and toward the new protagonist, reader and translator Maude Laures.

In giving herself over to language to the extent that she does, Laures finds that language gains visceral force in her world. She finds new directions when she encounters obstacles, and she lends Angstelle’s original material new resonance. Laures struggles with the extent to which she is obligated to maintain fidelity with Angstelle’s original.

Her process of negotiating between kinds of fidelity, of discerning between productive and counterproductive approaches, reflects the tension Walter Benjamin explores in “The Task of the Translator” (1923/1968):

All purposeful manifestations of life, including their very purposiveness, in the final analysis have their end not in life, but in the expression of its nature, in the representation of its significance. Translation thus ultimately serves the purpose of expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages. It cannot possibly reveal or establish this hidden relationship itself; but it can represent it by realizing it in embryonic or intensive form. (72)

For Benjamin, “Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own” (73). Laures clearly apprehends that the lusory task of playing with Désert Mauve will have just such an impact on both Angstelle’s language and her own. Both languages are engaged with the project of generating a new language that can accommodate women, and Laures’s translation will help this project toward fruition.

Laures transforms Angstelle’s epic and tragic love story into what reads more like a very respectful but still ironic Frygian romance. In Laures’s version, Angela’s death results from casual violence, not malevolent evil, and in some ways this traumatic event even promises to facilitate Mélanie’s integration into engaged adulthood and the writing life. Angstelle’s Désert Mauve forecloses on hope, its mourning and despair signalling the futility of human effort and the destruction of desire. Laures’s Mauve, l’Horizon forecloses on despair, emphasizing instead a hope achieved through language and

especially literature. Her lusive attitude towards text and narrative indicates the importance of play to radical cultures that wish to do more than survive.

Laures reads Angela's death as problematic because in Angstelle's narration it abhors the process of transforming radical cultures into thriving ones. She challenges it outright in the "dialogue" she writes herself having with Angstelle (140-3). In Laures's hands, none of Angstelle's rationalizations for killing Angela off are fully satisfactory,⁴ and the dialogue exaggerates some of the absurdities of narrative. One such absurdity involves the conceit of maintaining verisimilitude in fictional worlds to the point of replicating motivation and responsibility. In Laures's notes, she attacks Angstelle for "killing" Angela; she then writes Angstelle denying personal responsibility. Laures's Angstelle does assert that either Angela or l'homme long had to be a murderer, presumably in order to dramatize the assassination of gynophilic language/narration, and that having Angela die at the hands of her adversary was the better choice of the two.

This death seems to remain an arbitrary plot device calculated to sensitize naive readers to a hostile and misogynistic world. In this misogynistic world, men are essentially violent predators; women are their essentially vulnerable victims, and in Angstelle's text they threaten to remain so indefinitely. The shock of Angela's death and the bitterness of Mélanie's response to it emphasizes the injustice of the world, and Angstelle's narrative does not permit the Brossardian utopia which will exist when language itself changes enough to forestall all varieties of xenophobia from arising. Laures's strategizing mind desires a more strategic response than Angstelle provides, or

desires at least a comprehensible reason for l'homme long's violent misogyny. As translator, however, her function is to watch over the maturing process of the language. Beyond this, her rights are negligible within this imagined interaction with the writer, and the interaction with Angstelle's narrative. She therefore accepts the gnostic advice that she imagines her predecessor offering: "Tenez-vous-en à la beauté, n'ayez peur de rien. Amortissez en vous les bruits de la civilisation. Sachez soutenir l'insoutenable: le cru de toute chose" (143). Together sensibility and writing will preserve her, and the world she constructs, in the face of the negation or displacement that is immanent in Laures's position in historical time.

Laures's translation of Angstelle's narrative infuses difference into it. In "Delirious Translations in the Work of Nicole Brossard" (2005), Susan Holbrook characterizes Laures as a Brossardian "deliring" woman. Holbrook works with Jean-Jacques Lecercle's definition of *délire* as "a form of discourse ... where the material side of language, its origin in the human body and *desire*, are no longer eclipsed by its abstract aspect (as an instrument of communication or expression)" (Holbrook 178; Lecercle's italics; Holbrook's ellipsis). What Laures's *déliring* translation brings to Angstelle's text, in Holbrook's reading, is fluidity: "The fluidity here contradicts the popular translation strategy of *fluency*, in which the target text ideally appears as original." Fluency "erases signs of difference, performing a radical acculturation with an end to promoting the concept of universality" (180; Holbrook's italics). Holbrook understands fluid translations as being more tactile and sensual, more sensitive to differences and the

⁴ McGahan observes that in this conversation the 'respons[ibility] for Angela's death is absurdly displaced

frictions they generate, and more willing to play up the frictions for the sake of pleasure in language.

Differences between Angstelle's and Laures's versions of Melanie's narrative are many, and many have been traced by other commentators.⁵ There are, for example, several material distinctions between the two versions, both of which carry roughly equivalent markers of authenticity to signal their status as independently published texts. *Le Désert Mauve* follows its own pagination; when it begins, *Mauve, l'Horizon* also follows its own pagination, although it follows *Le Désert Mauve*'s numbering as well. The chapter headings are differently spelled between original and translation. Brossard assigns different publishers to Angstelle's and Laures's texts: Angstelle's publisher is Editions de l'Arroyo, where Laures's is Editions de l'Angle. Milena Santoro (2001) relates "angle of vision" to the act of translating (128), and Alice Parker (1990) connects Arroyo with the narrative's Arizona setting and identifies "angle" as "a polysemic term that suggests a locus of maximum imaginative potential" (113). Additionally, Laures changes "l'homme long" to "l'hom'oblong," caricaturizing the abstractions inherent in this character.

Taken together, such details focus attention on what Sherry Simon (1999) describes as the actual work that goes into producing a text, or "the complex network of emotional investments which create the life of the book" (66; see also Holbrook [2005] and Lorraine Weir [1986])). While interviewing Brossard, Beverley Daurio (1998)

and instead focuses on the idea of character assassination' (112).

⁵ See especially Susan Holbrook (2001; 79); Sherry Simon (65); Milena Santoro (128).

observes that translation has changed the flavour of the narrative: Mauve, l'Horizon "is more fine tuned and optimistic" than Desert Mauve, which "seems younger and more fiery" ("Patriarchal Mother" 47). Mauve, l'Horizon is fully complicit with Le Désert Mauve, and empathizes utterly with its anti-androcentric sentiment. The critique it offers is not of the original text, but of the factors that make it such a struggle to produce both original and translation.

Laures interrogates, explores, and plays with the world and events Angstelle has established. In other hands, such a project would read as ironic and parodic, as indeed it does to some extent in Brossard's. But Laures plays with Angstelle's text in a spirit that emphasises the appalling "normalcy" of a world and events, hostile to women, that Angstelle writes, and the desirability of Angstelle's implicit revolt against it. In maintaining complicity while eschewing separation from Angstelle's narrative, Laures's text unites with her predecessor's, and both unite with Brossard's. All three perform parallel critiques of a deficient patriarchy from within a similar culture of feminism, lesbianism and literary production. These complex narratives levy postmodernism's dynamic energy of dissolution to displace patriarchal values while preserving a feminist and lesbian ideal.

While a full paragraph-by-paragraph comparison of the two narratives is impossible here, a close reading and paraphrase of the final chapter of each will serve to highlight some of the differences that Brossard writes into the two versions of the narrative. (Please see Appendices I and II for transcriptions of Brossard's original chapters.)

Angstelle's writing evokes a stream-of-consciousness narration (see Conley 145), mimicking the observations and experiences of an individual subject as they happen. Anxious, arrogant and vulnerable, perhaps especially so due to her hopes of seeing Angela, in the first paragraphs of this chapter Angstelle's Mélanie gives the impression of being jaded about motel life and conflicted about the opportunities around her as she waits at the bar for her date with Angela to begin. In her reverie, Mélanie reflects that regular life obliterates the extraordinary. She distinguishes sharply between her mundane life and the desert experiences that represent rites of passage for her. The idea of the desert enters her reverie, having initiated her into thirst, desire, and a solitude that protects her from the world.

Surrounded by the brute spectacle of dancers in a room populated by sinister-seeming men—she compares the scene to a bullfight—Angstelle's Mélanie is elated at Angela's arrival. Her excitement and uncertainty at dancing with this woman is suggested by recurrent oppositions: the music is too loud, then too soft, nothing is sensual and then everything is sensual, Mélanie feels close to Angela and distant from her. Angela's movements are described with kinetic imagery that connotes disjointedness, suggesting discordant movement and an abundance of vitality on Angela's part, but also suggesting how enthralled Mélanie is with her dance partner. Conscious that they are being watched, Mélanie focuses on Angela's gestures, which seem to her almost magical in their promise to transform the environment.

Angela discusses her passion for language and the difficulties of communication, then asserts cryptically that things are about to begin anew. This conversation abounds

with evocative but obscure phrasings, suggesting that Angstelle's Mélanie may not fully grasp what Angela is trying to say. After midnight they dance again, and with even greater sensuality. Angstelle does not describe the sniper's gunshot. Instead she writes an interlude where time interposes itself, accentuating the two dancers' sexual desire. Only the sudden inertia of Angela's body as it submits to gravity and sinks to the floor alerts Mélanie that something is wrong. She feels a moisture on Angela's face and hair that she apprehends as sweat (but may be blood), and sees the small bullet hole. At death, Angela "dissolves," taking with her the equilibrium she and Mélanie had established.

Mélanie's dissociation and shock are suggested by the silent film image, whose visual nature challenges the linguistic imperative that has dominated Mélanie's narrativization. She can make sense of events no better than the others in the bar despite or because of her physical proximity to Angela at the instant of the murder. What she sees defies linguistic explication, thwarts communication. No one can provide clues to the police, who have come and reduced Angela to a chalk outline on the floor, reinforcing her reduction into the black and white of reality. For Angstelle's Mélanie, dawn, desert, road and mauve are now all associated with a bleeding profile, presumably Angela's. Le Désert Mauve ends with Mélanie feeling completely and eternally alienated.

Brossard writes Angstelle's style as emulating a raw consciousness-in-progress, but she represents a more polished and cinematic quality in Laures's writing. There is a stronger sense of organic flow as well. Laures's steady stream of bar customers, for example, counterpoints the terse, almost chunky arrivals of Angstelle's clients. Angstelle's Mélanie lumps the clients into two groups and has done with them in one and

a half laconic sentences, where Laures's Mélanie softens such distinctions, describing them in two full and rhythmic sentences. Suggesting a greater degree of control over language, Laures's Mélanie tends to use more figurative language and to employ more organic systems of imagery. The bar and the dancers are uniformly golden, having either golden wood, golden skin, or golden hair; revising the bullfight simile, the wild dancers are equine in their grace and power. Laures's Mélanie seems to have a greater sense of agency. When the idea of the desert obtrudes into the reverie, it seems to help strengthen her in her active struggle to avoid the world's contamination, rather than protecting and isolating her.

Conflict is also softened. Far from the agonistic bullfight dance in Angstelle's bar, here people try to dance harmoniously. There, people seem too self-absorbed to register any danger, while here, the three other dancing women are aware of others around them. They take good care not to dance too close, either from fear of injuring each other, or from fear of titillating the public and earning its disapproval. The disjointedness that describes Angstelle's Angela vanishes here. Laures's Mélanie bends her equine imagery in order to liken Angela to a deer, suggesting Solomon's Song of Songs. As a result, Angstelle's frenetic kinetic imagery resolves into Laures's tactile and oral imagery (velvety skin, a bawling song), whimsically heightening Angela's allure.

Complementing the stronger sense of fellow-feeling between Angela and Mélanie, there are fewer barriers to comprehension in their conversation. Laures's Mélanie understands clearly that Angela foresees a quantum shift in the world's makeup. The pains and sorrows of history are obstacles to this change, and what is required to

make it happen, Angela proposes, is hope, passion, turbulence, energy. Because of her words Angela is constructed as an inspirational visionary. Her speech evokes dawn in Mélanie—a recurring image in Brossard—and the utopian seed is planted. More dancing intensifies their desire.

In general, the bystanders' shock at Angela's death seems less starkly visceral and more sorrowful in Laures's text than in Angstelle's. Because she has had the opportunity to speak so Mélanie can hear, where she did not in Angstelle's version, Angela's death as Laures renders it seems at once more tragic, more beautiful, and more necessary. The disappearance of any opportunity for further interaction suggests that Mélanie will never forget those last words, and also that she will be more motivated to live by them.

Angela's body is exposed to strange gazes in both narratives, but in Laures's the image of the silent movie does not arise; Angela does not dissolve into the black and white of reality, but her body reposes on a still-golden dance floor. This gold colour may intimate, however ironically, that better days will return, because it echoes the vitality of the earlier scene of golden dancers cavorting in a golden hall.

"Le regard fond" is a phrase that recurs in every part of Brossard's text. When Laures echoes the phrase, having telescoped the sinister bullet hole into the pupil of Angela's fading eye, she felicitously unites Le Désert Mauve, "Un Livre à Traduire," her reading notes, and Mauve, l'Horizon, at the same time making sense of an almost impenetrably abstract image. The shift away from the cruel crime and toward the stalwart power of the Brossardian gaze is extended even further: where Angstelle writes a bleeding profile that is associated tragically with dawn, desert, and horizon, Laures writes

a menacing profile that, much more optimistically, is followed by dawn, desert and horizon. While Laures's Mélanie does feel completely and eternally alienated, the narrative she inhabits also insists on hope.

As a figure of play, Mélanie winds through *Désert Mauve*, *Mauve*, *l'Horizon*, and the different segments of "Un livre à traduire." Defying the banality she sees in her parents' lives, she takes to writing, a practice that lets her bend the shape of the real and marks her ability to move between ontologies. Playful and defiant, she is radically unfamiliar with any world that permits misogyny until she witnesses, almost co-experiences Angela's tragic death. *Désert Mauve* provides the first condition of tricksterism: the recognition of a situation that requires critique and radical action, specifically the arbitrary ideologies of androcentrism, but that restricts the accessibility of outside resources. Mélanie anticipates tricksterism, for she is conscious of the bonds that restrict her and keep her from reaching her full potential. Additionally, she has not fully developed her control of her transformative abilities, and her efforts to transform her world "for the better" are only variably successful. She vacillates between the desire to strive for that potential and the comfort of remaining within the realms of the familiar. She is enlivened by inhabiting the volatile limen between ontologies, specifically the space between being able to fictionalize the Real through language or engage in sensual experience outside language. But in the hands of Angstelle and Laures, Mélanie's trickster potential remains unrealized due to the traumatic loss of Angela, which cauterizes the parodic urge.

In this fictional world, parody is a technique of abstraction, distancing, distortion. Angstelle's project and Mélanie's simulated experience are exempted from Laures's—and Brossard's—parodic translations, while the phallocratic and misogynist Real receive the full brunt of the ironic treatment. Its superlative inhabitant, l'homme ob/long, is stripped of context and emotional resonance. Brossard and her writers alienate him from the position of deictic centre and deny him the ability to offer a deictic anchor, a situation that radically caricaturizes the role of epic protagonist or "hero."

Linda Hutcheon identifies parody and irony as "major forms of both formal and ideological critique in feminist and Canadian fiction alike" because "they allow writers to speak to their culture, from within, but without being totally co-opted by that culture. The irony and distance implied by parody allow for *separation* at the same time that the doubled structure of both (the superimposition of two meanings or texts) demands recognition of *complicity*" (1988; 7; Hutcheon's italics). The trauma of watching Angela die implicitly eliminates any willingness in Mélanie to collude with a world that permitted her death, while it destroys her ability to be separate from it. Laure Angstelle and Maude Laures are in situations similar to Mélanie's. They have lusory potential located largely in their twinned ability to transform with language/narrative. In writing books for publication, they explore an aspect of writing that differs from Mélanie's volatile experimentation.

If they have experienced a trauma besides that of trying to enter the Real through a language that erases them, *Le Désert Mauve* situates that trauma within an extradiegetic aporia. But in whatever traces of Angstelle might be extrapolated from Le Désert Mauve,

there is evidence of a wound that will not heal, a rift in experience that refuses to be represented in language or image. She too refuses to be complicit with the force that inflicted the trauma, but is unable to separate herself from it, and withdraws from her written world in response. Lares, however, has a choice of things with which to comply or from which to separate, and performs the lusive move of appropriating and transforming pain into a step towards healing. In the words of Thomas King, Lares is trickster-like in being able to “point out the fallacies in situations and arguments and [...] make] sure that nothing [stays] done” (qtd. in Gabriele Helms, *Challenging Canada* 117). She can claim the responsibility to change as her right, not her choice, and to turn it into a channel for resistant, ironic play.

Gayatri Spivak contends that “civility requires your practice of responsibility as a pre-originary right” (2000; 16).⁶ Assuming that civility and citizenship are interrelated, and assuming with Len Findlay and others that working toward change can be a vital aspect of citizenship, especially where it involves a transformation of hegemony into a form that can accept those who had been arbitrarily excluded, Brossard’s three faces of writing/playing women challenge the distinction between destructive change and constructive change. The trauma of being the target of misogyny is devastating in Brossard’s *Le Désert Mauve*, but it can be rehabilitated and turned into a significant aspect of progressing toward utopia. Joan Foster also experiences misogyny in Margaret

⁶ This phrase arises from Spivak’s own earlier work, *Imperatives to Re-Imagine the Planet* (1999), from which she quotes in “From Haverstock Hill Flat to U.S. Classroom” (2000).

Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, although the outcome is far less tragic. The play on which Joan embarks modulates between the destructive and the constructive.

4.3 Dizzy Is as Dizzy Does: Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*⁷

Alone among Atwood's women protagonists, Joan Foster resembles a stand-up comedian, for Atwood writes Joan's "self"-representation as overtly self-parodic. But as a writer whose search for fulfillment through love can take the form of illicit sexual interaction, Joan Foster is also a clear type, and with its publication date of 1976 by far the earliest type, of Atwood's playfully ambiguous, sexual, creative women, such as those of *The Robber Bride* (1993), *Alias Grace* (1996), *The Blind Assassin* (2000) and *The Penelopiad* (2005), to name a few. All of these women can be read as belonging in several senses to the same tribe as Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy, writer, player, and seeker for sex and love. This makes *Lady Oracle* a valuable point of entry into the sophisticated examinations of trickery that preoccupy Atwood's more recent novels.

As the earliest text explored by this study, *Lady Oracle* provides an opportunity to explore an early forerunner of the figure of the woman as player and played that is now gaining prominence in Canadian narratives. A Torontonion and an eccentric, Joan Foster is clearly distinct from the protagonist of *Surfacing* whose rural location facilitates the crisis of humanity she experiences. She is kin to Stacey of Margaret Laurence's *Fire Dwellers* (1969) for she shares with her an urban setting and a concern with the

⁷ An earlier version of this segment was presented as "Foreplay: Atwood Reading/Writing Sex in the Canadian Postmodern" at **Margaret Atwood: The Open Eye Symposium** at the University of Ottawa, March 2004.

stultifying aspects of marriage; but she does not share the fierce independence of Laurence's Hagar Shipley and Morag Gunn, nor does she share their small-town location. If the iconic Canadian woman character is rooted in Susannah Moodie's wilderness-fighting, pioneer self as represented in *Roughing It in the Bush* (1852), then figures like Joan and Stacey challenge icons of Canadianicity and of womanhood.

Because *Lady Oracle* is a relatively early example of this playing woman figure that challenges moribund icons of Canadian women, a large body of criticism has accreted around it, little of which takes sufficiently into account the extraordinary and resisting ludicism that Joan acquires in Atwood's hands. While it is in many ways more conventional than the other texts under consideration in these pages, it establishes a precedent for writing playful women and writing playful texts, and on this consideration alone the text requires reassessment. As is the case for Jeanette Winterson's writing I and Brossard's *Cybil*, Joan's ludicism infuses the world she inhabits but also inflects the exegesis of the story that tells her.

In *Lady Oracle*, ontological play combines with a sense of irreverence and mischievous transgression to produce an image of the writer as a clown-like visitor from another realm ready to improve this world by making it more like her own. That she is at odds with the new environment is suggested by the intermingling of a Gothic discourse with her own screwball discourse. This writer-clown plays and is played, and the dissonance between the two discourses further vexes the dynamic reciprocity that subtends the relationship between citizen and state. The resulting serial recession of the

limits of representation and reality, of politics and aesthetics, contributes to the dynamic confusion and the quality of dizziness that permeates the narration of *Lady Oracle*.

As Menard's *Quixote* exceeds and envelops Cervantes's original in Borges's story, so Joan's text exceeds and envelops her life. Her Costume Gothics are fuelled with material inspired by family, friends and acquaintances, and in an exchange of process, her romance novels seem to shape her life as well. Her specified addressee in the life-memoir comprised by *Lady Oracle* is a newspaper reporter. He is not identified until the text's very last paragraphs, but he affects how Joan emplots her autobiography, just as Fraser Buchanan, whose textual presence is relatively subdued, provides the hypotext for Joan's metanarrative autobiography through his little blackmail book (292-4). She expects Buchanan to break the news about her marital infidelities, just as she expects that the reporter's news article will break the news that her death was a hoax: her confessions are therefore also rationalizations.

The "dizzy dame" persona she constructs for herself—a lovable, intriguing, error-prone Joan who is marginally competent and vulnerable to circumstances—is a gameful solution to the problem. She spins about within her life, as much at the mercy of forces she cannot control as Sterne's Tristram Shandy. The lack of control connects alternately to the Gothic patterns of the romance novels Joan writes and to the crutch of the screwball mask.

As she addresses the newspaper reporter, Joan is currently in Terremoto, a "Mediterranean paradise." But this paradise is imperfectly satisfactory, so that because she misses her ineffectual but sinister husband, and because her sense of story and

audience has shifted along the way, her project is to re-catalyze the interpellation process. She means to achieve this on her own terms—effectively, to invert the standard process by becoming the *interpellating* entity rather than the *interpellated* entity. Her experience in writing successfully compelling worlds promises her success in this project, but her awareness of her own techniques and motivations is undermined by the contaminating effects of the discourses she uses, which are mutually contaminating and indeterminate. The ambiguous end that Atwood constructs for Joan leaves room for the full success-failure spectrum.

Joan's struggle is energized by what Gayatri Spivak (1994) terms the ironic vision and double-voicedness imposed on her by her old life, and by its "covert and overt violence practiced by the ideologic and systemic manipulation of rational principles, such as due process, human rights, and democracy" (26). Joan's screwball persona tends to minimize and parody this hegemonic violence as much as it does her own efforts to reciprocate. Still, the outside social, political, and cultural entities that urge her to comply and be complicit with them do violate her sense of due process, human rights and democracy, as much scholarship on the novel attests.

In the screwball comedies of the 1930s, as Duane Byrge and Robert Milton Miller observe (1991; 1-4), happiness is pursued continuously. Screwball comedies play with conventional power structures by portraying those who seek happiness as rich people who are "innocently aggressive, noisily silly, endearingly defiant, and happily destructive [...] little children at play repeatedly disturb[ing] the [adults'] peace and boredom" (2). Screwball comedies emphasize that happiness and its pursuit are not intrinsic to

citizenship, which is commonly understood as a status earned by demonstrating civic responsibility. When Joan, like Hollywood's wealthy screwball clowns, chooses to ignore the distinction between privilege and right, she hyperbolizes the privileges inherent within citizenship, drawing attention to its limits.

The struggle between citizen and hegemony in Joan's experience resembles the dual battle between the sexes and the classes in screwball film. Contemporaneous commentators Richard Griffith and Arthur Mayer eroticize the separation between the screwball world and "regular life:" "A new image of courtship and marriage began to appear, with man and wife no longer expecting ecstatic bliss, but treating the daily experience of living as a crazy adventure sufficient to itself" (qtd. in Andrew Sarris [1998], 94). A characteristic feature of screwball comedies is a strong, rebellious woman who refuses to let her chaos be tamed (see Lori Landay [1998], and Tina Olsen Lent [1995]). Sarah Kozloff (2000) observes that the romantic ideal in screwball comedies is less to find a soulmate than to find a playmate who is "quick-witted and relaxed enough to *play with [her,]*" making it clear to all and sundry that the two "are meant for each other" (Kozloff 180; Kozloff's italics). Screwball women do not need to be "completed" by a soulmate because they are already sufficient in themselves. They do, however, want to be diverted, and the means by which they achieve diversion often catalyzes a rupture of the dichotomous, androcentric, restrictive realities in which they find themselves.

Joan's very presence in her fictional world seems to rupture and dualize "reality." Her dominant ontology follows "normal" laws of logic, but a secondary possible world is also present, a ludicrous spin-off of the dominant world. Produced by one individual's

distinctive interpretation of reality—Joan's, for example—the logical laws of the secondary world are as internally consistent as those of the dominant world, but read as distinctly skewed and off-kilter. In conventional screwball comedies, this skewing often originates with the woman, and is emphasized by intensive wordplay. Her madcap behaviour is well-intentioned, and while full extermination is unnecessary—this eccentricity may function as an acceptable “feminine equivalent” to masculine spirit, and is a continuing source of “fun” to boot—such behaviour must be tempered to placate the norms of the era and world she inhabits.

In screwball comedies, the search for a romantic partner does not presume a lack on behalf of the seeker, but an agreeable surplus once the player secures her playmate. The preference for a playmate over a soul-mate models alternate possibilities for the construction of the human subject and of the human citizen. If fluid provisionality can ironicize even such over-determined human experiences as the quest for a partner, then other over-determined relationships such as that between citizen and state can and should become ironicized.

Joan amplifies a certain clownishness in order to be seen as entertaining. She is candid about her need to write, which is almost physical as well as psychological, but is less explicit on whether texts can bring change to any world outside their own. Her ambivalence toward the readers of her book of poetry *Lady Oracle*, who make such immediate and extensive demands on her skills of self-explication, suggests that she is skeptical about her own ability, and that of her text, to bring any change of value to this needy and desirous group of fans. She is gentler with the readers of her *Costume Gothics*,

and clearer on the restorative, tension-release value of her narratives within their lives, but it is also clear that she understands any benefit her books bring to their lives to be evanescent. Her adoptive screwball discourse minimizes the effect, positive or negative, of her texts on her reading publics. Joan's universe will continue to unfold as it should, no matter what escapades next unfold for herself or her heroines.

Joan's clownish, screwball persona is attached to her writing. She constantly and insincerely frets about her preference for writing schlocky Gothic romances rather than the "Literature" she "should" be producing. She bathetically diminishes any pretensions towards "artistry" or aestheticism. Her situation seems more desperate than that of most screwballs because the dysfunctions of the interpellative norm mark her deeply. Where the screwball women of cinema scorn to seek acceptance from any but their intended playmate, the goal of finding acceptance is suggested by Joan's preoccupation with how friends, lovers, mother, and her reading public react to her. As a writer of Gothic romances, she believes she thinks of her search in Gothic terms, conceiving of her "ideal other" as a soul-mate rather than a playmate with the power both to validate and to obliterate her. In the process she trades in her own self-sufficiency for immanent lack. The intersection of screwball sensibilities with Gothic-style emplotments is volatile for Joan, and will eventually necessitate that she simulate her own obliteration. More straightforwardly phrased, Joan fakes her own death (302-07).

Yet Joan readily abandons the Gothic paradigm for a science fiction paradigm in the last paragraphs of *Lady Oracle*, throwing into doubt the sincerity of her affinity for Gothic emplotments. Margery Fee contends that Joan feels an incipient attraction to the

reporter (1993; 19); thus she must find a way to tell her life in a way that seduces. The screwball discourse is the idiom she selects, indicating a desire for a playful seducing audience—for one cannot be seduced without first seducing, as Jean Baudrillard contends—and not a seducer that pretends to be a soul-mate. Therefore the life-story she tells to the reporter-narratee must construct Joan as charming, funny, endearing, talented, and non-threatening; it must represent this persona as desirable, fragile, under threat, and responsive to the narratee's engagement with it; and it must be sensitive to the fact that the reporter may in turn re-narrate and re-emplot this tale, as Maude Laures does in *Désert Mauve*.

Joan's idiosyncracies resist the expectations she places on this narrative, which will help shape public opinion of her and rationalize her staged death, as Fee points out (79), and which will have some legal valence in court. Thus the reporter's story must not diverge substantially from the testimony she will offer in order to rescue her accomplices Sam and Marlene. But at the same time the reporter's article must also bring her husband Arthur to empathize with her. She works gamely towards accomplishing these imperatives. For a time, the demands of constructing such a narrative occlude Joan's intuitions that Arthur, the man she reads as a soul-mate, is behind the sinister notes and dead animals left for her to find. *Lady Oracle* becomes a spiraling narrative that compulsively revolves around a cognitive chasm. Although she shies away from their many congruencies, the life Joan has written for herself duplicates the plots of the novels

she publishes, at least in the fact that she has married a man who needs to obliterate her in order to maintain his own sense of self.⁸

Her Gothic romance readers demand simplicity: predictable plots and stereotypical characters. Joan allows this demand to infiltrate her real life. She seeks recognition repeatedly for what she sees as her “positive” aspects, these being qualities that link her with the romantic heroine figures she constructs. At the same time, she uses the screwball discourse to deflect attention away from any “monstrous” aspect of herself, which she displaces onto the transgressive villainess-wives of her novels. Her husband Arthur expects Joan to be both a domestic and an intellectual dilettante who supports him and his political radicalism, and so Joan becomes politically-minded, supportive, faithful, dedicated and loyal although absent-minded. She both works and takes university courses on a part-time basis. She is also a poor cook, and just inept enough in politics, academics and daily life to show off her husband to advantage. Perpetuating her “deception” of him by maintaining the disguise instead of revealing that she is a romance writer challenges the idea of validation through true love on which she bases her novels, but it also troubles the concept of a stable identity that underpins the commonplace of the good citizen.

Joan continues to write her Costume Gothics despite many obstacles, or perhaps because there are many obstacles. She pursues her career at the expense of conventional constructions of secure marriages, and is only content when she is performing transgression through narrative:

⁸Ann McMillan (1988) contends that Gothic tradition is largely predicated on the obliteration of the female protagonist.

It was only after I got married that my writing became for me anything more than an easy way of earning a living. I'd always felt sly about it, as if I was getting away with something ... but now it became important. The really important thing was not the books themselves, which continued to be much the same. It was the fact that I was two people at once, with two sets of identification papers, two bank accounts, two different groups of people who believed I existed. I was Joan Foster, there was no doubt about that; people called me that name and I had authentic documents to prove it. But I was also Louisa K. Delacourt.

As long as I could spend a certain amount of time each week as Louisa, I was all right, I was patient and forbearing, warm, a sympathetic listener. But if I was cut off, if I couldn't work at my current Costume Gothic, I would become mean and irritable, drink too much and start to cry. (214-15)

Having fictionalized her aunt, appropriated her name, and inhabited the Louisa-persona she has constructed, Joan has become addicted to the giddy, fluctuating, "either/or" of being Joan/Louisa. Having two identities allows Joan to exceed, outrageously and mischievously, the rigid limitations Arthur imposes on Joan's personality—under his very nose. She also challenges his Marxist political position by supplementing their finances via the "politically incorrect" profession of romance writer. Strategy, chance, role-playing and quasi-Shakespearean high foolery combine to make of Joan's multiple lives a high-stakes, addictively entertaining, and very serious game.

Despite the escape offered her by her two identities, Joan drifts and floats through existence: "It was true I had two lives, but on off days I felt that neither of them was completely real. With Arthur I was merely playing house, I wasn't really working at it. And my Costume Gothics were only paper; paper castles, paper costumes, paper dolls, as inert and lifeless finally as those unsatisfactory blank-eyed dolls I'd dressed and undressed in my mother's house" (218). Not writing suspends Joan between two

binaristic unrealities. She is disconnected, two-dimensional, and suspended, a writer disengaged from her worlds, a reader without a deictic anchor.

From childhood, Joan experiences drifting, whirling, floating, and also dancing, as uniquely dangerous but compelling activities that relate to conflicting ideologies. She understands her corporeal form as having catalyzed the fetish when, at approximately age seven, she is forced to represent a mothball at the recital instead of the butterfly she has trained to be. Delight becomes agony as the screwball/gothic dichotomy begins:

I threw myself into the part, it was a dance of rage and destruction, tears rolled down my cheeks behind the fur [costume], the butterflies would die; my feet hurt for days afterward. 'This isn't me,' I kept saying to myself, "they're making me do it"; yet even though I was concealed in the teddy-bear suit, which flopped about me and made me sweat, I felt naked and exposed, as if this ridiculous dance was the truth about me and everyone could see it. (47)

The dichotomy between butterfly and mothball, obedience and rebellion, acceptance and rejection, dancer and destroyer occupies a hot, sweaty, tearful, painful, naked and exposed space that yokes together and, for Joan, fetishizes the binaries of appearance and reality, truth and perception, pleasure and pain, honesty and deception, concealment and discovery. All such binaries will mutually undermine and contaminate each other.

Joan's experience of humiliation also permits transgression and subversion. Already bathetically sexualized, the butterfly/mothball fiasco exposes the gaps between the mundane world and Joan's unique subjectivity. Joan's best-matched playmate might be a person as subject to nakedness and exposure as herself, willing to volatilize humiliation by performing transgressive rage. The rage and destruction he enacts might equally be designed to destroy the butterfly dance and kill the butterflies. Her repressive

husband Arthur is constructed as a restrained and controlled man who resists exposure; when his friends and associates do not match his conceptions of them, he obliterates them from his life by leaving sinister items for them, also sabotaging their standing in the social circle they share with him.

While he promises to be the closest fit—he dances with her, and unveils a new side of his personality under pressure—the Royal Porcupine does not extend the game as far as Joan requires of an ideal playmate. He matches her step for step: in appearance by sharing her red hair and green eyes, in anachronistic clothing through his costume of cloak and top hat embroidered in porcupine-quills, and in outrageous pop-art he outstrips her visionary poetry through his displays of animals literally frozen in their death-postures. Even his willingness to completely re-create himself in the image of what he thinks she desires most (271-73) echoes Joan's willingness to adopt a false identity for the person she loves. The romantic Royal Porcupine melts away, however, leaving in his place the distinctly suburban, predictably jealous, weak-chinned and needy Chuck Brewer. Encountering the Royal Porcupine/ Chuck plays up the tensions about which of Joan's identities is "real," and the related question of which ideology she should endorse.

This question is complicated even further when Joan fakes her death, abandons her life, and escapes to Terremoto, an Italian village she had visited with Arthur and which has strong romantic and sexual resonance for her. The villagers eventually grow hostile towards Joan, making anti-witchcraft gestures at her and keeping their children away (314). As Mr. Vitroni explains (326), the rejection is catalyzed by her uncanny and inexplicable physical transformation from the sexy, vital, "Junoesque" wife with flowing

red tresses they remember from her earlier visit into a mousy, husbandless "concentration camp inmate" or "secretary on vacation" (10). In order to avoid being recognized as the presumed-dead author of the cult-hit poetry book Lady Oracle, Joan has cut her hair short with nail scissors, hidden it under a scarf, screened her green eyes behind sunglasses, and shrouded her figure, once clad in velvet gowns and shimmering saris, in baggy print dresses (9-10, 22). In so doing, she transforms herself into a drab wife and member of the masses of whom even the self-righteous Arthur might approve, now that she is bereft of the glamorous garb that he finds "a personal insult" (18) even while it arouses him.

This is a far cry from the romantic vision Joan had expected to become after escaping to Terremoto: "... I had visions of myself as a Mediterranean splendor, golden brown, striding with laughing teeth into an aqua sea, carefree at last ..." (3). The disguise Joan actually adopts diametrically opposes the powerful, privileged, independent, sexual "Mediterranean splendor" of a woman she imagined. Joan has followed the pattern established by the Royal Porcupine: the transformation of an exotic anachronism into the suburban banal.

Paradoxically attracted to their surface exoticism and anxious about their concealed depths, Joan is ambivalent toward all of her lovers, each of whom mirrors her own dichotomous tensions. Her ambivalence suggests that "the perfect mate" might be a mythical thing, but also that being unique to the extent of being un-matable is similarly impossible. She exhibits no such ambivalence about one of her two reader-collectives: those who read her Costume Gothics, she seems to believe, are entirely comprehensible and entirely pleasurable. For them she writes love-stories that emplot aspects of her own

experience within a Gothic and romantic paradigm. Hayden White and Northrop Frye would assert that its romantic aspect reasserts the value of individuality and particularity within the social world; meanwhile, the Gothic aspect of it flirts with the obliterating potential of past ideologies. Each of Joan's Costume Gothics becomes a parable underscoring the triumph of the particular against a hostile collectivity.

For Joan, defiance of hegemony and/or dominating ideologies is a basic characteristic of good citizenship. The "nation" of readers she constructs through her texts must endorse this characteristic as well, but will not reduce the need to perpetuate the struggle artificially, to play with goodness and the ideological. Her means of achieving this on a personal level is through masquerade and disguise, but inevitably her personas, still energized by the screwball/Gothic tension that overtakes the childhood butterfly/mothball dichotomy, inflect her textual production as well.

Criticism on Atwood's *Lady Oracle* has often delighted in the sheer variety of these characters. In "Other Side, Other Woman: *Lady Oracle*" (1989), Molly Hite lists some of Joan's faces: "nurturing and bubble-headed wife, shy and middle-aged author of mass-market fantasies for women, kinkily sexy quondam mistress, and exotic and otherworldly cult 'poetess'" (162). Each of these identities spawns two or more faces. As Margery Fee observes, Joan "frequently depicts herself as unable to take responsibility for her behaviour. Sometimes she moves to the other extreme, apparently believing that she can make up her own identity, regardless of her past, just as she composes the identity of her fictional characters" (37). Joan the romance writer is thought of as a shy, retiring librarian by the publishers, while her readers think of her as brisk-shouldered and

professional. Joan the wife is a screwball, a screw-up, an intellectual, a student, an activist, a scapegoat. Joan in *Terremoto* is an affectionately-remembered return tourist and a threat to village safety. Joan the poet is a combination of Rod McKuen, Khalil Gibran and Leonard Cohen, as well as being a mystic conduit for the words of angels. Joan the teenager is a rebellious daughter, a confidante and good sport, an adoring niece, a regular attendee at spiritualist services, fat girl, dieting girl, waitress, fairground worker and mourner. Joan the mistress has affairs both with a Polish count who sees her simultaneously as a trophy, as competition, and as burden, and with an avant-garde artist who sees her as a trophy, a cult figure, a sex-playmate, and a possible wife. Joan the dead is the product of an elaborate con, the subject of a cult following, the subject of a murder investigation, and, lost and anxious in *Terremoto*, Joan is a citizen away from her state.

Small wonder that Linda Hutcheon numbers Joan among Atwood's "women who seem to possess subjectivities that are much less easily defined in traditional terms, that are more fragmented and even multiple" (1988: 145). Eleonora Rao (1993) observes that many of Atwood's female protagonists are similarly multiple:

Atwood's treatment of character and subjectivity presents the ego as inconsistent and in constant process. The novels challenge the notion of a coherent and self-sufficient subjectivity accepted by bourgeois ideology. They confute notions of "human essence" that sees individuals as possessing a number of innate qualities, which would make change impossible. On the contrary, Atwood's poetic vision lays stress on metamorphosis and change. (xvii)

Joan experiences change as a kind of simultaneous or concurrent r/evolution of subjectivities. Writing permits Joan to complicate matters still more. She writes versions of her many subjectivities into her romance fictions as characters, juxtaposing them with

others she encounters in her actual life. She constructs them for a vast, amorphous collective of an intended audience that she imagines as composed of her female high-school friends along with herself as ideal reader. Of necessity she glamourizes her shifting subjectivities in order to make them compelling enough to sweep her readers out of their dispirited lives. Glamourizing them presupposes simplifying them to smooth their rough edges and make them less "gray and multi-dimensional and complicated" (271).

Joan writes for women oppressed by men, but she also writes for the "real" working masses. Their desires are uninteresting to Paul the Polish count, inscrutable to people like Arthur, Marlene and Sam despite their theorizing, and immaterial to the Royal Porcupine/Chuck Brewer. She constructs the needs of this collective as unrecognized or disregarded both by well-meaning activists and by the capitalist pressures ("life") that keep them marginalized. Her adopted Gothic sensibility colours her perceptions. She does not see her collective readership as innovative and resourceful bringers of change, as people who seek playmates to enliven their worlds. Instead, Joan sees her readers as trapped and vulnerable to victimization, as people whose search for a soul-mate reflects their faith in an illusory promise of stability and validation, but who find only imprisonment, sublimation, and abjection.

As Joan understands him, Arthur would see the books that she writes as hopelessly bourgeois. The fact that she writes them interrogates his definitions of the bourgeois and the radical, and the fact that their patterns inflect her life questions the validity of his differentiations. The ambivalently romantic and Gothic lenses through which she reads/writes life experience trouble Arthur's preferred Marxist identity as well

as her bohemian one. She writes her texts under conditions of suburban oppression and under the assumption that her readers, like herself, will see acceptance as the solution to that oppression, but she does not distinguish between earning acceptance and granting it. Her insistence on her own happiness, on her dizzy dame persona, and on the glamorous aspects of her writing life erects an artificial barrier between herself and her readers. It prevents her from recognizing herself in her perception of them.

Tropes of glamour provide distorted images of empowerment for the “collapsed soufflés” (31) who will read books like Love, My Ransom or Stalked by Love. That such problematic characteristics retain auras of romantic mystique is made clear when Joan’s “sexy” red hair is replicated dizzily in the media (10-11). According to Shuli Barzilai (2000), Joan’s hair echoes the quasi-Victorian “dangerous duality” of women (240) and connects with the exotic via fairy tales and Romantic literature. Atwood suggests that Joan’s romance novels are not solely responsible for perpetuating the negative stereotypes that the hegemony insists on reading as affirmative. Likewise, this hegemony is unwilling to recognize that such narratives are “[w]orse than trash, for didn’t they exploit the masses, corrupt by distracting, and perpetuate degrading stereotypes of women as helpless and persecuted?” It has a “pure quintessential need for escape” (30).

Joan says of the women who form this collective that

Life had been hard on them and they had not fought back, they’d collapsed like soufflés in a high wind. Escape wasn’t a luxury for them, it was a necessity. They had to get it somehow. And when they were too tired to invent escapes of their own, mine were available for them at the corner drugstore, neatly packaged like the other painkillers. They could be taken in capsule form, quickly and discreetly ...” (30-31).

Joan constructs her readers and their neo-hegemony as disillusioned, exhausted, abjected, and in desperate need of escape and hope. The desire to be rescued, one possible expression of the desire for escape, becomes the equivalent of a desire to be interpellated, of being made subject to a system that by integrating its subjects offers them a security and support that dulls the edge of being made anonymous, invisible, a faceless member of a collective rather than a unique outcast. It also becomes the desire for recognition, acceptance, and perhaps approval.

The prospects of not being interpellated and not interpellating, then, become simultaneously less bearable and more inevitable: the obstacles to being recognized, accepted, valued increase with the degree of idiosyncrasy and alienation expressed in each potential subject. The difficult, thankless task of reshaping that relentlessly self-perpetuating hegemony from the outside with painful, slow, excruciating, loving care and utopian hope becomes more necessary and less likely; the prospect of subjection also seems more necessary and less likely.

Significantly, Joan claims no similar understanding of the readers of her poetry collection, Lady Oracle. She seems mystified and amused by the extent to which this work is lionized by her publishers and embraced by the public. She represents her decision to send it out as based on impulse, and only the fact that she determinedly sends it to a second publisher when the first rejects it (226-27) suggests that deeper urges underlie her impulse to publish this poetry. She does not anticipate a readership for it beyond observing that her "experimental" poems "seemed to me to be as good as a few similar books I'd seen in bookstores" (225); apparently she has never read such a book

closely. "I had as much right to try [to publish poetry] as the next person," she decides, and "screw[s] up her courage" to try her second choice: Morton and Sturgess, a reputable Canadian publishing house and an amiable parody of Atwood's publisher, McClelland and Stewart.

On accepting her poems, Morton and Sturgess courts Joan through a three-man team of editors. The men critique her poetry in terms of its literary achievement and marketability. Claiming that *Lady Oracle* will have "something for everyone" (227), they construct the book as a valuable commodity, a vehicle of the hegemony, and a medium for interpellation. These mainstream literary editors intend to publish her text because they see it as ideally-conceived for a mainstream market with highbrow aspirations. This situation comments obliquely on the situation of Maude Lares in Nicole Brossard's *Le Désert Mauve*, who takes on the task of translating Angstelle's novel as a way of interacting with and affecting the world's potential. Joan, in comparison, seems motivated by self-interest. The publication of her poems could compensate for her imperfect interpellation into the human social world by validating her incidental poetry. Ironically, this "literary" work, an adjective that Joan is not alone in questioning, exposes her to a mainstream, pop-art publicity.

Her hunger for approval dramatizes the desiring subject for whom desire is indeterminate, being sexual, emotional, psychological and political in nature. For such a subject desire is unfulfillable, and Atwood reinforces Joan's intuition that her hunger will never be sated by providing no resolution to the central conflicts sketched in excerpts from Joan's *Costume Gothics*. Atwood's readers never learn, for example, whether Sir

Edmund DeVere is a hero or a villain for Samantha Deane in Escape from Love. This ambivalence is significant, since Arthur walks into Joan's life in the DeVere role just as Joan is considering taking a lover to escape from Paul (162-64). Joan does not require these plot tensions to dangle; she wrote the resolutions herself long ago. But her omission of them in her autobiography perpetuates Scheherezade's trickster technique. It ensures that her audience will return and that she will survive because she abandons the narrative before its end, leaving her audience in suspense—they are captivated by the narrative, and dependent on her mercy for release. Narrating her own life does not relieve Joan's ambivalence toward Arthur and Paul, but transforms it, accentuating its function as a survival tool.

Similarly, in Love, My Ransom, the fragment Joan inserts into her life story abandons the psychic heroine Penelope mid-narrative, while she is in the clutches of a pair of gypsies. They plan to use her psychic abilities to access some unnamed knowledge (219-220). This narrative starts Joan's flirtation with automatic writing, since she experiments with it in order to research the characters, and it eventually leads her to publish Lady Oracle under her own name rather than under her aunt's, Louisa Delacourt. The gypsy excerpt is too short and unfinished even to provide any clues as to whether the gypsies are actual villains or friends in disguise. Yet the gypsy Estelle is obviously the same red-haired, small-toothed replica of Joan who functions as a villainess in the rest of her romance novels (see Fee, also McKinstry [1987]). The ambiguous status of the gypsies anticipates Joan's dubious success as visionary poet and cult celebrity. The same ambiguity that shrouds the gypsies suffuses the editors at Morton and Sturgess, who

virtually salivate over the projected commercial success of Joan Foster's Lady Oracle, like Estelle and François salivating over Penelope's occult ability. Their publicity tours propel Joan into the arms of the Royal Porcupine, the only one of Joan's lovers whom she does not transform into the hero/villain of a Costume Gothic.

Stalked by Love, the partial manuscript Joan brings with her to complete in Terremoto, is the most extensively represented Costume Gothic of the lot. As Joan's sympathies abandon Charlotte in favour of Felicia, however, and as Redmond becomes less and less satisfactory as a Gothic hero, this narrative dissolves into its component parts rather than resolving. It seems Joan plans to abandon it: "I won't write any more Costume Gothics, though: I think they were bad for me" (345). In the last paragraphs of *Lady Oracle* she considers writing science fiction narratives instead, which are often understood to follow a utopian thrust. Popularized publicly as occurring in the "final frontier" of space, science fiction may or may not be "better for you" as Joan hopes (345), but it does ostensibly offer fresh alternatives for constructing subjectivities, and it may offer escape routes from exhausted gothic romance worlds haunted by the spectres of the past.

Joan's Costume Gothics have been very much haunted by her past spectres. Susan Jaret McKinstry contends that Joan "uses nothing new, but recycles names (Joan Foster, Louisa Delacourt) and incidents (her mother at the triple mirror) in several different genres until she is satisfied as an artist with the effect" (1987: 67). This resembles the "fort/da" game described by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920/1961), an infant's game that, he theorizes, rehearses and amplifies the pleasure of the absent

mother's return by controlling the absence and return of his toys by throwing them. Joan rehabilitates past experience by re-writing it and exerting her own control over it.

Joan's most frequently recycled characters include herself—McKinstry points out that she "casts herself in her Gothics as victimizer and in her confessional life story as victim" (61)—and her mother. Fee provides a reading of Stalked by Love, in which the slender, tidy Charlotte increasingly resembles Joan's mother, and in which we see the tempestuous Felicia in a different light:

Charlotte is looking forward to behaving just as Joan's mother had after Aunt Lou's death (118), and suddenly the power struggle between Charlotte and Felicia is starting to resemble Joan's messy power struggle with her tidy mother. In essence, Joan begins to realize that her heroines, tidy, virginal and conventional, represent her mother's wish for her. To kill off Felicia, then, is to kill off, again, that part of herself that her mother (and most of society, in fact) deemed unacceptable, that is, the part that is loving, passionate, emotional, creative, and unconventional. (Fee 72)

In plotting Charlotte's reaction to Felicia's demise (Atwood 318), Joan recycles her mother's response to Aunt Lou's death (117-19). Mrs. Delacourt's erasure of Louisa resembles a quiet celebration at the elimination of a rival for her husband's affections, whether his sister or his daughter. As she is writing Stalked by Love, Joan confronts Redmond/ Arthur's preference for Charlotte/Mrs. Delacourt: "*with her stays and her particular ways, her white flannelette face, her blanched fingers ... her coolness intrigued him*" (320; Atwood's italics and ellipsis). In contrast, Felicia takes on grotesque qualities; her untrammelled figure and mind "spread like crabgrass," "like fire," "like cancer or pubic lice."

In the secret world where she plies her expertise, Joan replicates the dysfunctional relationships that plague her. But while she reproduces the conflict too accurately to permit herself to escape, she also avoids the conclusions to which her intuitions lead her. Her least contaminated representation of herself is located in the lady on the barge from her Lady Oracle, but she does not recognize herself in this figure: "She was enormously powerful, almost like a goddess, but it was an unhappy power. This woman puzzled me. She wasn't like anyone I'd ever imagined, and certainly she had nothing to do with me. I wasn't at all like that, I was happy. Happy and inept" (224). Joan persists in believing that this exercise connects her to a mysterious but emphatically separate Other Side. She does not recognize that she is looking at *herself* in a mirror while engaging in automatic writing, and that the writing may forge a link to a hidden self.

When Joan permits herself to stop replicating herself as the villainess Felicia who, as McKinstry suggests, imprisons Charlotte and women like her "in passive roles;" when she transforms men like Redmond "into monsters" (McKinstry 65); and when she lets herself see with the victim's eye, then she gains the ability to use what Ann McMillan calls the "transforming eye" of the Gothic heroine. According to McMillan,

In order to obtain her happy ending, the heroine must be able to bring both villain and hero out of the shadows, to distinguish between them. She does not simply recognize a hero, however; creation and recognition are simultaneous processes. Her need for salvation, her vulnerability, evokes heroic qualities in the man who rushes to her defence and thus becomes the hero. (48)

In Joan's case, when she can access the transforming eye she can recognize the disguised and commingled elements of hero, victim and villain within her central characters and, by

extension, within herself. With her transforming gaze she can construct herself as any combination of the three.

By the end of *Lady Oracle* Joan seems to have selected a benign fusion of the three. Regarding Joan's assault of the reporter in Rome, McMillan contends that "The fact that she has actually injured a complete stranger because, to her transforming eye, he 'looked like someone else' at last frees Joan from her self-created maze" (62). Joan feeds her own self-deception: "[Arthur's] indifference was feigned, I told myself. Any moment now his hidden depths would heave to the surface; he would be passionate and confess his long-standing devotion" (197). Her later observation that Arthur "loved me under false pretences, so I shouldn't feel too rejected when he stops" (345) and that "My mother was a vortex, a dark vacuum, I would never be able to make her happy. Or anyone else. Maybe it was time for me to stop trying" (331) suggest that she has thought the unthinkable, and has managed nevertheless to maintain a degree of equanimity.

Luce Irigaray (1991) suggests that mirrors are "invested by the (masculine) 'subject' to reflect himself, to copy himself" (354). Joan claims the position of Irigaray's masculine subject in an epiphany she experiences when unexpectedly reunited with Paul: "I felt I'd never really loved anyone, not Paul, not Chuck the Royal Porcupine, not even Arthur. I'd polished them with my love and expected them to shine, brightly enough to return my own reflection, enhanced and sparkling" (284-85). This epiphany permits Joan to abandon her romantic illusions: "all gallantry now seemed to me futile," she says, and "Besides, I didn't want to be rescued by [Paul]." Gallant behaviour presupposes that the gallantry will be reciprocal, that the high-minded, non-self-interested conduct of one will

elicit similar conduct in another. Joan infers that it is her own “insufficient love” and inadequately transformative vision that have prevented her from transforming Arthur, Chuck and Paul from mundane humans into the paragons she desires, and that she thinks she herself desires to be. By extension, her inferior material has refused their well-intentioned attempts to transform her. She has been reading herself as their muse and inspiration, the force that impels them to transcend their limitations and exceed all expectations, and recognizes only now that they want the same thing she does: to become more themselves, not to be re-shaped and improved according to the desires and standards of another.

Having achieved this recognition, Joan dances for pleasure: “I raised myself onto my bare toes and twirled around, tentatively at first. The air filled with spangles. I lifted my arms and swayed them in time to the gentle music, I remembered the music, I remembered every step and gesture. It was a long way down to the ground from here; I was a little dizzy. I closed my eyes. Wings grew from my shoulders, an arm slid around my waist.... ” (335; Atwood’s ellipsis). This pleasantly vertiginous dance does come to an abrupt end—Joan dances into the broken glass and cuts her feet.⁹ But while she briefly doubts her ability to escape on these bleeding feet (336), the wounds prove to be only temporary obstacles that are insufficient to halt the unstoppable force that is Joan.

⁹ Barzilai and others have commented on the “blood sacrifice” aspect of Joan’s injury, which connects with the Hans Christian Anderson tale of the Little Mermaid that pervades *Lady Oracle*. In mythic and folk tales the price paid for knowledge is often blood. The glass has been broken to begin with because of Joan’s dream of her weeping mother, who reaches for her from the other side of the glass (330-31).

4.4 Conclusions

In "Word, Dialogue and Novel" (1966), Julia Kristeva, working through Mikhail Bakhtin, distinguishes between epic and carnivalistic narratives and between Socratic and Menippean discourses. She suggests that in the twentieth-century novel, structures like "[i]dentity, substance, causality, and definition are transgressed so that others may be adopted: analogy, relation, opposition, and therefore dialogism and Menippean ambivalence" (86). Both Brossard's and Atwood's narratives clearly adhere to Kristeva's construction of Menippean texts. Again following Bakhtin, Kristeva traces Menippean discourse back to such classical writers as Antisthenes, Heraclitus, Petronius, Lucan, and Ovid (82) as well as "Rabelais, Cervantes, Swift, Sade, Balzac, Lautréamont, Dostoievski, Joyce, and Kafka" (79-80). Brossard's and Atwood's Menippean narratives emphasize the role of analogy, relation, opposition, dialogism and ambivalence between player and played, seducer and seduced, written reader and read writer, citizen and state. These two texts establish ambivalences that both promote and resist such humanist possibilities as replenished potential, the imagination as a viable resource, and other new and renovated seductions. They promote and resist at once the breakdown of differentiation.

Kristeva's definition of Menippean narratives emphasizes the contingency of narrative. There are always two or more currents involved and while none dominates, they are continually interacting, responding to or resisting one another, translating and

Penetrating the barrier between herself and her dead mother produces Joan's quasi-oracular realization that they have much in common: "She couldn't stand the view from the window, life was her curse."

transforming one another. In "Metamorphoses of a Discipline: Rethinking Canadian Literature Within Institutional Contexts" (2007), Diana Brydon observes a similar shift taking place in the concept of nationhood.

Where once the nation [Canada] and its literature were thought within the frame of international dynamics (implicitly if not always explicitly), it is now more common to understand these within postnational, transnational and globalized contexts. When McClelland and Stewart issued the New Canadian Library paperback series, my parents bought the first run. There were no courses in Canadian literature in the English department when I did my Honours degree in English Language and Literature at the University of Toronto in 1968-72. English as a replacement for religion; English as an education for citizenship: these were the implied but seldom-stated justifications for the discipline when I entered it. They are under pressure now. Religion is reviving. Citizenship is fragmenting and multiplying. Literature is less hegemonic a formation than it once was. (6)

Kristeva's definition of Menippean discourse was first published midway through Brydon's undergraduate degree; not only is it still applicable but it has apparently in some ways expanded. The polyvalency it describes as pertaining to narrative now also pertains to any number of hegemonies, that of nationhood not least: "With transnational mobilities of capital and people, nation-state functions are changing and the legitimacy of this institution [national literature] is also being questioned. At such a moment, it becomes easier to see that the very concept of national literatures is the product of a particular time and place, and a way of perceiving the world that may be losing its relevance or at least shifting its functions" (Brydon 5).

Brydon's focus, given these circumstances where every change brings multiple ripples of response, is not only to examine literature and citizenship, but also institutions and how they participate in these shifts. She divides these institutions "into three

somewhat overlapping categories: government departments, agencies, and arms-length institutions that depend for their funding on the state; the market sector; and civil society non-profit organizations" (5-6). Following Caroline Andrew, she argues that citizenship itself should be thought "as 'multilayered' rather than exclusive," and that it is counterproductive here to think "in terms of 'a preestablished order of priority,' moving instead to looking at specific conditions, specific struggles, and specific sets of actors" (9). Accordingly, while much of this section continues Chapter 4's strategy of engaging *Désert Mauve* and *Lady Oracle* through narratology and through interpellation theory, it will be useful to engage in a brief consideration of these two texts' representation of the publishing industry, its conditions, struggles and actors, already touched on above.

The publishing industry is situated primarily in the market sector, yet in Canada government funding at federal and provincial levels is available to publishers (<http://www.publishers.ca/publishing-writing-grants.htm>); the demands of capitalism (publishing houses tend to be profit-oriented) and of the state commingle here. With regard to Mélanie and Joan, this chapter has consistently referenced interpellation theory and Baudrillard's ideas of seduction with clear implications for the relationship between citizen and state. Aspects of interpellation theory apply to the capitalist marketplace as well: convincing the public to endorse a product by buying it involves convincing individuals that their own social, psychological, or intellectual capital will increase if they purchase the product. Brossard's *Désert Mauve* abstracts the publishing process by focusing primarily on ways in which the industry marks the artifact of the text, while

Atwood's *Lady Oracle* explores the banal collision of capitalist, cultural, and aesthetic demands on textual production.

As noted in 4.2 above, Brossard plays with typographical cues and book design, apparently to distinguish Laure Angstelle's Désert Mauve from Maude Laures' Mauve, l'Horizon. Angstelle's text and Laures' each have their own pagination which supplements the overarching pagination of Brossard's *Désert Mauve*, and each of the three has its own distinct cover with unique design features. Both publishing houses mark their texts via design, suggesting that what each publishes has its own unique identity. Désert Mauve's cover is image free, with the design apparent only in the font (largely consistent letter-type, size, placement) and colour (abyssal black in the center rectangle, liminal grey on the margins; the two shades are separated by a glowing line of white), while Mauve, l'Horizon's cover features a photo of a desert sunrise and four variations in font compared to Désert Mauve's two.

Yet these distinguishing cues in effect link the two fictional publishing houses, Angstelle's Arroyo Press and Laures' Angle Press, and blend their ideologies rather than distinguishing them; it also seems to draw some broad ideological congruencies between Arroyo and Hexagone, Brossard's original publisher. The diegesis of the narrative published by Arroyo is substantially similar to that published by Angle, involving as it does the blend between Mélanie's *künstlerroman* and *l'homme long*'s murder-suspense story. Both Arroyo and Angle Press are willing to take on the publication of unconventional, experimental texts by unknown writers (Angstelle) on the basis of what they contribute to literary culture at large as well as on a profit basis. Angstelle's

contribution to literary culture is demonstrably able to roll on past the initial-stage retail market since Laures finds her copy of Désert Mauve at a second-hand bookshop and since Laures' translation of Désert Mauve is published in its own right, achieving a second and third wave of readers.

In *Désert Mauve* the institution of publishing exists to facilitate textual interaction between writers and readers; it recognizes that transparent function and resists intruding on that relationship. But in Brossard's oblique representation of the publishing institution, publishers understand their buying public as able to see past the banality of such markers and able to recognize a valuable contribution to culture by engaging with it. These publishing houses promote an ideology that values independent, critical thinking and radical revision of conventions so that they come to resemble, if superficially, the civil society nonprofit organizations mentioned by Brydon.

Atwood's Joan considers publishing houses to be in service of the banal, not the radical. She sees Columbine, the publisher of her *Costume Gothics*, as offering a valuable service to readers by producing schlocky romances that provide reassurance and escape, and she sees Morton and Sturgess as slaving minions of capitalism because they transform artifacts of cultural capital into commodities. She never meets any fans of the Louisa Delacourt fictions she writes but she seems more than content with this situation. By imagining them as roughly equivalent to the high school peers she counseled as a teenager she has as much knowledge of them as she needs.

Joan meets many fans of Lady Oracle, on the other hand, and is made uncomfortable by them, suffering through the book launches and media spots. These readers seem to

belong to another camp Brydon mentions, those who agree with the unspoken assumption prevalent in the 1960s and '70s that literature exists as a replacement for religion or that it exists to model good citizenship. These readers are hungry for the instruction and external validation that texts as they know them make available. Joan's descriptions of them imply that they are not willing to act to bring change to the world, but expect the world to supply the change to them.

Joan's comparative evaluation of Columbine and of Morton and Sturgess, *Lady Oracle's* versions of the two Canadian publishing houses Harlequin Publishing and McClelland and Stewart, parodically assigns greater "value" to the mass market company than it does to the literary company that has so influenced the "canon" of Canadian literature (see Brydon's comment above regarding the New Canadian Library). Some of her distrust of Morton and Sturgess arises from the latent cynicism in her three editors' attitude toward their client base, for they predict this client base will quickly succumb to any text with resonances of Khalil Gibran and Rod McKuen. Matching readers to books is a simple process; one must simply know which precedents to cite when marketing the book, for each text has multiple precedents and it is these precedents, not originality, that readers seek.

Yet Columbine is also unambiguous about its reliance on precedent: the texts it sells are unabashedly formulaic. Innovating on its formulas is so far out of the question that, except for transplanting her romances from Costume Gothic worlds to science fiction worlds, the possibility of reworking the tried and true does not arise in Joan's mind. Yet the romance publishing house does not earn Joan's disapproval as Morton and Sturgess

does, perhaps because she avoids interacting with any representative of it. As abstract entities publishing houses are capable of benefiting both readers and writers and of intervening positively in the cultural lives of citizens and civic representatives. As collectivities of human individuals and human effort, publishing houses enhance, even intensify human experience, making their readers ever more vulnerable to outside influence, to old precedents masquerading as new.

The representations of the publishing industry achieved in *Désert Mauve* and *Lady Oracle* are selective and oblique. Laure Angstelle, Maude Laures and Joan Foster are writers, not publishers; while both sides may aim to interpellate citizens into political and or personal transformation, their means of doing so are not fully identical. Diana Brydon observes, "In a world where everything has been politicized to the detriment of the genuinely political, Literature (with a capital L) remains a battleground as the traditional humanities disciplines divide between those who share the fears evoked by Giddens's 'runaway world' and those seeking to understand what it means to say, with Arjun Appadurai, that 'the globe has begun to spin in new ways'" (11). Brossard's *Désert Mauve* perceives the world's new spin; Atwood's *Lady Oracle* worries that the new spin cannot be new enough.

As Menippean texts, *Désert Mauve* and *Lady Oracle* both function as "an exploration of language (of sexuality and death), a consecration of ambivalence and of 'vice'" (Kristeva 80). Their Menippean approach involves the exploration of the dark side of things, that is, of issues that remain under-theorized especially where the bounds of citizenship are concerned. As a youth, Mélanie remains outside the realms of

citizenship and the Real for much of the narrative, but she also occupies the limen that separates them from their opposites. From this liminal location she is free to experiment with reciprocal relations. She does so through her interactions with Angela and through written narrative. Angstelle, meanwhile, experiments with language's relation to sexuality and death, the futility of human interaction and the ineffectuality of language. To some extent, Laures can be read as "consecrating" ambivalence and vice as portals to deeper knowing, since her version of Angela's murder signals catharsis rather than the closure of tragedy. Character and writers meld, offering a spectrum or a continuous portrait of a reciprocal relationship that is unavoidably contingent with its opposite, and that is the thing on which extinction comments.

Both texts examine how language constructs sexual desire and death, both employ "diatribe [and] soliloquy" (Kristeva 82), both "tend toward the scandalous and eccentric in language," and both "destroy man's epic and tragic unity as well as his belief in identity and causality" in their use of "[p]athological states of the soul, such as madness, split personalities, daydreams, dreams, and death" (83). These are gratuitous, equivocal aspects of human experience that go far toward testing the limits of the ties that reciprocally bind citizen and state. Kristeva contends that "Put together as an exploration of the body, dreams, and language, this [Menippean] writing grafts onto the topical: it is a kind of political journalism of its time. Its discourse exteriorizes political and ideological conflicts of the moment. The dialogism of its words *is* practical philosophy doing battle against idealism and religious metaphysics, against the epic" (Kristeva's italics).

In some ways, Menippean narrative endemically critiques the nationalistic discourses that arose in the West more or less concurrently with print capitalism and the novel form itself. Tom Nairn writes, “‘Nationalism’ is the pathology of modern developmental history, as inescapable as ‘neurosis’ in the individual, with much the same essential ambiguity attaching to it, a similar built-in capacity for descent into dementia, rooted in the dilemmas of helplessness thrust upon most of the world (the equivalent of infantilism for societies)” (qtd. in Anderson 5). Understood as a subsidiary of the nation, the state may not be fully immune from these dysfunctions, nor from the preoccupation with death and mortality that Benedict Anderson perceives at the “cultural roots” of “nationalist imagining” (9-11). Anderson connects the growth of ideas of nationhood, which he contends is preoccupied with mortality, to the growth of print culture, which is concerned with generating immortal traces of the mortal. What Kristeva constructs in terms of scandal, eccentricity, madness, diatribe, and so forth, will clearly challenge collective identities built, as Nairn and Anderson read nationhood, on ambiguity and bad faith.

Le Désert Mauve and *Lady Oracle*, like all Menippean texts defined under Kristeva’s terms, exteriorize the “political and ideological conflicts of the moment” by using the body, dreams, and so on. Mélanie’s body provides more than one example. Because it is written differently by Angstelle and by Laures and can thus be read differently in the same situation, Mélanie’s body is a cipher. Even the incidental example of Mélanie’s presence at the bar in both versions of her narrative is illuminating on this count. For the motel owner in Angstelle’s novel, the cipher of Mélanie’s body generates

anxiety because it forces a choice about whether or not it is legally old enough to be served alcohol. Yet for the "same" motel owner in Laures's novel, the "same" cipher facilitates camaraderie, a friendly gesture of solidarity that bypasses the arbitrary law of the age of majority. The body and dreams can conflate as well. As was discussed earlier, Mélanie's epiphany about writing, language and the Real arrives in the form of the daydream or vision that attends her experience of auto-eroticism. In all of these cases, Mélanie's physical presence challenges abstractions generated by ideologies and languages, much as Joan's physical presence challenges similar abstractions in *Lady Oracle*.

Joan's body is put to a different range of uses than Mélanie's because it is also the location of disguise, change, and masquerade. The shape of it changes from the childhood mothball to the mature butterfly, but by adulthood Joan's habit of using garments to project persona vexes the "truths" of corporeal matter, showing them to be unstable, in flux, and subject to material alteration by thought and dream. This relates as well to processes of interpellation. The citizen's body is ultimately held to account for the citizen's compliance to its reciprocal bond with the state, as Joan's body is what will be imprisoned if she returns to Canada and is found guilty of legal offenses relating to her faked death. There is no commensurate form of punishment for the state if it ceases to comply with her civic rights. The physical reality of Joan's body is mercurial, changing shape and appearance, which seems both to challenge the right of the hegemony to dictate the terms of compliance, and to indicate a desire to evade the consequences of

testing the citizen's responsibilities. Its seductive affinity for masquerade performs a subtle Baudrillardian interrogation of the power of the state.

Anticipating Nietzsche's project, Menippean discourse constructs "the social and political thought of an era fighting against theology, against law" (Kristeva 84). This presentation of authority and power as vulnerable to defeat facilitates Nietzsche's metaphysical leap to proclaiming not only the death of God, but the arrogance of designing a god who designs his subjects in deimorphic form. Appropriating Artaud's description of the theatre of cruelty, Kristeva observes that Menippean discourse "'is not equal to individual life, to that individual aspect of life where characters triumph, but rather to a kind of liberated life that sweeps away human individuality and where man is no more than a reflected image'" (84). Kristeva adds, "Menippean discourse is not cathartic; it is a festival of cruelty, but it is also a political act. It transmits no fixed message except that itself should be 'the eternal joy of becoming,' and it exhausts itself in the act and in the present."

In bringing narrative to represent the radical collapse of distinct individualities into the realm of reflections and images, Menippean discourse combines with both a Nietzschean and a Baudrillardian metaphysics, carnivalizing the generative processes that produce citizens for the state. For Laures and her version of *Mélanie*, this amounts to the collapse of the Real into representation, making the struggle into language that much more necessary a task. The collapse is a freeing circumstance, part of whose cruelty involves the demand to exhaust some vestiges of the experience but replenish others, including (with vexed practicality) the cortical transformation of the actual reader. There

is little point in devising a whole new approach to narrative in order to change the way thought processes work, unless that change has some chance of being permanent or at least long-lasting, and in this at least Brossard's project must diverge from the Menippean discourse that Kristeva describes, and to which her texts conform in other respects. There is no similar divergence in Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, where readers who read past the ending might expect that Joan will forever whirl between screwball and Gothic discourses (Menippean and Socratic discourses?), or between the shimmering empty surfaces of language and the Reality it replaces, or in the limbo between resisting an interpellative call that never genuinely comes and issuing an interpellative call that is never heard.

Brossard's Laures and Atwood's Joan render the extant interpellating system ineffective because it is based on dichotomies, hypersensitive to the either/or but blind to the both/and. Laures draws on her entire professional career as engaged instructor of young women, as well as her academic background and what must be construed as her personal reserves, in order to translate Angstelle's fictional world into one that can sustain the both/and, seeding it in their readers. This endorses the positive change effect, translating a violent, misogynist ontology into a liminal region capable of transforming binaries into continuities.

Meanwhile, if Joan's mother and husband are reasonable representatives of the interpellative forces of Joan's world, they suggest a society that desires to obliterate what it cannot tolerate. Joan responds by developing lusory survival skills, in particular, serial self-re-invention—a tactic selected by another Atwood character, Zenia of *The Robber*

Bride (1993). These skills draw partly on intuitive reactions to the threat of obliteration, and partly on a calculated compromise between camouflage and flamboyance that suggests the responsible citizen's struggle to balance complicity and resistance. Joan seems anxious and defensive about the worlds that mark her: that of her mother and Arthur, and her own more chaotic one. Joan inhabits the unresolved tension of the struggle between them, a tension that is exacerbated by her ambivalence. The life-story she tells to the reporter reviles what tries to obliterate her, but the stories she writes for publication valorize exactly those things; to the reporter she represents herself as irrepressible and strong but harmless, while in her novels the women who most resemble her are malicious and manipulative, again anticipating Zenia.

What kind of citizen is Joan? One can read her as having driven the Royal Porcupine away from his art and screwball bohemian lifestyle, then abandoned him. One can read her as encouraging Arthur to read her as a vulnerable, inept, naive woman who needs protection from her worst impulses, only to reveal herself as a competent poet and media personage, capable of intricate deceptions such as faking her own death. She implicates Marlene in a situation that will cause her illicit affair to become public knowledge, and that result in criminal charges to both her and her lover Sam (337-8). This Joan, capable of identifying the self-deluded and puncturing their misconceptions, is practiced at guerilla citizenship. Joan undertakes her guerilla actions on behalf of a suppressed and potentially screwball world that stands for penetrating vision, disruption of stability, regenerative transgression, and lusory attitudes for their own sake.

Maude Laures, on the other hand, is a self-reliant citizen whose influence on those around her hardly factors into the narrative about her. She is capable of thinking on her own, but as a teacher she is also practiced in teaching others how to think and otherwise providing them with the necessary tools for life. Her engagement with intellectual/cultural/aesthetic products such as Angstelle's narrative can be intense and productive, extending and intensifying the received momentum of those products.

Cybil of Brossard's *Baroque d'Aube* also engages intensely with the texts and visual art she encounters but she goes a further step and refreshes her engagement by pursuing them in a variety of environments: art shows in the park, writing at Salons du Livre, producing text and experiencing virtual reality at sea. Here the human aspect of textual production is at least as important as the texts themselves, as the three narratives of *Baroque d'Aube* are rich with varied accounts of human interaction. The extensive representation of the publicity tour found in "Un Seul Corps" corresponds roughly with the brief, generalized representations Joan provides in *Lady Oracle*, but Brossard's writing I welcomes these interactions where Joan withdraws.

The wider reading public has little place in Jeanette Winterson's *PowerBook* where you-the-reader is the only important user of literature. The publishing industry as institution recedes into the distance in both *PowerBook* and *Baroque d'Aube*, giving way to the primacy of the reader-writer bond. Atwood's Joan Foster stands in stark contrast to this, as does Iris Chase-Griffen of *The Blind Assassin*, since their readers influence the daily experience of both Joan and Iris, as does the publishing industry as an institution, but both give their readers comparatively short shrift.

The utopian potential sketched in the pages of *Désert Mauve*'s tandem embedded narratives is rendered tragically in Angstelle's version where Angela's death prevents it from coming into being. It is rendered romantically in Laures's version where Mélanie's survival and contact with Angela may yet help realize a utopia that takes form in language, electricity, beauty, memory. In *Baroque d'Aube* too utopia, outlined by the sybilline figure who appears in *Vitesse*, promises to emerge from language, memory, beauty, and taken as a whole the encounters that subsequently arise in "Un Seul Corps" are sufficiently aligned with such an ideality that it seems to be on the verge of coming into existence. Practically speaking this utopia would be philogynistic rather than misandrist and it would respond to its citizens as its citizens respond to the texts they read. In *Baroque d'Aube* Brossard represents Canada's Quebec as a cosmopolitan place of supportive, engaged, informed and active users of aesthetic products; in *Désert Mauve* Canada is a place to which Laures can retreat to write and whose winter provides enough challenge and inspiration to effect the translation of one text into another. In both Canadas transformation is made available by writing.

In *Lady Oracle*, Joan's textual production begins in England with her romances and ends in Terremoto with her autobiography; what unfolds in Canada is the vast bulk of her Costume Gothic writing, achieved in secret from the oppressive influence of Arthur, and her production of *Lady Oracle*. The oppression has necessitated the strategy of seduction that Joan employs throughout her experience. Joan's attempts to seduce her targets—parents, lovers, friends, readers—are fuelled by the abilities to empathize, sympathize, and listen that construct her as passive and comparatively powerless in the

eyes of others even while she uses the same skill to increase her insight into human behaviour and thereby increase her power over others.

While many of her seductions are presented as being spontaneous and uncalculated, Joan does stand to benefit financially or psychologically from most of them and does assume forms of agency in most of her defining relationships. Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, on the other hand, places himself more on the periphery of power. While he too is constructed as fluctuating between power and powerlessness, the extremes of the spectrum are softened and relativized by being continually placed within socially-acceptable bounds, so that the threat of abjection that seems to hover constantly around Joan is less immediate for Tristram.

In *Impossible Exchange* (1999/2001), Jean Baudrillard offers the following theory on postmodern subjectivity:

The question raised, then, is the question of destiny, of impossible destiny, of our collusion in the paradoxical destiny of a species haunted by the imagining of its own end. And the problem is no longer how to conquer freedom—how are we to conquer it?—but how to escape it. How are we to escape unchecked individualism and self-hatred? It is not how to escape our destiny, but how *not* to escape it? ... The destiny of the individual soul has lost much of its grandeur. In the past, the human being was not doomed to be merely what he is. God and Satan wrestled over him. In the past, we were important enough to have a battle fought over our souls. Today, our salvation is our own affair. Our lives are no longer marked by original sin but by the risk of failing to fulfil their ultimate potential: so we accumulate plans, ideals and programmes; we constantly pass the buck and seek to outdo each other in a universal effort to perform. And we subside into the condition of those who, as Kierkegaard put it, are no longer capable of facing the Last Judgement in person. (47)

Sterne's *Tristram* would still be confident of being a worthy prize for which God and Satan should compete. He is content to leave the ultimate outcome of the contest in their

hands, and to abandon himself to the mid-ground between good and evil where dichotomies are simply impractical, both on the human level and on the level of literary construct. He is also free to employ "diversion, turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety" (Roger Caillois, qtd. in Stephen D. Scott [2000], 36) in his narrative communications, that is, to write for the joy of it rather than to demonstrate his virtuosity, for in the end he will not be the final judge.

Joan reads herself as having questionable worth and has no confidence that anyone, deity or human, will trouble themselves to claim her as their own. The onus, then, lies on her to construct some approximation of the conditions under which such claiming could occur. In *Lady Oracle* the act of construction itself, however, requires a level of commitment and energy that approaches the divine or diabolical, and for all intents and purposes Joan becomes her own Last Judgment, an interpellative force like no other that nevertheless remains inescapably contingent.

Both Joan and Tristram are constructed as valourizing the ideal freedom of thought, action and expression, but also as intuiting its limited valency within their spheres of operation. Baudrillard writes,

It is, in fact, a highly relative freedom, this freedom to become responsible, as a subject, for the conditions of one's own life. As long as I am subject to objective conditions, I am still an object, I am not wholly free—I have to be freed from that freedom itself. And this is possible only in play, in that more subtle freedom of play, the arbitrary rules of which paradoxically free me, whereas in reality I am kept in chains by my own will. (56-57)

Mélanie's, Maude Laure's and Joan's playfulness and their willingness to experiment, produced by the literary playfulness and willingness to experiment of their producers

Nicole Brossard and Margaret Atwood, are based on their questioning of agency and responsibility, traits that suggest citizenship as much as subjectivity. Both citizenship and subjectivity preclude absolute freedom, which is the impossible and compelling ideal that draws all three read-and-seduced writers into intricate play with literary production.

Questions about reciprocal bonds and interactions between the human, the civic, the narrative, the sexual, and the lusory are also addressed in the next chapter, where tricksterism challenges them. A figure familiar from folk narratives the world over, the trickster is a contradictory figure that tends to be both intensely engaged with and resistant of each of these areas simultaneously. Often employed as a cautionary figure, she sees and transgresses the outside limits of acceptability for challenging arbitrary norms, but does so for reasons that are themselves arbitrary and often gratuitous. As a challenger of cultural conditions, she is particularly interesting to Canadian scholars, sometimes because of First Nations contexts subtending many Canadian texts. She also seems to pose a particular challenge to constructions of gender within Canadian scholarship, where she is very rarely constructed as a woman despite the fact that First Nations tricksters, including Coyote, may be either men or women. Because this bears directly on the more ambivalent aspects of play and game that make player-readers and played-writers such provocative figures within the context of citizenship studies, this condition bears investigation according to its manifestations within Canadian novels written by men as well as by women.

5. Irony and Canada's Trickster Citizens¹

5.1 God, Animal, Goof: Aspects of Coyote in Some Canadian Metafiction

"The trickster is postmodern," writes Gerald Vizenor in "A Postmodern Introduction" (1989: 9). A cross-cultural and trans-historical figure, the trickster identifies and challenges cultural tensions and taboos. Operating as an icon of transgression and gleeful resistance, the trickster is quintessentially amoral yet perversely charismatic. As Jeanne Rosier Smith (1997) writes, "The trickster's role as survivor and transformer, creating order from chaos, accounts for the figure's universal appeal and its centrality to the mythology and folklore of so many cultures. Critic and creator, the trickster challenges culture from both within and without, strengthening and renewing it with outrageous laughter" (3). Tricksters appear in Norse myth and Greek myth as well as in narratives from Africa, South America and North America, to name a few. They also appear in the following Canadian texts: Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* (1993); George Bowering's *Caprice* (1987); Gail Scott's *Heroine* (1987); Lisa Moore's *Alligator* (2005); and Margaret Atwood's *Blind Assassin* (2000). In each of these texts tricksterism emphasizes, deflates, and rehabilitates untenable aspects of the Canadian experience of culture, society, and civic life.

Trickster strategies are roughly consistent wherever they appear. Alan Velie (1989) writes, "Whatever his form, trickster has a familiar set of characteristics: he plays

¹ I presented earlier versions of this chapter at various venues, especially material from the introduction, on Moore's *Alligator*, and on Atwood's *Blind Assassin*. One venue was Memorial University's Department of English's Colloquium series in January 2005; another was the Graduate Student Colloquium hosted by Memorial's School of Graduate Studies; another was the May 2007 Women Writing and Reading Conference at the University of Alberta.

tricks and is the victim of tricks; he is amoral and has strong appetites, particularly for food and sex; he is footloose, irresponsible and callous, but somehow almost always sympathetic if not vulnerable" (122). And in *Border Crossings: Thomas King's Cultural Inversions*, Arnold E. Davidson, Priscilla L. Walton and Jennifer Andrews (2003) observe, "Part of the trickster's purpose is to release individual and communal repression and redirect this anxiety into pleasure, a Freudian mechanism that allows those who listen to stories of the trickster's antics to enjoy themselves and still retain a sense of cultural order. The trickster indulges the fantasies of those listening and exemplifies how anything is possible ..." (176). Both in the matter being written and in the manner of writing, then, trickster writers and trickster writing would pursue the arbitrary for its own sake, would indulge various appetites lustily, and would place their own concerns ahead of all else. The process of writing becomes the means of transforming individual and communal repression into individual and communal pleasure.

Yet while tricksters and trickster narratives release pressure by both facilitating and problematizing carnivalesque inversions, the trickster influence is volatile in itself and consistently exceeds this paradigm. Across cultures, tricksters experience exorbitant repercussions for their exorbitant tricks; in Bowering's *Caprice*, several exemplars of Coyote narratives illustrate just such consequences. Yet few tricksters are deterred by this; despite impending consequences, they continue to play, trick, eat, have sex, and upend any limits and boundaries that they encounter. Tricksters consider themselves bound by neither law nor rule; their own radical exceptionality is obvious because their presence confounds all rules. In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995)

Giorgio Agamben writes, "The exception does not subtract itself from the rule; rather, the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and, maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule" (18). On the next page he continues the thought: "What is at issue in the sovereign exception is not so much the control or neutralization of an excess as the creation and definition of the very space in which the juridico-political order can have validity" (19). Thus trickster antics give rise to rules and validate human ordering systems that regulate the interaction of individuals among collectives.

One form taken by trickster exegetics in the texts under examination here is a basic destabilization of the narrative's political foundation, such as a reversal of position or a re-assessment of approach. This is what happens in the texts of interest in this section. Scott's *G.S.* reconsiders her political loyalties; Bowering's *Caprice* perceives a hollowness at the core of her motivating revenge; Moore's *Madeleine* dissolves into the shadowy death like that which has haunted the Gothic film she is making; Atwood's *Iris* perceives that her love stories have not only been the hoax she sees in them, but also the negative space that has permitted her sister's self-destruction. In contrast King's *Coyote* and Bowering's *Coyote* are both more resilient in the face of the consequences they experience; and because the contrast is gender-related, it motivates this chapter.

The trickster puts himself first and is unapologetic about it; without him there is no world, and if he is to survive, the world must change to suit his needs. His desires, tastes and whims take precedence over those of every other living being, and if they result in tragedy or trauma for others it is of no concern to him. He is hedonistic and self-

involved, he is deeply flawed, and his faults produce abject failure almost as often as success. Both player and played, winner and loser, he embodies the contradictions and ambivalence of the ludic. Yet the wilder appetites of Coyote are problematic. Coyote in particular has legendary sexual appetites, for example, and he has few scruples about objectionable behaviour such as taking what he wants whether there is consent or not. He frequently brings violence and trauma along with change, and Gerald Vizenor in particular indicates that representations of Coyote must be complex and multidimensional, accommodating destructive as well as constructive effects in order to be fully authentic (see King, "Coyote Lives" [1998], 96). In both *Green Grass, Running Water* and *Caprice* Coyote is a character who occupies an equivocal space within fictional reality, radically altering some aspects of it while being utterly uninterested in others; in *Heroine*, *Alligator* and *Blind Assassin* the human protagonists adopt non-specific trickster strategies as they navigate their worlds and narrativize their experience. In each of these texts responsibility, survival, and pleasure are inextricably entangled, and the trickster ways of resolving the tangles involve the partial, almost random jettisoning of responsibility, pointing up the conflict between responsibility and pleasure within civic experience.

There is a hesitation to examine the darker aspects of tricksterism with relation to women's experience. The writers of *Border Crossings*, for example, admit to being initially "troubled by Coyote's feminine status" in Thomas King's *Coyote Columbus Story* (1992) "because it is her frivolous desire to play baseball that generates the problems in the story" (Davidson, Walton and Andrews 80). The conjunction of frivolity

and the female still constitutes a danger zone, especially when that conjunction brings about catastrophe. King's female Coyote is bored and frustrated at having no one to play with, since her habitual playmates have wearied of her, so she accidentally imagines Christopher Columbus into being. While he packs up her human beings, the native inhabitants of North America, to sell as slaves, she does nothing to help because she is preoccupied with convincing him to play baseball but also because she does not believe anyone would buy them. The offhand comment of Davidson, Andrews and Walton regarding their difficulty reading this female Coyote implies that while such behaviour would be almost expected if this Coyote were male, as is the case in King's *Green Grass, Running Water*, it is next to unthinkable in a female.

Davidson *et al* do not pursue the gender issue because of their interest in an equally important one. They observe that their hesitation reflects a "hierarchical value system of Eurocentric culture that dictates what is and is not important" (80), an insight that frees them to read Coyote as permitting "an allowance and a respect for differences, a situation that subverts the Western ideological insistence on hegemony" (81). This reflects that fact that the trickster predilection toward play and game is a significant and signifying activity whose pursuit relates as directly to cultural capital as do other arts; but this signification vanishes if the trickster is gendered as female. Elsewhere in their text they closely examine King's constructions of women as intelligent, active, engaged, and effective; the Coyote of *A Coyote Columbus Story* is all these things, but she is also reckless, self-involved, frivolous and distracted. Her engagement is contextually inappropriate and her people are harmed because of it, but she does not cease reading all

her creations as playthings, for when she spontaneously dreams up Jacques Cartier on the last page she re-initiates the same narrative pattern, inviting him to play baseball.

The limits of women's responsibility is admittedly a miry area to negotiate, since misogynists continue to justify their contempt by constructing women as frivolous, flighty, undisciplined, capricious, selfish, and inherently infantile, all of which descriptors characterize trickster paradigms as well. Yet refusing to theorize irresponsibility and ludicism as deployed by female-gendered characters and written by women writers is problematic in its own right. In *Literature After Feminism* (2003) Rita Felski barely restrains impatience when discussing "Masquerading Women" writer figures. She observes that it takes a gifted critic to investigate texts by writers like Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson without "laps[ing] into a relentless recycling of the same few clichés" (78). She reminds us that "[s]ocial change is about much more than parody and sexy subterfuge [...]" (79) and admonishes against "the routinizing of transgression" (78). Felski also claims that

What is most valuable about the feminist allegory of authorship as masquerade is that it leaves room for the "artness" of art and the skill of those who make it. Rather than reading all works by women as autobiography or therapy, it sees the writer as a shape-shifter, an artful creator of multiple selves. It pries apart the author and the text and insists that literature is not a slavish mirror of identity. Writing can reach beyond the dull facticity of the given; language can be worked against the grain in ways that are seductive, playful, irreverent, often unsettling. The elusiveness of words can call into question readers' attachments to knowable selves and coherent realities. (78)

Felski's diction constructs vertiginous metanarratives by women as somewhat superficial; they are intriguing tools of proliferation and diverting indicators of what lies outside

identity, and they are suspect because they attempt to commodify an evanescent and definitively ungraspable quality of narrative.

Canadian women writers are adopting the persona of the masquerading woman conservatively, unwilling to jeopardize social conscience even though they are eager to challenge what Felski calls “readers’ attachments to knowable selves and coherent realities.” While these representations continue to be equivocal, their numbers are increasing, and only partly from a recognition that women are not uniformly wise, sensible, self-disciplined, aware, order-loving, intelligent, tidy, biddable people.

Agamben quotes philosopher Carl Schmitt quoting Kierkegaard:

The exception explains the general and itself. And when one really wants to explain the general, one need only look around for a real exception. It brings everything to light more clearly than the general itself. After a while, one becomes disgusted with the endless talk about the general—there are exceptions. If they cannot be explained, then neither can the general be explained. Usually the difficulty is not noticed, since the general is thought about not with passion but only with comfortable superficiality. The exception, on the other hand, thinks the general with intense passion. (Agamben 16)

It is imperative to examine trickster exceptions: they shape the rule, they revitalize and recontextualize the general, they “creat[e] a situation in which juridical rules can be valid” (Schmitt, qtd. in Agamben 16), and they permit the theorization of the norm. With so many Canadian women adapting the ultra-exceptional trickster to their own purposes it seems probable that a new norm is emerging.

Rather than following a Coyote-model of hedonistic and heedless tricksterism, Canadian women writers follow Scheherezade’s model of focused and purposive tricksterism. Lori Landay (1998) contends that people, including women, are tricksters

when they “use impersonation, disguise, theft and deceit to expose hypocrisy and inequality, to subvert existing social systems, and to widen their sphere of power” (2). A trickster like Scheherezade, Landay suggests, can still “[transform] the place of her victimization into a base from which to seduce, charm, interest, and most importantly, *change*” her victimizer (3; Landay’s emphasis). In Scheherezade’s case, Landay observes, she must change her bridegroom from a vengeful and misogynistic serial killer into a peaceable husband who is at least an adequate marriage partner, if not ideal. Famously, Scheherezade engages in her trickery in order to prevent her new husband from following through on his practice of wedding, bedding, and beheading a new bride every day. After her own wedding and bedding, she begins an intriguing and suspenseful tale, then breaks off at the exciting part just before dawn, claiming that her own approaching death is preventing her from continuing because she must pray. Once she has survived the day and another bedding, she completes the tale and begins the cycle anew. In this way she continues for the thousand and one nights, by which time she has attached herself to him too closely for him to insist on her death, and has borne her husband several children. She has also saved the lives of a thousand women including her own beloved younger sister, for whose sake she devised the strategy to begin with. Scheherezade’s trickery is limited to the immediate sphere of her husband whereas Coyote’s can spill over the breadth of the world; Scheherezade’s trickery is justifiable because it directly affects the lives of a quantifiable number of members of a quantifiable group, where Coyote’s mischief is always ambiguous, providing limited benefits to few and discomfort or destruction to others.

Many will see Scheherezade as a much preferable model for tricksterism than Coyote, Hermes, Ulysses, Anansi, Brer Rabbit, Loki, and their brothers, because Scheherezade is their safer and more predictable sister. Her play has a purpose and, at least as importantly, a foreseeable end. Yet to expect women, fictionalized or actual, to embrace responsibility more thoroughly than men, and to eschew the sheer joy of gratuitous play especially in their storytelling, is unrealistic. To define citizens always according to the quality and quantity of responsibility they demonstrate while leaving gratuity and pleasure out of the picture falls within the same pattern, and threatens to perpetuate exactly the illusions it is meant to critique. At the same time, women were forced to exist in a state outside humanity for centuries, and continue to do so in places around the world. Ludically reclaiming this excepted state is important not only for purposes of rehabilitation, but for purposes of re-envisioning and revising the world to pre-empt such persecution.

Canadian writers write women who use their texts as tools for trickery. For these, the text-within-a-text structure offers a way to think problems through (at least) twice in two (or more) separate, complete narratives, but because the separate narratives inevitably comment on each other in an ironic as well as "seductive, playful and shifting" way, the issues bloom outward in an ever-expanding and multi-layered challenge, defying any kind of closure. They incorporate aspects of the trickster within their women writer-protagonists, who become worldly women of appetite, unapologetic about their attention to their own needs, not least their need to write. Narratives by Canadian women writers feature an equivocal and partial use of the trickster whose appearance informs

understanding of a perhaps dangerously equivocal society. This trickster has crept into Scott's *Heroine*, Moore's *Alligator*, and Atwood's *Blind Assassin*.

The struggle over how and whether to define "the Canadian" is ongoing. In *Scandalous Bodies: Diasporic Literature in English Canada* (2000), Smaro Kambourelli points out that "Recent debates about the metanarratives of the federal state and cultural discourses—the Constitution, the Charter of Rights, the Official Languages Act, the literary canon—have shown that we can no longer remain trapped within a national self-image of cohesiveness. Yet the signs that some might read as symptoms of cultural and political malaise might also be seen as indicating a healthier state of affairs." The realization that the political and the cultural are "inextricably interrelated," Kambourelli claims, is deeply inflecting current discussion on "the perceived need to recast and articulate the meanings and positions of racial, ethnic, and gender differences" (93). She quotes the 1971 White Paper on multiculturalism: "although there are two official languages, there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other" (98). Kambourelli points out that this White Paper "seeks to overcome difference rather than to confront incommensurability[,] and that it has in fact 'displayed a remarkable consistency in objectifying and containing Canadian Others' while maintaining intact the privileged positions of French and English Canada as heritage groups (99). With regard to tricksterism, such unstable cultural and political spaces become playgrounds ripe for exuberant exploitation.

Tricksters turn Canadian texts into narratives of replenishment, making vivid worlds out of the wilderness and dynamic agents out of static stereotypes. And tricksters

betray a powerful faith in the ability of language to transform and energize worlds, since language is the medium of interactive contact best able to form and connect similarities. This replenishment is not without its dark side, and can be a destructive force in its own right, worthy of trickster's two-edged play. Growth can be violent and devastating. When growth results from the actions of a figure as ambivalent as the trickster, who wherever he manifests the world over suggests complicity and conservatism as well as resistance and liberality, there is all the more need to interrogate it.

Particularly in Canada, this commentary may be expressed in metafiction's self-reflexive terms, querying constructions of reality. Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* positions Coyote as the element of gleeful chaos that opens new possibilities for people and worlds. George Bowering's *Caprice* embeds Coyote within a Western revenge narrative whose protagonist plays seriously with tropes of writing, agency, and heroism. Each of these texts traces an elaborate godgame whose players must also be expert readers to survive the game. Expert reading and playing is also at issue for the trickster women written by Scott, Moore and Atwood. The godgame with its paranoiac resonances is diminished for Scott's G.S. and Moore's Madeleine, whose play approximates the Frygian comic romance. Both of these are primarily concerned with their own position and their own experience within the world. Atwood's *Iris*, on the other hand, successfully enacts a godgame through narrative, rewriting experience as romantic irony. Each of these tricksters challenges easy concepts of responsibility and engagement.

5.2 Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* and the Multi-Functional Trickster

In *Green Grass, Running Water* Thomas King's Coyote-play resists conventional stereotypes of First Nations culture and challenges commonplaces of subjectivity and agency. Vizenor claims that tricksters as a rule stand "outside comic structure, 'making it' comic rather than inside comedy, 'being it'" (13), so that trickster figures like Coyote and Nanapush become crucial tools for downplaying the image of Natives as a tragically vanishing people of the past, and replacing it with a more accurate image of First Nations people as resoundingly present and thriving in contemporary times. King's text joins its voice to many others that resist what Gabriele Helms (2003) calls "the choice that is not one," that is, the choice that "Aboriginal peoples have long faced in both their literary representations and their social contexts in Canada: assimilation and extermination" (99).

As Davidson et al. point out, this is a concern in King's narrative. Everywhere they turn, Eli, Alberta, Latisha, Charlie and Lionel are confronted with images of Indians being roundly defeated by the forces of white society, or simply ignored as exemplars of a "failed" culture whose integrity has been compromised by the pressures of contemporary living. The Westerns they watch on television or read as books portray Indians as desperate and inherently archaic people who are predestined to fail in the face of Eurocentric progress. Officials and merchants who should have a vested interest in promoting First Nations concerns do not recognize chances to strengthen ties with a valuable customer base, and projects like the Blossom dam that should benefit the entire community actually threaten the Blackfoot reserve by appropriating treaty land without adequately compensating the band. Coyote's direct and playful intervention in stories like

these is inevitably self-serving, but it also introduces a dynamic and comic element into potentially tragic situations while destabilizing an insufficiently flexible hegemony.

King's narrative moves through a number of different levels that could seem rigid and hierarchical were it not for Coyote and his interventions. Eli, Alberta, Latisha and the rest occupy a level that has no access to the other levels even though it is vulnerable to them. Functioning as part of a collective protagonist (see Davidson *et al.* 43), these characters focus largely on their own concerns—their relationships with each other and what to do with their lives. They are, however, visited by the four old Indians and by Coyote, all identified as extraordinary beings because they have special powers. Not everybody can see the four old Indians and none of the humans are able to hear Coyote's speech, yet these four visitors from what seems to be another plane of existence do concretely affect the world of Blossom, Alberta and the Blackfoot Sun Dance even though the humans cannot affect any world outside their own.

The four old Indians walk the human plane where they are known as the Lone Ranger, Ishmael, Robinson Crusoe and Hawkeye, but they seem to come from another plane where they are known as First Woman, Changing Woman, Thought Woman and Old Woman. Each tells the story of his/her experience on the other plane. In every case the narrator describes floating down a river, falling from the sky, encountering a figure from the Bible and/or from European literature, and, in the ensuing comedy of misunderstanding, ending up at Fort Marion, an Indian prison colony in Florida. Coyote intervenes in these stories at will just as he intervenes in the affairs of the good people of Blossom; he helps send Changing Woman to Fort Marion and he helps Alberta become

pregnant, for example, and he also causes the crew of the Pequod to abandon ship just as he causes the flood that kills Eli.

But Coyote seems most at home in another plane entirely, the level that holds himself and the narrating I. Like the region where the writing I and you-the-reader interact on-line in Jeanette Winterson's *PowerBook* (2001), this level seems the least "real" because it is barely described. What happens here emphasizes the relationship between the narrating I and Coyote-as-listener/viewer, not the storyworld. The two interact much the way a pair of friends or family members might as they watch television together, judiciously needling each other while passing the time. The point of the interaction is as much to get together and share time and space as to pay attention to the narrative. Coyote is far from an ideal audience, continually interrupting with non-sequiturs, puns, and broad hints about snack food (69). He demands to be entertained but he also demands to be the centre of attention, and if the attention is not the kind he likes—he is pleased that Thought Woman mentions him but displeased that she prefers him to stay far away from her (323-4)—he intervenes in the storyline, expediting Thought Woman's journey to Fort Marion, where the other Women are, in order to rid the fictional world of an irritant.

In a controversial speculation that she later revises, film theorist Laura Mulvey (1975/1993) speculates that such desires relate to the desire to control, punish, or correct a guilty party (119), and Coyote's behaviour provocatively plays with this problematic idea. Coyote's literalized demonstration of what lies beneath viewing (and narrative) pleasure—the ability to punish "wrong-doers"—remains contingent in King's treatment.

Thought Woman is guilty of making Coyote think uncomfortable thoughts and must be controlled, and Fort Marion serves the purpose admirably. But Babo, an attendant at the Fort, questions whether or not the four old Indians ever feel punished by this incarceration, since they seem to treat the prison as a convenient and comfortable home base that they can—and do—leave at will.

Coyote's action of consigning Thought Woman to Fort Marion is not quite punishment and not quite forgiveness. Coyote is voyeuristic but not fully sadistic, so that he is more interested in novelty and diversion than the punishment of others. Vizenor and others acknowledge that Coyote's hedonism often causes pain and trauma, but they contend that he is not motivated by malevolence as such. The pain and trauma of others are incidental to the fulfillment of Coyote's desires. For tricksters, then, the desire to dominate is not necessarily motivated by competitive agonistics, but by the firm belief that dominance is the only possible position. To dominate by imposing one's will affirms that all is once again right with a world that was about to go off-kilter, producing a mildly pleasurable sense of vertigo controlled.

Coyote's spontaneous meddling results in significant upheaval both in the storyworlds of the four old Indians and on the human level of events, but while some results, such as Eli's death, seem purely tragic, the transformative effects of Coyote mischief are unmistakable. As Davidson *et al.* write, "[T]he chaos Coyote provokes by refusing to listen and choosing to play creates spaces in which various characters can begin to articulate their own definitions of selfhood—both individually and communally—and undercut the imposition of Western cultural paradigms" (177). The

writers read Alberta's impregnation by Coyote as enabling her to be an artificially-inseminated single mother in defiance of the protocols of fertility clinics that require her to be married. They also read Coyote's warning that the Sun Dance is about to be desecrated as exposing George Morningstar as a self-serving, hostile and violent intruder opposed to Blackfoot ways. Coyote's warning enables Lionel to achieve his lifelong dream of protecting his community from evil (King 241). This does not "perfect" Lionel in any predictable way, since he perseveres in his lazy, comic delusion that women will make his life easy for him. But Lionel's dreamy misreadings of the world and his place in it are symptomatic of Coyote reading strategies that manifest throughout this text.

Even expert readers read transgressively in *Green Grass, Running Water*.

Davidson *et al.* identify three expert readers in this fictional world: Eli, Alberta and Latisha. Of these, the first two are university professors who might be presumed to read at advanced levels. Alberta's expert reading strategies help her find and live alternatives to the role of submissive, wifely woman that others try to impose on her. As Davidson *et al.* comment, Alberta "adapts and reconfigures key elements of the formulaic seduction plot in order to achieve her desire for independence" (170). Both her ex-husband and Lionel misinterpret her as willing to set aside her own goals in order to further theirs. Charlie also misreads her, thinking she would be willing to compromise her relationship with Lionel in order to validate him instead (42-3). Even her students seem to expect her to infuse them with knowledge as they nap during her class (18-21). Instead, Alberta reconstructs her life on narrative lines that appeal to her. She offers academic knowledge about the past experiences of First Nations people, and functions as vivid, material proof

of their continued vibrancy, challenging the image of the foredoomed noble savage that dominates the cultural imaginary. She investigates alternate ways of conceiving children, dating both Lionel and Charlie to avoid the traps of a monogamous relationship, and possibly considers friendships with women as an alternative to the demands of heterosexual relationships (see Davidson *et al.* on Alberta and Connie, 174).

Eli too resists conforming to narrative structures whites may impose on Natives. As he knows, Western novels do not accommodate the consummation of interracial love, and rarely accommodate aboriginal survival, since as either “noble” or “brute savages” First Nations people tend to die, demonstrating the superior, progressive force of white evolution (King 199). Yet Eli marries Karen, a white woman, contradicting the cowboy-and-Indian Western’s false myth of racial progress. When Karen, not Eli, dies in an accident, the myth is further distorted and darkly ironized. Had she died of cancer as she and Eli expected, the death might have been emplotted as tragic, making Karen a martyr to the insufficient medicine or a villainous disease. But she is in remission when she dies in a random traffic accident (342-4), a martyr to nothing but casual circumstance. Karen’s senseless death challenges the popular culture concept of death as a means of ennoblement, just as her marriage to Eli challenges the myth of racial progress.

Eli’s choice to return to the reserve on retiring from the university also opposes the perception that “exceptional” Natives who achieve white standards of success never return to the “backward” reserve. These are the three possible paths of the non-reserve Native in the White cultural imaginary, as Eli sees it : “Indian leaves the traditional world of the reserve, goes to the city, and is destroyed. Indian leaves the traditional world of the

reserve, is exposed to white culture, and becomes trapped between two worlds. Indian leaves the traditional world of the reserve, gets an education, and is shunned by his tribe” (286). In these myths, Indians *cannot* return to the reserve, but Eli does so because that is where he wants to be. The Westerns he reads addictively intrigue him for their fabulous content: their Natives bear little resemblance to anyone he knows, least of all himself.

Latisha, on the other hand, is not an obsessive reader. Of the three expert readers she reads the least and is perhaps the most Coyote-like. As she runs the Dead Dog Café she encounters any number of fictionalized writers who come in for food, including Polly, Sue, Archie, and John—otherwise known as Pauline Johnson, Susanna Moodie, Archibald Belaney and John Richardson (156). Polly/Pauline leaves Latisha a copy of *The Shagganappi* (159), but it is unclear whether she ever reads it. She has already learned about white stereotyping of First Nations people through her estranged husband, George Morningstar. George has read quite widely, but this does not prevent him from being a prejudiced, misogynistic, and abusive person who tries to make his wife abject by imposing negative stereotypes on her, her culture, and her country, and by beating her when his first tactic fails.

Through George and other sources, Latisha becomes familiar with a number of ludicrous misreadings of Blackfoot practice and belief, which help her produce the inspired foolery of the Dead Dog Café (Davidson *et al.* 52-3). The menus, the décor and the demeanour of the wait staff burlesque the tourist trade’s burlesquing misconceptions of the Blackfoot. The Dead Dog Café, as Davidson observes, is a successful business in part because it gives Latisha and the other workers an opportunity to appropriate negative

stereotypes, transform them through parodic mimicry, and reflect them back at their original source in a ludic anti-seduction process that beats promoters of stereotypes at their own game. In this way she and her colleagues assert that the Blackfoot are neither a vanishing people nor defined by defeat but can live and thrive in the contemporary West.

Writer figures are far less prominent in *Green Grass, Running Water* than reader figures, and they tend to relate to farce rather than parody. Many of them are preoccupied with facts, bureaucratic procedure, and cultural repression in a world where '[t]here are no truths [... o]nly stories' (King 391), which is where their problems begin. These writers are generally whites who arbitrarily equate the written word with law. Sergeant Cereno is the foremost example, but the many people who make lists and design government forms also fall into the category of writers who try to re-shape (and reduce) the material world through their texts. None of these writers are competent within the medium of narrative, however, which is a crucial disability considering that the world they are trying to reconfigure is composed of narrative.

Except for Latisha, who designs menus for the café and an irreverent personal ad for Alberta (355), and Eli, who has written academic texts on Shakespeare and Bacon (262), few of the Blackfoot characters perform writerly acts. Within *Green Grass, Running Water*, only George Morningstar actually composes narrative, and considering that Latisha soon stops reading these self-involved, rambling and unrealistic letters out of bored disillusionment (249-50), this may suggest that Eurocentric writing too strongly privileges the individual, thus blinding itself to perspectives outside its own.

But in their oral form narratives abound here, so that writing seems incidental to narrative rather than intrinsic to it. It is the impact of writing on the community, not on the individual, that becomes important. A magazine article describes how the reserve will benefit from a proposed dam; the article is intended to facilitate the dam's construction by forestalling objections. Physical changes will come to the reserve because of the development, and lifestyles will be altered, but jobs will be plentiful and "progress" will come to Blossom. But Homer Little Bear cannot stop laughing as he reads the article aloud at an emergency council meeting (117), and the shared experience of the parodic oral reading helps solidify the council's position against the dam.

Gabriele Helms (2003) contends that by "[h]ighlighting the gaps between narrative sections, King exposes the interstices of narrative as sites where meaning can be negotiated." The narrative sections to which she refers are the narratives of Coyote and the narrating I, the four narratives of the flood and the fall, and the experiences of Eli, Latisha, Lionel and the rest. These do indicate how interpreting human interactions can be both wildly off-base and hysterically accurate. Helms reads the narrative sections collectively as emphasizing the interrelatedness of story and the community of human society, performing a vital critique of culture and politics in the process. She reads Coyote as a key figure in "not so much sustain[ing] neat separations between stories and perceptions as attempt[ing] to keep those boundaries from solidifying" (116). In King's opinion, a "sacred clown" was key to this narrative, "Someone who could point out the fallacies in situations and arguments and who made sure that nothing stayed done" (King, qtd. in Helms 117).

In *Green Grass, Running Water*, Coyote makes sure that people and their stories always have something to do, something to change, something to critique, and something to come together and chuckle over. In George Bowering's *Caprice*, tricksterism is bound up with narrative and communication, as in King's text, but where King's Coyote replenishes joy and pride in an exuberant First Nations community, Bowering's critiques a settler community and its interaction with unconventional invaders.

5.3 George Bowering's *Caprice* and the Wily Trickster Goof

Community solidarity is also a concern in George Bowering's *Caprice*, where communities respond to a capable, intelligent and attractive woman who is on a quest for revenge. Bowering's parody of a stereotypical Hollywood revenge Western takes a US-originating paradigm, transports it to a Canadian landscape, and activates it with an enigmatic Canadian woman. *Caprice*'s brother Pete Foster has been murdered near Calgary by Frank Spencer of Tennessee, so the young woman leaves her home in St. Foy, Quebec in order to redress this wrong. With her tall slender body, red braids, freckles, grey eyes, and penchant for poetry, *Caprice* resembles an Anne Shirley who has found herself on some wildly unexpected path. But her black Spanish stallion, her cosmopolitan experience, her whip, and even her French-Canadian heritage code her as altogether more worldly and independent than the young orphan from *Green Gables*.

Caprice's enigma transcends mere appearance, since both those who see her—the men, women and children she meets on her journey—and those who do not—notably the

writer and some reviewers of *Caprice*²—fall under her feminine and sexy spell. Her long, weary pursuit of a resolution she does not genuinely seem to want also earns her the empathy of the community, which rewards her for tracking down the dangerously malevolent Spencer. Caprice's earnest, thoughtful reading strategies are not Coyote-like, but Bowering's playfully constructed narrative allows two important focal characters, the first and second Indians, to be Coyote readers.

The first and second Indians observe and critique Caprice's activities in an ironic, detached manner, but participate minimally in those activities. Like Coyote and the narrating I in *Green Grass, Running Water*, their bantering conversation dominates their presence in the narrative. They know each other very well as the narrative begins, and their relationship moves beyond a teacher-pupil dynamic toward a more equal friendship as time and the narrative progress.

Their commentary on the action that unfolds before them has an analytical, even anthropological cast. In "B.C. Dreams Quebec: *Caprice*" (1993), Frank Davey writes, "Rather than speaking in the poetic and symbolic discourses usually awarded them in western fiction, [the two Indians] parody those discourses and speak themselves, rather, in the analytical language of anthropology, to which their role as spectators to another culture suits them" (84). Bowering transforms stock characters by emphasizing their subtle perception, sophisticated expression, and advanced analytical power. The two Indians critique life in the West, and the relationship between Europeans and First

² Isabel Carrera (1994) and Georgina M. M. Colvile (1992) both comment on the ways in which Caprice resembles a fetish for the male reader's gaze.

Nations people within it, as they exchange metaphysical ideas and puns. In the process, they also critique the standard Western “cowboy and Indian” narrative with its ethos of individualist heroism, conquerable frontiers, and easy distinctions between good and evil.

They are also an important means of critiquing narrative because they closely consider issues of aesthetics and reception. The second and younger of the two Indians considers himself an artist “destined to immortalize his people” (Bowering 2), opening the floodgates for an extended discussion of art and artistry. His medium is not words, as he emphasizes, and judging from his teacher’s wry comment—“You know how impatient I get when you get started on magic and the great spirit and all that”—this young artist tends to romanticize his art’s source and intent. This incipient distinction between linguistic and visual art is directly linked to their relationship. The first, older Indian has poor eyesight and functions as a teacher, passing on lore in linguistic form. The second, who has excellent eyesight but has come to distrust language—“Oh, you are playing with words again” he chides his teacher (87)—will integrate the lore into his aesthetic as he constructs material art objects. Thus their ongoing mock-oppositional critique becomes central to their bantering dialogue because it is closely linked to their senses of identity.

The sense of “two-in-one” that hovers around their relationship is emblemized towards the end of *Caprice* when the two Indians work with Everyday Luigi, now jawless and speechless, to teach him sign language (263-4), which is yet another form of representation that is both linguistic and material. When the first Indian tells the story of Coyote and the Word-Eater (88-91) the different poles of language and vision begin to come together. Coyote habitually summons prey to his lair through song, but he is unable

to do so once the Word-Eater, an undefined but monstrous being, begins to eat his words. Not satisfied by a diet of berries, roots and insects, Coyote devises a way around the problem; instead of *singing* signifying words like “salmon,” “deer,” and “sheep,” he *draws images* of his prey instead, and resolves the situation completely by drawing a picture of the Word-Eater and eating him. Thus he is able to return to his former easy-going, song-based hunting style. As Coyote, he uses language not because it is his only means of representation, but because it is easy and fun. In fact, the first and second Indians exchange some banter about the delightful lameness of Coyote’s prey-summoning chants.

Coyote’s ludic mindset helps him switch between word and image. Both language and image are tools for him, and are part of the way he plays with his world. The younger Indian says of Coyote, “I have never been able to figure him out. [...] Is he a god or an animal or just a goof? Is he an Indian with magic powers? Why does he use a bow and arrow? If he can do so many supernatural things, why does he wind up all covered with skunk piss and things like that?” The first Indian’s response—“He gave order to the world, so he keeps falling into messes” (89)—employs trickster logic to avoid answering the question: “We have many Coyote stories, [...] but we do not have the story on Coyote” (92).

The bundle of contradictions and contrariness that is Coyote reflects the many trickster aspects of postmodernism, especially the way it challenges definition, opens itself to compromising situations, and refuses to be wrapped up in a tidy capsule of story. Just stopping short of an implication that the two Indians together could almost add up to

one Coyote, Bowering's text still emphasizes the dialogism that underlies postmodernism and tricksterism. The needling, bantering, oppositional conversation—between a teacher who has taught almost everything he knows and a student who is ready to implement his education in his life and career—is a liminal dialogue of uncertainty. How will the student use what he has learned? How useful have the teacher's lessons been? How will the products of their interaction shape their worlds to come? Will they continue to function largely as spectators and commentators, or, through their new friendship with Everyday Luigi, will they begin to participate in the wider community of the West?

King's Coyote is literally present and active in *Green Grass, Running Water*, affecting character, setting and plot. Bowering's Coyote remains an extratextual reference, nuancing thought and underpinning events, belonging to the textual world because its inhabitants allude to him, but affecting that world only minimally. Where King's Coyote moves among realities and storyworlds, Bowering's does not. He belongs to a different order of reality from Caprice, Roy Smith, the Indians and the rest.

Caprice herself also seems to come from a different order of reality. Yet even though she carries many of the markers of heroism and action that promise she will profoundly affect her physical and social environment, her strongest effect on her textual world is through the people she meets. Her quest to revenge her brother's death by killing his murderer, Frank Spencer, is drawn out and wavering; she herself doubts her purpose, collecting reasons for stopping as time passes.

The people she meets consider Spencer a danger to the West. Bowering writes

him as a violent and malevolent man whose imprisonment and subsequent hanging are necessary to the health of the community. Caprice tracks him and his sidekick, Strange Loop Groulx, hither and yon across the frontier, sometimes moving West, sometimes North, sometimes East. Frank is fully aware that she is in hot pursuit, and as part of the tracking/luring game he plays with her, he consciously chooses to return to the ranch where he killed her brother Pete, before doubling back yet again for a final showdown among the coulees. In an ironic twist, Caprice, who has been built up as an instrument of death, actually helps Constable Burr rescue her enemy, who is clinging to a crumbling ledge, so that the legal system can deal with him.

Bowering builds many such contradictions into his protagonist, who experiences validation at the hands of an "old boys club" gathering. The assemblage includes an editor, a journalist, a photographer, a doctor, a business owner, and a major landowner. All of these but one are men,³ and they reward the intensely feminized Caprice by replacing her now-dead beloved black Spanish stallion with a white Arabian stallion (261-3). Because these members of the establishment co-operate to give her this gift, there is an implication that while Caprice's female heroism might have been sexy, it is also suspect, and must be contained, validated and normalized by the status quo. By accepting the white mount offered her by so many representatives of phallocratic hegemony, Caprice leaves behind the blackness of vengeance heroism and suspect sexuality. She moves towards a much more conventional and virtuous form of

³ Gert the Whore is present, but because Bowering emphasizes her status as a capitalist and entrepreneur she seems virtually male. In an earlier quasi-"masculine" act, Gert has used physical force to rescue Caprice from a probable rape (185), so that her womanhood seems to be an almost honorary status.

womanhood, just as she exhaustedly abandons the frontier for the city, shedding the West's challenges in favour of her familiar East.

Davey reads the change from black mount to white as showing that Caprice has changed "from fury to rescuer, from pursuit of personal vengeance to acceptance of collective social action" (96). Yet the focus that Isabel Carrera (1994) and Georgiana M.M. Colville (1991) place on Caprice as an object of male sexual fantasy, rather than the subject of her own narrative, places even Davey's attractive interpretation on questionable ground. Carrera reads Caprice as a markedly reluctant protagonist:

[S]igns of Caprice's pleasure in her own story are strangely absent, and her own consciousness is only vaguely conveyed. Presented as highly erotic to observers, there is only passing indication of her own desires or behaviour, except for brief reports of apparently satisfactory and faithful passion for her schoolteacher, baseball-player boyfriend, Roy Smith [...]. (436-7)

Caprice seems more comfortable with the role of poet than that of vigilante. As a poet, she has a tradition to follow and a model to emulate. She carries Marlowe's Faust with her, and has already written and published her own poetry. Her task now is to live up to or surpass her own example, while learning what she can from Marlowe.

Caprice does not look playfully at her world, as the first and second Indians do, but sees with evaluating eyes that reject the substandard. She throws away the miners' poetry she finds in the newspaper (136) and quickly returns Doc Trump's book about the whip-wielding woman (142), severely reducing her contact with both of these texts as if she fears contamination. Clearly there are risks that she is not willing to take, and values that she has no wish to transgress but does through her very presence. She is satisfied with having one word to represent her, her given name of Caprice. She chooses to leave

Roy behind when he asks her to compromise her already-compromised social function of poet-turned-avenger by marrying a schoolteacher as well. Her brother Pete's violent death has brought her into a story that appeals to her less and less as she lives it. She distrusts it not least because her brother died while living it. Its defining inhabitant, Frank Spencer, is her opposite in every way, being low, malevolent and destructive. As Carrera contends, Caprice "is acting out/writing ... a tale pre-written for her by an American man [ie. Frank Spencer]. She is inhabiting a genre in which she is an outsider, in which language must be transformed to adjust to her ..." (437).

As Bowering writes her, it seems that Caprice might have been far more comfortable in the romance narrative she has apparently forsaken for this vengeance narrative. Like a French-Canadian Cinderella, she has clear memories of an impoverished childhood where much time was spent looking for coal "to bring home to [her] cold kitchen" (117), and her chief girlhood desire was to be good (193). Meanwhile wealth has come to her, probably through a mysterious absent husband (218) who might also have made possible her cosmopolitan voyaging to Parisian cafes and Spanish stables. The romance that renders her exotic and sophisticated to frontier eyes seems to be also the suppressed *künstlerroman* that makes her a poet.

The further this Cinderella romance recedes into her past, and the further vengeance recedes into the unreachable future, the less Caprice can access her poetry. Her copy of Marlowe's *Faust*, her constant companion, is abandoned without a thought once her horse Cabayo dies (240). By this point even her writing is a thing of the past.

“She had not written a poem since the muteness of God had stayed her pencil” (201), she muses, and God’s silence has been at issue since she encounters writer’s block:

*Toujours le bon Dieu reste muet
En dessinant les lacs et les forêts
Les matins frais et lumineux qu’il crée
Ne font que pleurer les êtres destinés
A partager les ombres désolées.*

*Pourtant un coeur qui bât rempli de haine
Est presque* (83; Bowering’s italics)

The rest of her notebook contains variations of this poem written in English with different metres and rhyme schemes (84-6), but despite her experimentation none of the revisions seem any more “finished” than the one Caprice writes in her mother tongue.

The longer her prey eludes her, the more Caprice seems colonized by vengeance and fury, as Davey observes. Her capacity for things like love and poetry steadily diminishes, and Carrera points out that Caprice, as we know her, dies as soon as her vengeance is consummated (436). This reluctant vigilante is overtaken by her unwelcome role, and although she earns the unstinting approval of the phallocracy, she loses much of her original self in the process.

Caprice is the medium of transformation without being its catalyst, and ends by being drained rather than replenished by her function. The text’s most explicit description of sexual interaction hints at a full and cooperative reciprocity between Caprice and her reader-lover Roy, but even here Roy’s perceptions and desires are realized more fully than Caprice’s so that she recedes into erotic objecthood: “Her body and his body, nearly the same size, cleaved to one another. His head reached with all its care for her lovely

strong body. Her head felt the ball player with his quickness. Feeling his body she felt her own there, and he felt his, she doing the feeling of it for him" (75-6). There is a definite narcissistic undertone in this apparently reciprocal erotic encounter, since Roy is aroused primarily by her arousal to his body.

Roy may have little choice since Caprice resists diminishing her own enigma. Stan Dragland (1988) observes that the poet is destined to remain a puzzle to her lover since "an ordered, patient life with Roy would drive Caprice up the wall" (85-6). These two lovers have read many of the same texts, and Roy has read Caprice's poetry, but despite their sharing of literary experience he persists in misreading her, neither writing nor reading the world as she does. As a result she rides off into a blinding sunrise that will kill the fog that lurks in the valley. As he watches her follow her narrow trail toward the past, Roy's only ambiguous consolation is "the shortness of life" (266). Her melancholy parting words, "*Couple, adieu; je vais voir l'ombre que tu devins*" (Bowering's italics), reinforce the funereal atmosphere.

Bringing something new into the world involves strenuous effort, whether that something is a poem or an unconventional avenger. This seems to be Caprice's main motivation; she struggles to produce poetic text that is beautiful and original, and she struggles to avenge her brother's murder while remaining true to herself. She finds she is not willing to become a killer as well as a creator, and holds close the values of the romantic *künstlerroman* of her past. When the written word deserts her, her main medium of communicating those values is through herself: her person, her comportment, her communication.

In *Writing Tricksters: Mythic Gambols in American Ethnic Literature*, Jeanne Rosier Smith points out that “[t]he trickster’s medium is words. A parodist, joker, liar, con-artist and storyteller, the trickster fabricates believable illusions with words—and thus becomes author and embodiment of a fluid, flexible and politically radical narrative form” (1997; 11). Bowering’s Indians are apparently deserving of such a form, but his Caprice is not. Dragland contends that she has a sparkling intellect, but it is an isolated intellect and does not interact with its equivalent on the frontier. The Indians, on the other hand, continually interact, and because they become friends, the suggestion is that their trickster-like dialogic interaction will continue to have beneficial effects.

Coyote survives to sing, eat, and end up in raucously humiliating situations for many days to come. Caprice survives to follow a solitary, shadowed path, but having undertaken her Westward journey under the obligation to avenge her murdered brother, she gradually loses touch with her ability to play with words. For her, play with words involves skill and strategy, since she has chosen a demanding form—poetry—that resonates with “higher concerns:” God, beauty, sublime silence, the human condition. Coyote’s language-play is concerned with immediate things like food and gratification, and he places no aesthetic demands on it, outside the imperative that it must be pleasurable to communicate through language and/or song. Using language involves pleasure and skill, responsibility and hedonism. This unique situation produces a uniquely tricksterish text whose narrator’s lusory attitude challenges and critiques the role and function of narrative.

King and Bowering juxtapose different embedded narratives within their texts. *Green Grass, Running Water* foregrounds the oral-style legends of First Woman, Thought Woman, Changing Woman and Old Woman by allotting them independent chapters and alternating them with both the story of the narrating I and Coyote and the story of the human events. But it also incorporates the plot of the stereotypical cowboy-and-Indian Western, sliding it insidiously into the human level of narrative where it confronts each of the human protagonists individually. In both cases King privileges the function of narrative as entertainment, as education, and as shaper of communities. In *Caprice* the story of Coyote and the Word-Eater is contained within a fragment of a chapter, just as the bulk of *Caprice's* writings, her fragments of poetry-in-progress, are contained within a chapter. The two embedded narratives resemble two faces of a coin about language: *Caprice's* poetry speculates on the silence of a good god, while the Coyote story explores the silencing of a god who is also an animal and a goof. *Caprice's* poetry is stymied when confronted with the task of regaining language, perhaps because she is not a goof and has invested all her ingenuity in the task of achieving revenge. Coyote, meanwhile, is not restrained by love for others and the need for respect; transgression is part of his way of life, and he uses it without compunction to regain the language he has lost.

King's text seduces by importing the reader into an insider community of secret vibrancy, inventiveness and regenerative transgression. Bowering's text seduces by suggesting a reader who is as inquisitive, articulate and analytical as the two Indians, whose purpose in receiving narrative is to extrapolate anthropological and metaphysical

truth from narrative. Readers who, like Roy Smith, read out of a desire for romance, are doomed to failure, abandonment, loss of the game. Yet the process of writing worlds and people into being, while arduous and filled with missteps, is also a process that can be continually restarted.

5.4 Gail Scott's *Heroine* and the Trickster as Activist

To explore the potential of the hero, the epic and the tragic within postmodernity may seem to be at least a complex if not an oxymoronic task, and by taking it on Gail Scott opens a resonant space for her quasi-trickster in *Heroine*. Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) constructs the epic and the novel as standing in opposition to each other. For him, the epic is the territory of "the national historic past; it is a world of 'beginnings' and 'peak times' in the national history, a world of fathers and of founders of families, a world of 'firsts' and 'bests'" (13), while the novel, as the realm of "the common people's creative culture of laughter" (20), parodies what the epic elevates.

Gail Scott is fully aware of the contradictions inherent in her approach—see her essay "A Feminist at the Carnival" in *Spaces Like Stairs* (1989, 115-35)—but far from retreating from the problem, she evolves it into a source for the muted Rabelaisian laughter that permeates the subtext. As Nicole Markotic (1994/2002) observes, "The entire plot of *Heroine* is the heroine taking a bath and masturbating" (37). Coupled with the fact that this heroine is known variously as G.S. (as she will be identified here), Gail, or Gail Scott, this autoerotic situation makes the narrative resonate with irony.

Concepts of the heroic, at least as Bakhtin conceives them, involve an extraordinary individual who lives a public life of action on behalf of the public. A

person who is alone in her bathtub pleasuring herself and remembering her life throughout the book's "real time" action does not seem to fit this mould. But in Scott's text, languid sensuality opens a space for reflection and self-interrogation. As she relaxes in her bathtub with her spray of water, the protagonist/heroine, G.S., plays with her past. She considers how to shape it into a narrative that will echo the world as she sees it while keeping open a space within it for positive social change. In the 1970s she has been a lover, a political activist, and a writer; a perennial outsider in her own personal Shangri-La (see also Frank Davey, 213-19), she has abandoned her childhood home of Sudbury, Ontario to become a citizen of Montreal. In the novel's present moment of 1980, her lover Jon has abandoned her for other women, and this brings G.S. to reassess her previous identities. The process produces an instability in how she sees herself and her world.

G.S.'s memories flow in an associative rather than a linear pattern, presenting her experience of the past in no obvious order and repeatedly returning to certain key ideas and emotions—especially a sense of betrayal and bafflement, and a sense that for her activist comrades, much of her credibility vanished with her lover. Towards the end of the book, this separatist group offers her a conditional re-acceptance on condition that she joins the effort to help restaurant workers unionize. Knowing that she has negotiated a vacation from her regular job in order to free herself for her writing, they expect her to use this time off for their cause.

The expectation that activists and women should sublimate their own plans for the sake of the communal good seems doubly rooted here. As well as being indicative of

certain strains of communist and Marxist thinking, it is consistent with a twentieth century Quebecois social structure, where both church and state expected women to erase themselves from the political picture as needing and desiring subjects (see Karen Gould [1990], 1-51). G.S.'s reluctance to conform reinforces the many fault-lines she sees embedded in the group's politics—the members do not vote for a politician who is sympathetic to their cause, for example, because they do not wish to support a bourgeois political process (89)—and also underscores the parodic nature of her narrative.

Lorna Irvine (1988; 118) contends that such inconsistencies are in fact what threatens the progressive socialist efforts represented in *Heroine*. These efforts range from social activism—on behalf of both Quebec as an oppressed province, and the oppressed women G.S. encounters at the shelter where she works—to what we might call textual activism, as Scott and G.S. both struggle with romance plots that restrict their potential as citizens. Calling on Rachel Blau DuPlessis's concept of romantic thralldom, Irvine examines how G.S.'s fraught resistance of the romance plot emphasizes that "the concept 'heroine' is necessarily linked to the concept 'hero'" (116). G.S.'s resistance is fraught, as Irvine observes, and it is difficult to see a definite triumph in it: "Even in the present moment of *Heroine*, the day of the narrator's extended bath, the narrator's own nostalgia prevents the forward movement of plot and catches her in a circle that parodies much discussed feminist structures" (117).

The nostalgia is particularly compelling for G.S. because it is based on several threshold experiences of young adulthood that, in her case, occur simultaneously: her first extended romantic relationship coincides with the rite of passage of leaving the childhood

home, and it mingles with the first thrill of embracing adult responsibility in a chosen society. Montreal is an especially dynamic place so soon after the October crisis. It appears to be ripe for social change and just steps away from becoming utopic, and young G.S. clearly experiences the opportunity to participate in its transformation as heady. All of her early experiences in the city bear a load of delight and excitement, not least her first encounter with the group of young radicals that happens to include Jon (23).

The young G.S. fetishizes the heroic because she experiences the romantic and the epic as intricately intertwined. While she is aware of the darker sides of both and develops a pronounced skepticism toward them, she first experiences them as genuine and free of irony. But her acceptance into this exciting world is equivocal because she is from the Sudbury area, not Montreal, so that her politics are considered suspect. Her comrades keep her on the fringes of the action, assigning her to a safe post in a telephone booth during a dangerous action, and correcting her ideology when she focuses on women as an oppressed group. As Frank Davey observes (1993/2002: 61), it is feminism that preoccupies G.S. more insistently than any other cause in this text as she becomes aware of herself as a member of an oppressed group within a supposedly progressive movement. Yet this focus makes her suspect in the eyes of her comrades.

When her lover discards her for a woman whose appearance is more conventionally feminine than G.S.'s own (14), it already reads both as inevitable and as the ultimate injustice. The event occurs very early in the text and establishes the tone of the relationship between G.S. and Jon, a relationship in which she is always already insufficient and always already betrayed. Her "epic" battle to bring change to the world

seems inextricable from her battle to retain Jon's affection. These congruent struggles play out in an actual world that blurs distinctions between political principle and personal bias; it confuses political effectiveness and personal validity. When G.S.'s friend Marie, a feminist, lesbian and filmmaker, says that leftist activism is immaterial and a feminist's primary responsibility is to write (113), she implies that the attempt to re-write the world is a viable activist alternative to other forms of social change.

The playful process of re-figuring her past into a narrative offers G.S. some freedom. There are four main levels of narrative in *Heroine*—the prototypical embedded narrative-in-process whose own protagonist has an ex-boyfriend named Jon and writes in a journal, the narrative of G.S.'s remembered life of the last decade, the narrative of the bathtub interlude (what prolongs it? what will end it?), and the implied ur-narrative of Scott's own life—for the insistent repetition of similar experiences throughout the different levels irresistibly suggests that Scott herself is their parent and original.

On some levels Scott's fictionalizing strategies seem far clearer than those employed by Winterson, Brossard, and Atwood. She simply takes a single set of related experiences and repeats them with minimal changes in her framing and embedded narratives, confident that the core experience is compelling and that repeating the core experience builds resonance. Atwood, Brossard and Winterson, on the other hand, filter experience through fable and fiction when producing their texts. Even when Nicole Brossard writes herself into her texts it is in a markedly fictional context among fictional characters and fictional situations. Alone among the texts examined here, *Heroine* avoids referring to reading, and names no novels, poems or movies, implying that its own central

experience is sufficiently mythic without overlays from fairy tale, legend, myth and literature. It also champions self-sufficiency, suggesting both disinterestedness and a certain freedom from influence.

According to Rita Felski, the masked, shifting aesthetics of narrative exemplified by Carter and Winterson use narrative to model Judith Butler's theories of the performance and construction of gender (75-6). Scott's text casts this type of aestheticization within a more commonplace idiom. While narrative may play a large part in constructing gender and other aspects of identity, everyday experience is even more influential. While mythic structures such as heroic and romantic quests do inform the plot of *Heroine*, they eventually seem insufficient to the task of finding one's place in the world as an activist, as a writer, and as a woman. This is achieved by combining the more mundane processes of reflecting and writing. The interconnected acts of writing and reflecting are necessarily ironic, as G.S. learns:

I got that same feeling again later taking a taxi along Esplanade-on-the-park. On my knee was the black book.... When suddenly on the sidewalk I see a projection of my worst dreams. A real hologram. You and the green-eyed girl. Right away I notice she's traded in her revolutionary jeans for a long flowing skirt. And her hair is streaked. Very feminine. As for you you're walking sideways, the better to drink her in. With your eyes. Oh God, obviously you can't get enough.... All I could think was what a coincidence. Because at the moment I saw you my love, I'd been writing in the black book (not believing yet that our reconciliation was really finished) *He's Mr. Sweet these days. I'm the one who's fucking up, making scenes.* (14-15; Scott's italics)

The words G.S. has written in the journal reflect a severe misreading, not only of an enigmatic world, but of a man with whom she has been intimate for years. This situation interrogates romantic fallacies about women and relationships, and about writing and

reality. Journals, after all, are a means of reflection and self-knowledge, forming a record of a life lived; they are also a means of shaping a self and a life. In this excerpt G.S. uses her journal to stage a moment of doubt and self-flagellation, but what she sees through the taxi window reveals her anguish as falsely-based, and perhaps even perversely self-indulgent.

Irvine observes, "That Scott so openly presents us with this problem of distance—the space between women authors and their female characters—illuminates, quite intentionally, the novel's persistent awareness of debates about the writing of women, and underscores the fact that this novel is intent on showing female creativity as a process only partly understood" (115). A sense of mystery, or perhaps mystification, does persist throughout Scott's text. Things evade her pen, and life refuses to be controlled no matter how thoroughly she envisions, writes, and re-writes them. Passionate, committed, engaged, and active, G.S. is perhaps a model citizen, but neither the lover nor the world she serves reciprocates her devotion. Her rights and privileges seem few while her obligations and responsibilities are many. Chief among these, Marie insists, is her feminist responsibility to write (156). Because this pronouncement echoes through the mind of G.S.'s protagonist, it resonates the more strongly, but it also eddies and swirls with the impossible pressures of representing a world that refuses to let itself be perceived accurately, that sidles away from its lovers' gentle caresses and from the knives of surgeons about to excise its diseases.

Frank Davey (1993/2002) notes that Scott's text comments on Lacan's theory

that to become a separate human subject requires the losing of direct knowledge of the world and its replacement by language and its forever inadequate signifiers, and that the regulator of language and its meanings is the Phallus, which thus stands as a sign of its own inadequacy—a reminder of both the loss of metaphysical “truth” and the mere systematicity of the symbolic code of language that has replaced it. (52-3)

Scott's not-quite-trickster yearns to be recognized as a viable subject and citizen but her world does not accede to her yearning. Because of *Heroine's* many shifts in verb tenses and other radically disruptive communication techniques (Irvine 115) there is a sense that something about language remains beyond G.S.'s grasp, but direct knowledge of the world is also out of reach, so that there is a continuous struggle to find any ground from which to write. The struggle and the yearning seem to bear little relation to the trickster paradigm, but operate instead to bind her to the inadequate world.

The trickster aspects that do rise to the surface include the devotion to erotic pleasure established by her bathtub interlude, and G.S.'s reluctance to leave the comfort of the tub. There is also G.S.'s ironic, nearly cosmic laughter at herself and her world, which seems to bubble beneath the surface of the text. Additionally, G.S. seems to take a genuine pleasure in the vagaries of her narrative drifts. Irvine characterizes the struggles with tense shifts and interrupted narratives as problematic and obtrusive. But Markotic reads them as indicating a pleasurable relaxed languor, or a gloriously casual but rich relationship with language and narrative that welcomes shorthand, digression, and return as an intimate practice. As such, they suggest the artfulness employed by Felski's masquerading woman writer, but rendered in an accessible and quotidian idiom.

Markotic suggests that *Heroine* is more a novel of middles than of beginnings and endings. G.S. dwells on the middle of her failed relationship with Jon, especially downplaying the traumatic close of it, but also declining to depict its beginning in close detail. Even the process of planning the next text she will write follows the same pattern. The mental process of plotting it out and conveying the texture of her narrative world absorbs and delights her, but the physical process of writing it down and committing it to paper and ink implies that she must leave her bathtub. While she fully intends to do this, thinking about it from time to time, and thinking also about going to a neighbourhood café that is a favourite place to write, by the end of the narrative she has explicitly confirmed neither that she has left the tub nor that she has begun to write. The process of constructing the narrative, then, compels and pleases her more than producing it as a material artifact. The finished book seems like an incidental by-product of this pleasure, largely because the narrative does not depict the physical labour involved in producing the text. It privileges instead the mentally lusory aspects of constructing narrative.

In its ebb and flow and cyclical return, the narrative structure of Scott's text overtly mimics Cixousian and Irigayan concepts of the extended female orgasm, and resembles the vertiginous motion of the maelstrom. Absences, including the weirdly obtrusive absence of the physical writing process and the diegetic absence of G.S.'s lover, catalyze the steady but insistent spinning movement, becoming reminiscent of the vortex or hole that, as Davey (52) points out, is the subject of G.S.'s wry refrain: "Oh Mama why'd you put this hole in me?" (Scott 31). Since G.S. is masturbating as she thinks through the stories she has lived as well as the one she is about to write, there is a

sly appropriation of the seminal fluid/ink equation. Further, since the flow of water, a symbolically over-determined item if there ever was one, is her aid to pleasure, “spurting warmly over [her] uh small point” (36), there is a suggestion that the shifting and changing elements of the world are her “ideal lovers,” that anything that flows and wells with water is her lover, or perhaps just that water can be as satisfying a lover as any human man.

The trickster G.S in Gail Scott’s *Heroine* is dedicated “to creat[ing] Paradise in this Strangeness” (183) because paradise is a good place for a trickster to be. The created Paradise offers an easy life outside of oppression; it offers equal access to resources and luxuries, an appreciative community free of strife and in control of its own destiny. Here the weightiest responsibility is the responsibility to write a tantalizingly shifting world with words distilled from erotic pleasure. One can achieve paradise by conducting a sustained dialogue with heroism, romance, and the utopic, tempering nostalgia with irony and remembering the capacity for self-delusion within the utopic citizen. Scott’s almost-trickster is emerging from the quagmire of social illusion and reaching toward a bauble of possibility. If the bauble shatters she will probably fall back down into the muck, but meanwhile the prospect of reaching it and expanding it energizes her, inspires her, makes her willing to risk delusion and embarrassment for the sake of a play-world that recognizes her expertise, her passion and her worth.

5.5 Lisa Moore’s *Alligator* and the Gothic Trickster

A complex and unusual novel, Lisa Moore’s *Alligator* (2005) features a number of different protagonists, of whom the film director Madeleine, and to some extent her

niece Colleen, pursue issues of narrative and personal pleasure past the bounds of personal safety. The draw of narrative leads these two women to jeopardize the security of others as well as their own. Moore constructs both Madeleine and Colleen as fixated on film, Madeleine for its imaginative capacity and Colleen for its referentiality.

The feature film that Madeleine is in the process of directing obsesses her as a means of exploring and communicating an important aspect of her place of origin, Newfoundland, and its historical heritage. She wheels, deals and wheedles a dream cast, a dream crew, and a dream location, but her diseased heart betrays her and she dies before completing production. Meanwhile, teen-aged Colleen is captivated by a discarded snippet of an old documentary Madeleine filmed some years in the past, which happened to catch on film the actual mauling of an alligator wrangler by his alligator. The banal violence it depicts resembles a symptom of Colleen's own experience, because for her it apparently conjures the trauma of losing her beloved stepfather.

Described on its book jacket as the first "Newfoundland Gothic" novel, *Alligator* constructs narrative, particularly in its cinematic form, as a potentially entrapping structure. Gothic erasure, dispersal, and obliteration are all fates to be feared and avoided, however, and Madeleine and Colleen employ trickster-like tactics diligently and enthusiastically to avoid facing them. In true trickster fashion, both achieve at best a qualified success, are their own worst enemies, and adversely affect others through their recklessness, even while they thoroughly enjoy the ride.

Madeleine, Moore's writer-director, struggles to coalesce images into a compelling Newfoundland Gothic film. In the film, a red-headed maiden and her eerily

lovely mother face a hostile outpost community; an enigmatic Archbishop exorcises a church bell and obsesses about silver chalices; and throngs of white horses pound through the North Atlantic surf. The Newfoundland of Madeleine's film is definitely a haunted place. Its people are constrained by the intractable worlds of the past, the spiritual, and material reality, and its narrative is integrally bound to questions of mortality. The film begins to unfurl for Madeleine on a morning when the conflict in Abu Ghraib makes the front page of her newspaper, and the dimensions of the narrative arrive full-force in the midst of her first heart attack. Framed as it is by the director's first and last heart attacks, the production of this film clearly and literally depends on the engine of Madeleine's body, her heart.

This engine has been diseased since childhood (162), and has already malfunctioned badly within the last several months. Concealing the fact of her heart disease from cast, crew, friends, and family is, therefore, the trickiest maneuver that Madeleine faces during production. When she cannot rely on outright deception to convince her doctor to endorse her health for insurance purposes, she relies on luck and her acting skills instead (37-8). Only she knows that the film's foundation is so fragile, and she tries to bypass her body's constraints in order to thoroughly enjoy the challenge of translating her vision into film.

Thoughts of her ex-husband and close friend Marty are closely related to thoughts of her film and her recalcitrant heart. The heart, again centrally positioned, connects with romantic and erotic discourses as well as with discourses of cinematic production, and all of these connect with ideas about travel and mobility. For Madeleine, voyaging carries

intensely erotic associations because her honeymoon was spent traveling other continents by train with little privacy for sexual interaction. At one point a train passenger inadvertently interrupts an erotic interlude between Marty and Madeleine, while a tractor moves past moments after another erotic interlude, this one outside under the trees in the Black Forest. For Madeleine, a possibility apparently exists that these interlopers have witnessed her intimacy with Marty, and have thus become benignly contaminated by this eroticism. In later years, after her divorce, business travel connected with her filmmaking also consistently yields sexual encounters that occupy an uneasy place between the private and the public. Madeleine seems merrily conscious that members of her cast and crew are fully aware of who spends the night in which room. Where the clip of the alligator film is concerned, the only comment she makes on it to Colleen is the fact that the alligator wrangler who was mauled had been her lover. Travel and filmmaking are thus fully contaminated by the erotic, and sex becomes an activity that hovers around the line between the public and the private. Sexual interaction develops into a bridge between self and world for Madeleine, a suspenseful act of personal exposure and passionate communication that produces vulnerability and exhilaration at once. Interacting with the material geography of Newfoundland and filming the narrative she has conceived for it touches on all these aspects of the ebullient Madeleine's experience, and the phenomenological experience of making films bears a sexualized cast.

These elements are uniquely combined in the particular newspaper photo and its subject which she encounters on the morning of her first heart attack.

The photograph was soft focus, a digital photograph that had an amateurish cast, a naked man in a hood standing on a platform. He stood with his cupped hands over his genitals. One shoulder slouched, an almost girlishly coy slouch except for the hood that was large and black, and the brutal fact of his nakedness. The man's nakedness shocked her deeply. The photograph was low resolution, and looked like it had been passed through a variety of media and the image had been degraded in the process. The hues in the print were off, an almost imperceptible wrongness of hue and focus, sinister in its casual ineptitude.... [Madeleine] tried to understand the image. A blooming horror made her skin prickle; what was this photograph? It was a homemade joke about torture, folksy and kitsch, full of abject glee and hatred.... She would not let herself think the word *evil*.... The photograph was evil. (170-71; Moore's italics)

The gratuity of the photograph format, the easy accessibility of it, and her own intimacy with it are suddenly compromised by its "evil," which involves the "casual ineptness" of the photographer and the transformation of a human torture and abjection into a spectacle.

But Madeleine does not question her own complicity in just such activities.

Alligator opens with her niece Colleen watching Madeleine's archival footage of a man being mauled by an alligator. Moore's text compartmentalizes narrative perspectives within chapters, shifting points of view between ten different characters; in Madeleine's chapters, this fragment of her past cinematic production never enters her memories at all while Loyola, the alligator wrangler and her ex-lover (9), is not even an echo. Her in-passing announcement to Colleen about the sexual aspect of this relationship arises only in Colleen's chapter, not registering at all within her own chapters.

Colleen, a perceptive teenager, particularly notices how the festive aspects of this industrial training film jar with the shockingly didactic message, for the excised clip incorporates the alligator clip within its instructional script on safety in the workplace.

The clip presents a small crowd gathered by a dirt road under moss-covered trees in a scene that is overlaid with the atmosphere of an exhausted and banal carnival spectacle. This atmosphere is suggested partly by the terse and spare language with which Colleen's consciousness narrativizes the event, and partly by her observation of the dry, dusty, hot, weary weather the camera has recorded. There are aluminum lawn chairs, and a child with glowing blond hair and a silver balloon; the perspiring wrangler, later identified as Loyola, struts and postures to "create anticipation" (2). This spectacle is interspersed with footage of a nuclear power plant, a *topos* that strangely resembles a carnival or amusement park as the film's moment of crisis approaches. The plant, Colleen considers, "is all chrome and steam. It's all shiny surfaces and echoes and ominous footfalls, which people forget the importance of sound effects in a safety video. / ... / There are pistons dropping into cylinders, pipes sighing, gusts of steam lit by cherry-coloured exit signs or orange lights and beeps and dings and shrill whistles like kettles that sound not very state-of-the-art" (6).

It is easy to imagine that this montage of images could have been designed by the absent filmmaker to increase tension, suspense, and the sense of encroaching danger, mingling all with a sense of immanence and inevitability. Yet Colleen's description uses an entertainment idiom and not an instructional idiom to contextualize these standard tropes. She could as easily be describing a pinball machine as a nuclear power plant or a mauling. She is already more than familiar with the commodification of actual suffering; she watches executions live via the internet, and has attended house parties where watching "bum fights" on a plasma screen television is part of the attraction (2-5).

Despite such contrary suggestions as her involvement with ecological initiatives—at one point she vandalizes bulldozers in an effort to preserve the habitat of the endangered Newfoundland pine marten—Colleen's empathy for suffering seems ambiguous, contingent, willed, and somehow cynical. Even her fascination with Loyola seems inextricable from the spectacle of his suffering, and when she does meet with him face to face, the deep traces of the mauling dominate her interaction with him to the point that she nearly re-enacts the mauling incident herself, stepping out of a boat in an alligator preserve at the wrong time (253, 280). For her, the alligators carry a resonance of mystery and the intractable, and she is much compelled by her aunt's film's attempt to provide a trace of an actual human struggle with such forces.

Colleen and Madeleine are both struck by the radical disconnect between the experience of suffering and the outside perception of it, especially where a camera lens, itself a framing or narrative device, mediates the suffering. Madeleine cannot shake a suspicion that the photograph of the execution is a bad joke and an example of kitsch art. Colleen is watching a man being mauled by his alligator, but as she first watches it, the placement of this scene within Madeleine's instructional film almost resembles black comedy. To frame this shocking moment within the context of an industrial training film, the voice-over warns against careless deviations from routine, and Colleen bridges the abyss between this banal gloss and the horrific scene by characterizing the alligator's actions: "The alligator shakes his head as if he's having a disagreement. He really disagrees. He disagrees vehemently. The alligator is trying hard to tear the man's head from his shoulders" (7). As Colleen watches this footage she is also snacking on a peanut

butter sandwich and flipping through a Cosmo article about increasing a man's sexual pleasure. What she sees on screen, while still horrific, seems to flatten out. It is no more or less important than anything else Colleen experiences within the same timeframe.

As such, this opening segment of *Alligator* conforms to what Justin D. Edwards (2005), following Georg Lukács, calls a "powerful [link] between an urban culture of mass consumerism and the brutal violence that such a society perpetuates" (74). In his reading of gothic discourses in current Canadian literature, Edwards reads such linkages as "participat[ing] in the political ambivalence of the gothic, which often moves between contradictory agendas and refuses to remain fixed in a clear political position" (75). It is indeed the political ambivalence of the media, be it newspaper or cinematic, towards human trauma that propels both Madeleine and Colleen into the wild, even hedonistic paths they follow in their narratives.

Madeleine throws herself into the movie-making work she loves. She spares some time for nostalgic reveries, for calling Marty, and for buying an off-season artificial Christmas tree, but everything else she does relates exclusively to her film, from conning her doctor into signing her physical, to hobnobbing with the premier to arrange the transport of Lippizan stallions from Austria to Newfoundland's Southern Shore in the dead of winter, to schmoozing with her lead actress Isobel and cinematographer in order to build confidence in the project, to cajoling Marty to invest his life savings in this under-funded film. The crises of others do not register in her mind. Isobel has become dangerously entangled with a psychopath from Russia and attempts to enlist Madeleine's help during a lunch meeting (289), but Madeleine is too preoccupied with the film to

recognize the call for help. Her niece Colleen vanishes utterly from St. John's, but this drama does not register at all within Madeleine's thirteen chapters until it has already been resolved by Colleen's return (300). Her beloved ex-husband Marty has been rejuvenated and restored by the birth of his new daughter, whom Madeleine never sees. Moore's narrative constructs Madeleine as being absorbed to the point of enthrallment with her film's key images: snow, darkness, and thundering white horses, a sinister enigma of an archbishop, a mother and daughter who are eroticized by their gothic vulnerability to the island and its citizens. Madeleine resists letting her fragmentary and fictive narrative be subordinated by any currently-unfolding drama from her actual world.

In her sixteen chapters, her impetuous niece Colleen also acts largely to indulge herself. She brazenly steals liquor from a liquor store, impulsively participates in a wet t-shirt contest, sleeps with then steals from Frank the hot-dog vendor, and jaunts across the continent to Louisiana to meet Loyola, who survived the alligator attack. Her Aunt Madeleine's epic attempt to film Newfoundland's quintessential narrative does not enter her consciousness appreciably. Colleen constructs her more extraordinary actions as emerging from a certain amoral curiosity that is also an attempt to explore the reciprocal relations between actuality and experience: "once I've imagined the absolutely worst thing I can do in any given moment I have to do it. I have to see how it turns out" (118). One of these things, the wet t-shirt contest, turns into an ugly and dangerously-charged situation, but help arrives in the form of a virtual stranger called Frank. They sleep together spontaneously, and her discovery of his sizable supply of cash leads to her equally spontaneous decision to steal it and run off to Louisiana to find Loyola. Within

twenty-four hours of meeting him, she endangers herself by stepping off a boat and almost being mauled herself. "How it turns out" is itself a long and complicated story with many unexpected turns, generating multiple "worst things to do."

Aunt and niece are both unruly women whose blinkered, even self-absorbed focus leads to direct confrontations with mortality. Moore's text contextualizes them with other citizens of St. John's, however, and only a few of these do take the existence of others into consideration. This condition is not endemic to inhabitants of the city and the island, since the most extreme example, Isobel's brutal and psychopathic lover Valentin, is from Russia. It seems instead related to proximity to packaged narrative, for Colleen is never far from magazine, television, article, or book, and Madeleine has deeply internalized the world of film; others, meanwhile, seem defined by their tendency to live their lives according to the "truths" their memories provide.

Colleen's lover Frank provides a counterpoint. He cherishes his memories of his dead mother, but lives alone in a downtown apartment paying little or no attention to any form of media. He is aware of its existence because the local news media frequently passes him as he sells his hot dogs on George Street, but his somewhat insular existence remains largely untouched by the products of narrativization in any form. Instead he is closely connected with the streets and downtown core of St. John's, which brings Frank to resemble an avatar of the city. He is challenged, threatened, and endorsed by the city as no other character is, for he is drugged and left to die in Isobel's burning house by Valentin, which brings Frank the attention of the media and the citizens. This eventually alters his lifestyle, bringing him sustained interaction with others as well as a safer, if less

lucrative, job at a photocopy shop. Frank's awareness and consideration of others and his willingness to interact with them is not tempered, as for Madeleine and Colleen, by needing to press a narrative further either by making it or living it. He is focussed on the present moment and the near future, and while his memories of his mother are close to hand, he seems less dominated by them than Colleen seems to be by her obsessions with her beloved stepfather's death and the mauling, or as Madeleine is by her film and her nostalgia. Frank does not let his mother's memory dictate his current actions to the point that he barely seems to consider her dying wish that he should attend university.

Madeleine, on the other hand, does seem dominated by the past, although she is determined to subsume it within the present and the future. This ongoing project of her film focuses on a time in Newfoundland's history, and when she is not focusing on this she is flooded with nostalgic memories of her rich and varied life. Her film conflates the erotic and the exotic within a gothic idiom, itself perennially associated with the return of the repressed and the continuing presence of a suffocating past. The concept that fascinates her positions a mother and daughter within the island's rugged outpost landscape, and at conflict with a society that demonizes them. They attract the attention of the archbishop who has come to exorcize the church bell. There are two false priests who hear confession under false pretenses, but what they have to do with the story, where the horses fit in, and precisely how the archbishop's narrative thread relates to the mother and daughter's remains unclear.

The director relies on the skill of her cinematographer to translate the Southern Shore of her Newfoundland home into film, and to de-familiarize it, exoticize it, and

render it uncanny. She is bound to the potential of the film itself, which she knows will “be better than any film ever made by anyone. Better than Bergman. This film will contain everything. It will contain everything. It will contain everything” (251). Unlike Joan Foster in Atwood’s *Lady Oracle* (1976), or the writing I in Winterson’s *PowerBook* (2001), or Cybil in Brossard’s *Baroque d’Aube* (1995) or G.S. in Scott’s *Heroine*, Madeleine does not keep her audience in mind as she works toward bringing her film into being. It is the process of making it that captivates her, and like Coyote in Thomas King’s *Green Grass, Running Water*, she rarely looks far beyond this process, focusing instead on the pleasure this challenge brings her.

Madeleine is clear on the basics: the film is “about the violent, desolate landscape and human triumph over nature, but it [is] also, in a much quieter, private way, about evil. A community in the grip of some religious fervour that had sprung out of the tyranny of mild, constant hunger and a giving over” (38). There is again a disparity between religious fervour, continual physical deprivation, the abdication of agency, and the commodification of suffering. But how the plot will explore this is left unclear. Madeleine thinks instead about how red hair shines on a pillow (89), the haunting qualities of Isobel’s face under various lights (38), and how to make the white horses look right against the dark winter ocean. In order to communicate her narrative, she relies as much on evanescent aspects of visual images of a type that resist linguistic expression as she does on logic, grammar, language, and structure.

The story of the film does not come fully clear for *Alligator*’s readers, at least in comparison with Madeleine’s early industrial training film. The indeterminacy of the

film's plot coincides with Moore's narrative technique. She interleaves the fragmentary perspectives of ten different people to produce a shifting and kaleidoscopic narrative that interrogates the products of hunger and surrender. Its avatars, scapegoats and victims are everywhere in the book. Madeleine, her lead actress Isobel, and her niece Colleen all interrogate those products as well, since they do not act against such forces, and sometimes even enable them.

Moore's narrative leaves the embedded narrative of Madeleine's film defined more by aporia than by its shaping details, suggesting the film may acquire an almost mystic ability to seduce with promises of signification. This treatment makes the film seem unpredictable and independently impetuous on a level with Colleen—or Madeleine herself. In Moore's hands, a city can become a character, even the main character in a novel, and a film can do so as well. Making this film demands of Madeleine both expertise and improvisational skills, both experience and inspiration, and it seems to reciprocate by becoming something like her ideal playground and her ideal playmate. Her relationship with it resembles Tristram Shandy's relationship with his own narrative. Tristram's autobiography and Madeleine's film are continually interrupted, and never quite manage to attain their stated goals, but nevertheless charm, compel, and obsess their producers.

The winter shoot is plagued by virtually insurmountable obstacles, but is enlivened by superlative performances from Isobel and compelling scenes with the Lippizan stallions (302). As with *Lady Oracle*, gothic convention eroticizes and legitimates the story. The central figures, mother and daughter, are both emphatically

vulnerable to their community because they are subject to its judging scrutiny and to the ambiguous scrutiny of the archbishop. In this, they suggest Madeleine's unconscious apprehension of the position she will eventually inhabit as the director of the completed film. Through this film, her first feature film after a career of making documentaries and instructional films around the world, she too will face the scrutiny of two communities, that of her home and that of her profession.

The prospect of this scrutiny seems to connect with her early intense but equivocal experience of sex as public/private. Despite her own faith in the film, the scrutiny will not necessarily be friendly. Madeleine dwells on how the camera will "see" her story, and on how the images currently in her mind's eye will read on the screen. The visual aspect seems to blur eerily with the material and the "real" for her, intimating a similar blur between the cinematic and the actual. Madeleine conceives of the young woman as marginally in control of her own actions. Apparently entranced, she roams the cliffs in a nightgown or reclines wanly in bed (36, 89), perhaps at the mercy of the cathedral bells that the archbishop thinks are possessed. Isobel plays the mother, and both character and actress fit the description of "an ageing beauty, a haggard temptress. Isobel's cheekbones, her wide, full-lipped mouth—the strength in her face—an absorbing iconic face, the dark, heavy eyebrows, sooty lashes, almost masculine, except for a vulnerability you couldn't put your finger on" (38). A young woman who may not be able to control her actions and how the community receives her; an older woman who is almost threateningly strong and compelling, but still vulnerable: both images suggest Madeleine's unthought defiance of any less-than-flattering pronouncements on her vision

and her skills when it comes to this film, which she sees as a monument, a labour of love, an obsession, a threat, a fictionalized image of her own life and reciprocal relationship with her “reality.”

Her first feature film is very much a departure and an experiment for Madeleine. Yet because the glittering narrative that she conceives is arrested partway through its production phase, this particular thread reads as essentially purposeless: surely it would be more fully developed were it crucial to *Alligator*’s plot. Instead, Moore writes Madeleine’s film as an unresolved sequence of images. They have immense but enigmatic personal resonance, and their connections to the director’s material body are unmistakable if elusive. The process of imposing an accessible logic on them requires a group effort that draws on the intellectual and emotional but also very physical aspects of aesthetic production. Madeleine’s film enables skilled artists to interact and to practice their craft for the sake of excellence alone. There is a promise of financial reward and possibly professional respect, but it is an exceptionally frail promise that dissolves utterly on Madeleine’s death.

As an aesthetic enterprise within *Alligator*, Madeleine’s film is gratuitous, a vehicle for the skilled play of masquerade and identity. The “violent, desolate landscape” across which the story plays suggests Madeleine’s own violent heart and desolate body, and the random collection of struggling humans that populate it suggest the contradictory and terrifyingly ambivalent impulses that mark her. This is a near-trickster who refuses to acknowledge the restrictions of living in a material world, and who plays herself out of it as a result. The montage that moves her out of her living gothic body toward whatever

comes next subsumes her obsession within the enigmatic aspects of a world that demands she resist it: "The archbishop raised his arms. The horses come by helicopter, pawing the clouds with their great hooves, a snowfall of moths. The city is covered in fluttering white snow. Moths on their hands, their arms, their upturned faces" (303).

The irony of being ushered out of the world by a creature that conventionally suggests the transcendence of the soul, but that in *Alligator* suggests an uncanny natural world that devours itself—in spanworm form the moths have eaten almost every leaf in downtown St. John's—is entirely in keeping with the irony of being Madeleine. She is a gothic trickster whose obsession with the past and nostalgia for the fictive defuses her every transformative impulse, but whose power in a roundabout way eventually brings those she influences, such as Colleen and Isobel, to face their own weakness and destructiveness. Colleen eventually apologizes for overstepping her bounds (280) and atones for stealing from her lover (285), and Isobel turns her talents toward teaching others and entertaining the community (294); both may be refigured by these hopeful acts of connection into promising and productive citizens.

But this has never been the issue for Madeleine, who abandoned conventional values of stable citizenship along with her husband and middle-class married life. The wilder, glamorous, rootless and aesthetically exciting professional life she chooses instead does not alert her to how she herself commodifies suffering, or to read her aesthetic production as complicit with evil if not intrinsically evil. In fact, perhaps she perceives her film as counteracting the evil because it will be starkly, vividly, uncannily beautiful and not sinister, off-colour, inept. Still, the glossiness of the future film can

conceal the many faults and flaws of the production process, just as the project of constructing the film distracts from Madeleine's heart disease. The effervescent enthusiasm of Moore's imperfect trickster exceeds the limits of her physical world, surpasses aesthetic representation, bypasses responsibility, and helps energize the catharsis of a world that consumes what threatens it before facing whatever comes next.

5.6 Trauma, the Trickster, and Margaret Atwood's *Blind Assassin*

Pursuit of gratuity is not perhaps the first idea that comes to mind with regard to Iris Chase-Griffen, a venomous octogenarian who delights in deflating pretension and revealing false illusions in Margaret Atwood's *Blind Assassin* (2000).⁴ A powerful catalyst, her trickster wit enshrines the dispossessed and topples the mighty. As a young woman, Iris seems to embody an "ideal" woman of the 1930s. A wealthy socialite, she, her sister Laura, and her daughter Aimee walk the same metropolitan Toronto streets walked by the young Joan Foster, her mother, and her Aunt Lou in *Lady Oracle* (1976). A privileged, upper-class young wife, Iris seems to be the kind of woman Mrs. Foster admires and Joan resents.⁵

Some of the ingredients are in place to position Iris, like Joan, as a screwball in a world that needs to be shaken up. She lives at roughly the right time, being a young

⁴ While they may not be directly cited, a number of juried oral presentations addressing Atwood's texts have contributed to my understanding of *The Blind Assassin*. These include talks at Margaret Atwood: The Open Eye, a symposium held at the University of Ottawa in April 2004. Papers on *The Blind Assassin* were presented by Wendy Roy, Helena Hyttinen, and Coral Ann Howells, all of whom addressed aspects of writing, traces of violence, and authorship. At the ACCUTE sessions of the Congress of Learned Societies held at the University of Winnipeg in May-June 2004, I attended a session by Lynn and Ben Cecil on the interrelationship of age, place and identity in fiction that also influenced my understanding of *Blind Assassin*.

⁵ As a point of interest, Iris Chase-Griffen and Mrs. Foster share an admiration for Joan Crawford's "big serious eyes, an unhappy mouth and high cheekbones" (*LO* 38-9) or, as Iris puts it, "Wounded eyes [and] lethal mouth" (*BA* 404).

woman in the later Depression and early years of World War II. She seems alien to the world she lives in, knows wealth and poverty, and has encountered both class struggles and the battle between the sexes. Her lover constructs her as a straight-up sexpot, her husband and sister-in-law see her as a vacuous “dumb bunny” (420), and her sister believes that she is frivolous, unrealistic, and irresponsible. Yet as she writes her memoir, Iris is reluctant to view the screwball tools of mischief, frivolity and banter as viable means to attain her own goals, let alone social transformation.

Iris suggests a challenge on Atwood’s part to the stereotype of the privileged “conventional” woman so resented by Joan Foster and other Atwood protagonists. In Iris, Atwood traces the pressures and fractures that facilitate collusion with a toxic hegemony. But like Scheherezade, Iris uses what she has, when she can, to shatter the hegemony’s hold on her. Carefully selecting some, but not all, of the trickster’s tricks, Atwood’s Iris is a postmodern neo-trickster woman who shows that there can be an after, however embryonic, to the trauma of living a settler-invader culture, a colonial culture, and an androcentric culture, and to the trauma of being victims, perpetrators, collaborators, bystanders, and resisters. And it does so not least through an unusual, and very intense, narrative structure.

Atwood’s *The Blind Assassin* contains an entire novel called The Blind Assassin, authored by Laura Chase. It is the story of an illicit love affair between a nameless man who is a political fugitive, and a nameless woman who is married and a member of Toronto’s upper classes. It also holds within it a different, orally-told science fiction story

called *The Blind Assassin*.⁶ Within the love affair narrative eventually appears a précis of a segment of *The Blind Assassin* that had been published as a short story in a pulp magazine—as “The Blind Assassin.” Interspersed with chapters of Laura Chase’s *The Blind Assassin* are a number of press clippings, as well as large segments of a manuscript-form memoir, also called *The Blind Assassin*, which has been handwritten by Laura’s sister Iris Chase-Griffen. The hypotext for *The Blind Assassin*, “The Blind Assassin,” *The Blind Assassin*, and *The Blind Assassin* is a series of school notebooks. These also form part of the bundle, and Iris incorporates their contents into her memoir. As a result, Atwood’s text reads like what it is: a large textual scrap-book; an exploration of multiple possibilities for narration and emplotment; a collaborative effort undertaken by three or more different narrators or writers, plus miscellaneous reporters.

In Atwood, the oral *Blind Assassin* is a fantastic science fiction narrative and political allegory set in a remote time and planet. It is embedded fragment by fragment within chapters from Laura Chase’s *The Blind Assassin*, which situates the science fiction narrative as told by a man to his lover after their sexual encounters. *The Blind Assassin* alternates chapter by chapter with Iris’s memoirs. In Atwood’s text, the narratives develop concurrently; the embedded novel and, for the most part, the memoir segments progress in a steady, linear fashion. In her memoirs, Iris adopts the same technique that Joan uses for her memoirs in *Lady Oracle*: she tells the story of her current life, but she also narrativizes the events that brought her to this point in detailed

⁶ The study’s earlier system of differentiating between identically-titled but different narratives through italics, underlining and quotation marks needs to be expanded here. *The Blind Assassin*, using the Arial font, will distinguish Alex’s orally-told narrative from the book Laura authored and from Iris’s memoir.

flashbacks. The chapter-fragments of novel and memoir alternate with each other, and are brought to an orchestrated resolution.

The order of development for the proliferating narratives in Atwood's *Blind Assassin* becomes clear only in retrospect, or even in subsequent readings. The oral *Blind Assassin* narrative is published after the oral storyteller's death, and thus without his knowledge. His lover embeds it within the narrative of their love affair, where it becomes an enfabulating memorial to their love. The love story is eventually revealed to be a camouflaged part of Iris's life-experience, not Laura's, just as Iris, not Laura, is revealed to have written The Blind Assassin. Iris's adultery and her authorship morph into a single occulted secret.

As Scheherezade tells her tale to rescue her sister as well as herself from certain death, so Iris's memoir also rescues the "lives," or at least "life-stories," of her sister and herself. The bundle of hand-written pages obliquely accuses Iris's (and Laura's) oppressors. The narrative's layered ontologies suggest the parameters of the extreme bliss Iris once experienced, her heady but all too short flight, and her plunge into trauma and limbo, but it does so indirectly.

Iris constructs herself as a monstrous trickster, a figure from which society in general and children in particular should be protected. She is aware that the destructive accuracy of her words and the violent consequences of her blind gaze are double-edged, indiscriminately wounding those she loves as well as her enemies. By the time she composes her memoir, she dwells in nearly impermeable isolation. Iris's parents, her only sister Laura, her husband Richard Griffen, her lover Alex Thomas, and her one daughter

Aimee are all long dead, as is Reenie, a beloved family servant. She is permanently estranged from her two living relatives, granddaughter Sabrina and sister-in-law Winifred. Reenie's daughter, Myra Sturgess, and Myra's husband Walter are Iris's sole remaining ties of affection.

Iris avoids claiming her own most intense experiences, but displaces them onto surrogates. The nameless woman in The Blind Assassin, for example, serves as a surrogate for Iris and her sister Laura at the same time. Iris decides to publish the book under her sister's name rather than her own, and it is a complex and tricky decision. Both sisters know the nameless man in question, Alex Thomas, and both are interested in him romantically from their first meeting in the 1930s. Iris, at least, has never been able to shake her jealous suspicion that Laura is meeting Alex on the sly. Iris's deception about which sister wrote and experienced the The Blind Assassin's illicit romance shields herself from negative repercussions, and casts Laura, already a suicide before the book is published, in what 1940s Toronto would have seen as a sordid light. In her memoirs, Iris eventually confesses to writing the story, and to living it, but her deception still has the effect of "giving" Laura the whole love affair, as if to recompense her for stealing it away in the first place. It also reads as a self-sacrifice, since she obliterates her own experience by ceding it to her sister.

After its publication, a copy of The Blind Assassin is found near Iris's husband Richard's dead body, at the scene of his suicide. The connection is clear: the book has somehow assassinated Richard. Three of the four "actual world" people who are most deeply implicated within this narrative are dead, two by their own hands—a sinister

testament to its volatile potential. In this particular case, people who are “implicated” in the cult-hit novel come under ethical, even criminal suspicion, since each implicated person is involved in the destruction of the others. But in *The Blind Assassin* this effect is tempered, even rehabilitated. Chapters from this volatile novel are cut with segments of Iris’s memoirs, supplying much of the context that the earlier text strategically excised. In *The Blind Assassin* indeterminacy is a strategy bringing death and obliteration. But in Iris’s *Blind Assassin*, the proliferation of detail records presence, and rehabilitates traces of life.

In “*Alias Laura: Representations of the Past in Margaret Atwood’s *Blind Assassin**” (2006), Alan Robinson traces the indeterminacy with which *The Blind Assassin* is constructed, focusing in particular on the way that either Laura or Iris, or both, might be the nameless woman protagonist. Robinson points out that there are many periods when Iris, whose relationship with Laura is very conflicted, knows little or nothing about what her younger sister is doing (354); it is at these times that Iris most suspects Laura of being with Alex. Robinson traces the use of details in *The Blind Assassin* that seem specific but could refer to the experience of either sister. The park bench, for example, where the nameless lovers meet for their first tryst seems to refer to some anonymous Toronto park, perhaps near newlywed Iris’s Rosedale home. Yet there is an earlier interlude, while Iris is working at their father’s factory in their home town of Port Ticonderoga, where Laura, left to her own devices, regularly meets Alex, and is seen sitting with him on park benches. A much later chapter in *The Blind Assassin* alludes to a baby, and ascribes to the nameless woman a dissociative state of mind. Iris’s memoir makes clear that at one

point, both sisters are pregnant at the same time by the “wrong” fathers—Iris by her lover Alex, Laura by Richard, Iris’s husband. Robinson notes that the dissociative state could describe either Iris’s post-partum depression, or “Laura’s drugged confinement in the Bella Vista clinic in the aftermath of her forced abortion” (356).

There are many additional ambiguities. Hilda Staels (2004) notes that “[t]he nameless female knows Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, like Iris. She similarly wears expensive clothes and goes on the Queen Mary’s maiden voyage, like Iris” (150). Yet both of these identifiers apply equally to Laura, who, having been tutored at Iris’s side, knows Ovid as well as Iris does, and who accompanies Iris and Richard on their Queen Mary voyage. Laura begins to wear Iris’s clothes once she begins to sleep with Iris’s husband (533), so that even the glamorous clothes do not necessarily exclude her. The nameless woman dreams of leaving her established home to live by herself in a yellow-and-white kitchen (582-3) that bears a striking resemblance to Reenie’s kitchen, which both sisters visit (489). The nameless woman frequently mentions or thinks about “them,” that is, Richard and Winifred, but neither she nor her lover ever says specifically that she has either a husband or a sister-in-law; “they” are simply members of her household and antagonistic to her, which is as true of Laura’s situation as Iris’s.

This indeterminacy, combined with Iris’s intense cynicism, amplifies her unreliability as narrator. Robinson writes:

It is theoretically possible that Iris is lying when she claims to be the author of [*The Blind Assassin*] and that this act of usurpation is the last stage of her sibling rivalry, motivated by jealousy of the affair with Alex which Laura’s novel records. Were one to accept this hypothesis, then her memoir would be unmasked as an elaborate (self-)deception, rendering Atwood’s text a Nabokovian game with the reader (with

perhaps the additional possibility that Iris herself merely fantasized her own supposed affair with Alex). This extreme self-referentiality seems, however, less probable than an interpretation which acknowledges in the sisters' intertwined lives the kind of doubling of female roles characteristic of Atwood's earlier novels. (355)

Based on patterns already established in earlier Atwood novels, Robinson concludes that it is Iris who had the affair with Alex. But tricksterisms and Scheherezadianisms have also been a distinct thread in Atwood, having previously appeared in *Lady Oracle*, *The Robber Bride* and *Alias Grace*. Atwood develops it further in *Oryx and Crake* (2003), where Crake's uncontrolled lusory attitude ends in his own death and the annihilation of the human race. Her recent *Penelopiad* (2005) explores how Penelope, wife of Ulysses, who is himself a proto-trickster in Western culture, ruthlessly bamboozles suitors and other adversaries in her bid to maintain her independence. Young Iris's trickster move of obscuring the identity of her female protagonist is a worthy one, reinforcing an established Atwood pattern.

In "Negotiating with the Dead" (2002), an essay written at roughly the same time as *The Blind Assassin*, Atwood discusses the exchange between writers and the dead. "The dead," she contends, "get blood," which stands in for revenge or justice, while "the poet gets clairvoyance, and the completion of her identity as a poet" (178). Usurping Laura's desired experience, the life she would have chosen, wakes Iris up, lets her vision penetrate past the level of the immediate towards the abstract, and helps her strategize to survive in a world where power is disguised and reversible. It also, as Robinson points out, turns *The Blind Assassin* into a much more devious game with the reader. But it remains a purposive game, exploring coercion, complicity, and the responsibility to

transform—a game that becomes the more interesting from never knowing who the nameless woman is, even while readers are seduced towards connecting her with Iris.

Iris does offer a few clues that it is she, not Laura, who is the nameless woman. In The Blind Assassin, the man asks his lover to stand at her window, look down at him beneath the chestnut tree, and turn out the light (29). Iris writes herself performing this exact sequence of actions much later in her memoir (423). Having received the telegram announcing her lover's death, the nameless woman has a distinctive dream of mourning (587-9); Iris writes herself as waking up from an almost identical dream one morning as she is writing her memoirs (498-9). But most interestingly, the chapter called "The Telegram," which describes how the woman learns of the man's death (584-6), contains a description of events that Richard and Winifred, on reading The Blind Assassin, would recognize categorically as unfolding on the day Iris is notified by telegram of Alex Thomas's death. Iris apparently assumes that when Richard commits suicide with a copy of the book at his side, it is because he is heartbroken at the thought that Laura betrayed him with Alex. Iris takes some pains to promote this misconception in him (641-2), even though she herself is finally convinced that Laura has not interacted with Alex since he first left Port Ticonderoga twelve years earlier in 1935 (628). It seems that Iris engineers Richard's suicide as much as she engineers his political downfall (639-40).

But how far into The Blind Assassin does Richard read? Does he stop short in agony at thinking he has been betrayed by Laura, the woman he loved, or does he commit suicide only when the passage about the telegram makes it dismally clear that it is his lovely, vacuous, infantile, bruisable, obedient wife who has betrayed him, and has been

doing so continually since early in their marriage? Richard, who Iris writes as a competitive and conservative man who “preferred conquest to cooperation, in every area of life” (469), might not react well to realizing that he has been hoodwinked systematically by the woman he sees as his lovely but empty-headed trophy wife—an image she has apparently fostered.

Because Iris’s memoir injects room for doubt about the identity of the nameless woman, the nameless woman’s trauma spills across both sisters. As the writer of The Blind Assassin, Iris’s trickster move of denying her female protagonist a name is a generous one that shares both the glory of writing a cult classic, and the joy of engaging in an affair that fulfills desires. It also shares the trickster’s glee at destroying an order that has grown obnoxious. But it also has its malicious side, because both sisters are marked as victimized by their hegemony’s dominant teleology of martyrdom, of failing exactly when they think their self-sacrifice is purchasing success. It distributes Richard’s physical abuse between the sisters, but also Alex’s cruelly diminishing misogyny. It diminishes the sisters by presenting them as victims of their own self-deception, as foolishly complicit with a system that has a vested interest in their obliteration. It suggests that for each sister, the happiness of the other is grounds for suspicion and sabotage. And it ironicizes the self-imposed, selective blindness each sister directs toward the other.

The relationship between Alex, the fugitive radical, and Iris, the society wife, as depicted by Iris through The Blind Assassin, has its own troubles and turbulences. Atwood writes Iris writing Alex, the nameless man of the love story, as thinking of her as

a “cunt on stilts,” and wishing he himself had placed the bruise on Iris’s thigh that Richard left there (348). Iris writes the man as continually berating the woman for looking out of place and attracting the wrong kind of attention in the rough neighbourhoods where he moves from place to place. He critiques her through his fables, where the adulterous wives of aristocrats are tossed to the mob after the revolution (150), or rejected and exposed by their royal lovers, then sold into slavery by their husbands (162). There are multitudes even of that rare creature, the mute sacrificial virgin, and they are completely indistinguishable, no matter how pathetic their plight (338). Iris writes him sarcastically advising her not to worry because worry has detrimental consequences: “You’ll get thin, and then your lovely tits and ass will waste away to nothing. You’ll be no good to anybody then” (134). The woman rarely responds to these attacks, accepting them without comment.

Iris insists on her own monstrosity even while her reactions to many situations follow a distinctly tricksterish pattern. She sees herself reflected nowhere else in her world, and may not have been able to do so since before the deaths of her family and lover fifty years earlier. Iris experiences being an elderly woman as being subject to patronizing surveillance and general distaste. Now relatively poor instead of rich, she lacks easily-recognizable influence and power. Once the scion of a powerful dynasty, she is now a dispossessed relic. The Chase family might once have been the economic heart of Port Ticonderoga, but the failed Chase dynasty is now only marginally relevant, a distant part of civic heritage. Her context may have produced her as a subject, but it stops short of supporting her as a subject.

The playful aspects of the embedded Blind Assassin foreground the trickster's transformative bent. As a text putatively published in 1947 (31), The Blind Assassin addresses many social taboos. The romance it details is very obviously illicit. Its male protagonist is a radical leftist, and its embedded fable is "pulp" science fiction, a genre that was not even marginally legitimate at the time. These taboos are celebrated in the love story, but barely register in the comparatively conventional material of Iris's memoirs. And Iris makes the project of writing her memoir a game-like enterprise. She restricts her method of narrative production, and suppresses vital information. She erects obstacles for her reader that range from an extravagant proliferation of details that echo from level to level (see Ruth Parkin-Gounelas [2004]), to her depiction of her self as crotchety, unpleasant, and monstrous. Subtending it all is an acid glee that she has tricked her world one way or another for the last sixty-three years, and a bitter delight in revealing how the delicate tissues of truths, half-truths and deceptions have layered together to form the deceptively monstrous carapace concealing the trickster within.

As Arnold E. Davidson, Priscilla L. Walton and Jennifer Andrews point out in *Border Crossings: Thomas King's Cultural Inversions* (2003), trickster discourse may employ a vocabulary of indeterminacy stressing process over product. It evolves, unfolds, is open-ended and incomplete, as the trickster him/herself is a "cunning, playfully self-centered, impulsive, shapeshifting creature" (33). Davidson et al. elaborate: "Texts that utilize a trickster figure or tricksterish elements tend to create an 'inside' and an 'outside' readership: the 'inside' audience is aware of the trick at play, while the 'outside' falls prey to the trick. This effective strategy generates laughter on the part of those who have

been 'had,' at the same time that it affirms the positions of the 'insiders'" (60). Iris's memoir plays intensely with generating insiders and outsiders, and it does so precisely at a site where the issues of authorship, trickery, and trauma converge. As J. Brooks Bouson observes, Atwood's *Blind Assassin* is "[a]t its core a trauma narrative focusing on the sexual self-sacrifice of women under a patriarchal system..." (2003; 255).

The reasons that young Iris chooses to transform her life are, then, relatively clear—even though her life has not been without comfort, and even though as the wife of a prominent industrialist and politically active Conservative with hopes of leadership, she is clearly of the privileged hegemonic class. Yet her privilege has functioned largely to isolate her.⁷ As a young married woman, she leads an official life where being a woman means being silent and accommodating. As she says about being Richard's wife, "My job was to open my legs and shut my mouth./ If that sounds brutal, it was. But it wasn't out of the ordinary" (419). Being rich entails a lack of community and suffering experienced in communal isolation. Iris finds no kindred spirits among the Rosedale socialites and views her sister-in-law Winifred as an adversary. Laura ceases to support her emotionally because she thinks Iris has married for money and disapproves. As a *de facto* socialite, Iris must often attend elite social events that not only keep her apart from Alex but fuel his resentment of her (437-8).

⁷ At the Atwood symposium in 2004, Frank Davey pointed out that although *The Blind Assassin* seems to be about class, the characters are almost exclusively of the middle and upper classes. Alex has mysterious orphan origins and has become a Communist, but is raised by a middle-class minister and his wife in Canada and is university educated. Laura tries to transgress class barriers by working among the lower classes at hospitals and funfairs, but these are doomed attempts. The exhausted workers and peasants of *The Blind Assassin* are backdrops and do not affect the story except by supplying atmosphere.

Iris's secret life is little better. There, being a woman means being subject to unsympathetic definitions. In The Blind Assassin, where the narrative voice alternates between "his" and "hers," the women in the communities where Alex hides are repellent. "She" finds them threatening; "he" constructs them as either whores or resentful peasant women. The women who people his narrative are also contemptible. The mute virgin is incapable of acting on her own account; aristocrats' wives are inherently ridiculous, selfish, and mean; and the Peach Women of A'Aa⁸ are the parodic obverse of the Victorian "angel in the house" ideal: smothering, bruisable sex dollies who castrate by their overpowering drive to nurture. Being rich fosters thoughtlessness and becomes both a liability and a fetish. As the nameless man, Alex bemoans Iris's silliness in wearing a fur coat to a tryst in a poor neighbourhood, but asks her to keep it on during sex (348; 441).

Initially, Iris's alter ego does not think past these constructions of women. In a secret fantasy that she never shares with her lover, she imagines that he will return to her from the war, seeking her out because "[s]he's the tremulous heart of everything, tucked into her white bed. Locked away from danger, but she is the point of it all" (515). At this point, she is still content to let others do the rescuing while she waits in safety, a passive, vulnerable, corruptible commodity, and a trophy to be won.

Iris does not clarify why the relationship is important to her, or even how Alex attracts her. It is implied that as a stranger to Port Ticonderoga, where he first meets the

⁸ Robinson reads the Peach Women narrative as a parodic fable about Alex's experience of hiding in the attics of Avilion, where the two sisters try to cater to his needs (356). Of the two Peach Women, "one [is] a sexpot, the other more serious and open-minded to theological discussion," Robinson observes.

sisters, he seems exotic and compelling, and that his revolutionary political leanings amplify his charm. Perhaps Iris, like her nameless alter-ego from the love story,

hasn't examined her motives. There may not be any motives as such; desire is not a motive. It doesn't seem to her that she has any choice. Such extreme pleasure is also a humiliation. It's like being hauled along by a shameful rope, a leash around the neck. She resents it, her lack of freedom, and so she stretches out the time between, rationing him. She stands him up, fibs about why she couldn't make it

....

But in the end, back she comes. There's no use resisting. She goes to him for amnesia, oblivion. She renders herself up, is blotted out; enters the darkness of her own body, forgets her name. Immolation is what she wants, however briefly. To exist without boundaries. (328-9)

What Alex Thomas can offer Iris is the obliteration of all the boundaries that chafe her. She does not feel she has a choice, because she has already stepped into a narrative where sex is a means of capital exchange. Within this narrative the only means of purchasing freedom, even a freedom that obliterates, is through perpetuating the commodification of the body at direct cost to the self.

This means that even obliteration or erasure of self has an appeal. The image of obliteration recurs in *The Blind Assassin*. Complex and disturbing, it suggests the unwillingness of the hegemony to accommodate or even recognize the existence of citizens it arbitrarily rejects. Existing unseen, staying outside of reality can be comforting at times, especially when such an existence is all one knows, so that it becomes a comforting condition. The fact that Iris's alter ego, the nameless woman, desires the obliteration her lover offers suggests the extent to which Iris accepts, even desires what she has been taught to see as her own unfitness for the world.

By the time Iris writes The Blind Assassin, she is skilled enough at dealing with obliterative aporia to draw a veil over her participation in the lovers' interactions, even though they are among the most significant events in her life. Even decades later in her memoir, she omits almost all discussion of her relationship with Alex. In between publishing The Blind Assassin and writing her memoirs, in the barely-detailed sketch of her life between 1945 and 1998, Iris metamorphoses. She begins as an outwardly conventional and privileged society wife and new mother, and transforms into a single woman and small-business entrepreneur who is unencumbered by husband or child. Her existence as an independent woman does not, however, transform her into an icon of feminism. She continues to be defined by her relationship to others—tolerated as a daughter of the family whose business was once a source of municipal prosperity, courted as the sister of the now-dead writer of a cult classic. She mentions no awards from the Chamber of Commerce, no cards of thanks from charities, no trophies for becoming Woman Entrepreneur of the Year. Her legitimate business enterprise does not legitimate her. Monster or trickster, she inhabits in isolation an emphatically liminal realm.

Iris is already in a liminal state between monstrosity and trickery when she begins to write The Blind Assassin (possibly as early as 1937). Her affair with Alex has revealed more clearly the tawdriness of her official life. The stories he tells along with the quality of the relationship he offers her provide imaginative scope for her sexual and emotional escapes from banality. He allegorizes their relationship in an ambivalent fable about the future, transforming it into a quasi-political gesture and a strike of the disempowered against the powerful. It is, in fact, through his stories that he accomplishes his seduction

of her, at least as Iris tells the story in The Blind Assassin. This specific echo of Scheherazade's tactic keeps Iris coming back for the relief of narrative suspense as well as sexual release. His desire for her return suggests a dependence on her that challenges the misogyny he sometimes experiences.

His nameless alter-ego's first words, "What will it be, then?" (11), open up the wide multiverse of narrative for her listening pleasure. "Dinner jackets and romance," he continues, "or shipwrecks on a barren coast? You can have your pick, jungles, tropical islands, mountains. Or another dimension of space—that's what I'm best at." Her decision, a desert because she has "always wanted to visit one" plus "another dimension of space, and also the tombs and the dead women, please ..." cements the teller-listener contract, but also provides Alex with the terms of her seduction. She wants a new experience as far away from the conventional as possible. As is revealed later in her memoir, other dimensions of space have always appealed to Iris because they are "*Like nothing on earth*" (191; Atwood's italics). He stipulates that the tale be told on the "instalment plan:" "You can't skimp, it might take days. We'll have to meet again" (12). This condition places their new relationship on a game-like footing by introducing the lusory precondition, the arbitrary constitutive rule of leaving the narrative incomplete at each telling, which heightens suspense and promotes return engagements.

Both lovers seem to understand their interactions as experiences that sustain them in the other aspects of their lives; in the language of cliché, it is the thing that keeps them going, their mutual *raison d'être*, the thing that defines them and makes them whole. Yet they are also "ruinous together" (513), each monstrous in his/her own way and

destructive to themselves and each other. Together, the interaction between the nameless couple and the fabulous science-fiction world they share will form vigorous playworlds, related but distinct. These playworlds are far removed from their everyday lives while transforming those lives into dross, the banality that must be endured for their "real" or "important" lives to exist.

Whether incurred in ideological, cultural, political, spiritual, or social areas, fracture is experienced as trauma. The tumultuous relationship between Alex and Iris allegorizes this situation. Iris writes the nameless man's thoughts as consistently engaging the question of power and how it is won, maintained and lost. The stories he tells juxtapose Babylonian and Sumerian history with 1930s Toronto society to foreground the vicissitudes of capitalism. His narratives want to show things "as they really are" despite their exotic aspects. The nameless woman's thoughts are transformative, revolving around appearance and change, pastiching and thus directly referencing the exotic fictional world created by the man. Her nostalgic narratives seem designed to show things as they once were. The interplay between the two becomes an interplay between Alex's belief in the immutability of things and Iris's experience of mutability. But in the end Alex's ideologies are not accessible, because they are always filtered through Iris's telling. Similarly, in the Jorge Luis Borges story, Pierre Menard's successful production of several pages of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* achieves an entirely fresh critique of society and culture from those achieved by Cervantes himself in his original writing of the identical text centuries earlier.

Between them, Alex and Iris are two aspects of Scheherezade. Alex's seductive technique of keeping the affair alive by narrativizing it on the instalment plan is the strategy that provides survival to Iris's mute virgin sacrifice. The mute sacrifice is only one in a long line of past and future sacrifices. Her temporal positioning—being the sacrifice at this particular moment of revolution—is one chance reason for her survival. Another chance reason is the susceptibility of this particular blind assassin to her sensual charms. Their combined material presences or physical bodies are the single field on which this quantum shift is negotiated through sexual interaction. Whatever she communicates to him in this interaction is behind his decision to keep her, but it is never detailed in the nameless man's story. The splitting of Scheherazade's function between the ability to tell stories and the status of her body as medium of exchange literalizes the potential of both sex and narrative as means of communication and motive for engagement. Yet with characteristic irony, Atwood leaves this encounter behind a veil of enigmatic obscurity.

Many early chapters of The Blind Assassin begin and end with the interactions of the lovers, and some begin where the previous installation of the Sakiel-Norn fable left off. There are always juxtapositions and parallels between the memoir segments and the novel's chapters. For example, the memoir segment that details Iris's wedding to Richard is framed by two installments of the Sakiel-Norn story that portray the sacrifice of the virgin. The first installment ends as the blind assassin (Alex) unlocks the door to enter and kill her—he plans to disguise himself in her clothes before murdering the aristocrat (Richard) who will perform the sacrifice (165). The second installment details the erotic

encounter between assassin and sacrifice, which brings the assassin to change his mind and rescue the former virgin instead (320). Meanwhile, the assassin's key has also been the nameless man's key, as he opens the door to the current trysting place. The image explicitly superimposes the assassin on the nameless man, and implicitly on Alex. Because parallel events such as the consummation of Iris's marriage and the Zycronian sacrificial act are closely juxtaposed in Atwood's narrative, there is a fantastic effect of collapsing time between the "real world" event and its fabulous narrativization.

Vertiginous imagery of various sorts exacerbates the vertiginous narrative structure. Vortexes, eddies, currents and flows; back and forth movement such as thrashing branches, writhing snakes, even the play of cigarette lighters (304); floating, gliding, dissociation; and especially melting, dissolution, and the evaporation of boundaries: all these are common within The Blind Assassin, where they appear roughly every two to three pages.⁹ This suggests that an exaggerated slipperiness pervades the lovers' world of emotion, sex and story. Establishing a tension against this dizziness, discourses of miniaturization and enclosure that suggest the need for control complicate the narrative. Once again, the interaction between Alex and Iris dramatizes the interaction between possibilities, as Alex's politically subversive alignment with authority and control meets Iris's experience of uncertainty and mutability. Where Alex's immutability dominates, things can and must be controlled. The practice of controlling things involves power. Yet Alex is clearly aware that whatever power he has is contingent: he remains a

⁹ In the memoir such images appear only once every seven pages or so, which is still plentiful, but less so than in The Blind Assassin.

political fugitive until he fights in the war, depends on Iris for some of his money and creature comforts (she brings him gifts and cashes cheques for him), and is unable to convince her to abandon her privileged life to join him. But his desire to exert such power over her is implied by the bitterness he sometimes feels where she is concerned, and by the fact that his narrative gives to his own alter ego, the assassin, the ability to determine his lover's life and death.

Where Iris's mutability dominates, control and power are comfortable delusions. Her experience thus far has demonstrated that it is more likely that one will be required to sacrifice control over one's own life than to strengthen that control. Family members who might be expected to support one's pursuit of joy are likelier to contribute to the extinction of that pursuit. Language that connotes melting, sliding and gliding mark The Blind Assassin more thoroughly than those connoting enclosure and miniaturization. These last find their strongest representations in the comparatively brief embedded fables about the Peach Women and the miniaturization of Sakiel-Norn. But the novel that Iris writes for herself and for Alex provides a turbulent site where mutability and diminished control, submission and compromised power, the power of narrative and the power of sex can play against each other.

No matter how compelling each version is, if either of the world-types suggested by Alex and by Iris is to obtain, then the other must recede. The nameless man insists on this message, as does Iris in her turn. There are no half measures, for example, for Will and Boyd, who must choose whether to stay in their edenic prison, the infantilizing "big transparent tit" that is Aa'A, or escape to certain death at the hands of the Lizard Men of

Xenor (448-50). For the blind assassin and the mute sacrifice to thwart their societally-assigned functions and survive, the city of Sakiel-Norn must fall. The nameless woman's pastoral version of the ending permits assassin and sacrifice to live happily ever after by joining a secret utopian society, an opportunity they purchase largely by betraying the city to the invading People of Joy (433-5). The nameless man responds by retelling the utopia as a hell complete with wolves and murderous dead women, so that in his version the young couple is devoured as the city is destroyed (435).

The published version, found months later by the woman, offers a third ending. It conflates two different fabular worlds by juxtaposing the narrative of Sakiel Norn on the planet Zycron with that of the Lizard Men of Xenor, the enemy aliens of the Will and Boyd/Aa'A story. In it, the love story between blind assassin and mute sacrificial virgin has completely vanished. The blind assassin does not appear at all. The mute sacrifice does appear, but is last seen cowering under a bed, apparently doomed to perish once the Lizard Men attack (506). What unfolds instead of the love story is a macho tale of solidarity against invaders that is also a political parable. The two castes of Sakiel Norn discard their differences and reconcile with their common enemy, the People of Joy, in order to repel the reptilian Xenorians. "All salute to each other by the name of *tristok*, which means (roughly) *he with whom I have exchanged blood*, that is to say, comrade or brother. The women are taken to the Temple and locked into it for their own safety, the children as well" (505; Atwood's italics). Only in this scenario does the planet Zycron and its city, Sakiel Norn, survive its internal upheaval, but it also survives an attack from

an alien force with superior technology. Is this victory possible only because the assassin and the sacrifice have never met and fallen in love?

Alex's communist ideologies dominate his published version of the Zycron narrative, but they also dominate what Atwood constructs as a contemporaneous phallocratic sensibility that essentializes women as vulnerable trophies, an ideology that young Iris has internalized. In "The Lizard Men of Xenor," women are liabilities that must be imprisoned during battle; their worth is limited to their bodies, which are unaccustomed to battle and will thus endanger both themselves and the "real" fighters, while perhaps tempting the enemy to further desecrations. Although directed at a readership which the man sees as very different from his lover-listener—they both understand the readers of his published texts as grass-roots, working class males sympathetic to anti-capitalist messages (354, 504)—this published narrative still erases any sign of incipient female agency. The oral narrative remains noncommittal on this point, constructing the mute virgin as a largely passive adjunct to the assassin. It is his assassin's expertise and knowledge of the city's ways that enables their escape, while she is more of a burden and endangerment (337). Yet she remains an important part of the story. She provides an alternate example of a survivor of caste oppression who may transcend victimhood as she grows into her freedom. As such, the reduction of her influence on the published story seems to be experienced by the nameless woman as an erasure of herself. While this erasure resembles what she, as Iris, learns to accomplish so well, the fact that it originates from her lover adds a vexing inflection.

Atwood's *Blind Assassin* insists on the provisionality of narrative. Narrative itself is a vertiginous medium, and the more there is of it the less secure the world becomes. There are aspects of it that are beyond the writer's control, much as the sisters' secret lives are beyond each others' knowledge. The interpellative processes reflect how provisional are the hegemonies that work towards assimilating the sisters, both martyred to modernist illusion, and one surviving to become a postmodern tricky monster.

Iris's eddying narrative navigates the borders of the many different worlds she knows, all of which shift beneath and around her. Having gradually become comfortable with the surges and recessions of story, she writes two worlds into existence and interleaves them with news-clippings, artifacts of another world again. Trickery and illusion equip her well in her determination to obtain the basic necessities of life: a witness, a reader, a memorial to loved ones obscured by narrative and hegemonic shifting. Her turbulent stories become a limen, an initiatory space that promotes the value of vertigo and the potential of tricksterism. Tricksters may seem blind because they do not see what others see or value what others value. When they unleash their skills and reveal their designs, however, the kaleidoscopic revision of hegemonic worlds is dazzling enough that trickster-vision can contaminate reading eyes

5.7 Conclusions—Scheherezade, Coyote, and the Right to Be Contaminated

In First Nations narratives, Coyote is both a culture hero and a cautionary tale. Citing a Harry Robinson narrative, Robin Ridington (1995; np) constructs Coyote as a culture hero who, in exchange for the freedom to go where he likes and do as he likes, takes on the task of fighting against the monsters that threaten human people. He is also

implicated in the creation of the world—"Through his storied life, he helps bring the world into being," Ridington observes. Yet Coyote's irreverence and self-interestedness destabilize the heroic elements, and his storied and lusory life makes a volatile world that continually resists stale order. His main responsibility to the world is to make sure it changes.

In "From Haverstock Hill to US Classroom," (2000) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak theorizes responsibility as a right, not a duty. In "Responsibility" (1994) she thinks through responsibility as a type of contamination. Responsibility involves a willingness to get one's hands dirty in the process of trying to shape the world. It would be a trickster move to revise her thought thus: people have a right to be contaminated. This holds true for Coyote, as well, since she has a right to end up covered in skunk piss. But humans also have a right to emerge from contamination, and if Coyote chooses to emerge laughing, that is her prerogative.

From the numerous narratives explored above, as well as from the many narratives that could not be explored, it is clear that some Canadian writers have been playing with the idea of adopting Coyote as a figurehead of sorts for some time. Coyote functions as an image of an engaged citizen who is willing to gamble with her own comfort level, even if it is violated by her own actions at times. Coyote can face this pratfall and survive as long as it comes from herself, but she will brook no violation of her comfort that is imposed on her from without. Bathos is preferable to pathos. It suggests continuity, not predetermination; process, not endings; survival, not victimization.

The idea of comfort is important. It connotes complacency, complicity, contentment, the opportunity to relax and stop resisting. It suggests leisureliness. Leisure, along with responsibility, freedom, and dignity, is enshrined as a right, not a privilege, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Coyote stands for the idea that as human citizens, we have the right to be contaminated equally by comfort and failure and self-interest, by desire and jealousy and the hunger for interaction. We have the right to retain the toleration of others throughout, and to use our wits to emerge as unscathed as possible. As far as Canadian novels are concerned, perhaps tricksters are emerging in response to an ambivalent understanding of Canada: a nation that reads itself as increasingly distanced from its traditional imperialist ties to Britain and the U.S.

It is intensely disturbing that so few women writers in Canada are exploring the full range of possibilities offered by women trickster figures. This reluctance suggests a disinclination to accord narrative representations of Canadian women the opportunity to fail, to be worldly, to be comfortable, to play, and to use their wits to survive or triumph in a situation that already tends to desire their obliteration. The model they do follow bears more resemblance to Scheherezade, a figure that already enjoys its particular relevance to postmodern texts, than it does to Coyote. If Scheherezade had not deployed trickster tactics to get her way, the story would have gone deeper and deeper into darkness and depravity as the Caliph continued killing wife after wife.

Scheherezade's intervention recuperates the story. She prevents her story from becoming a narrative of casually callous human cruelty and turns it into a narrative of survival. In so doing she transforms herself from one kind of commodity into another and

transforms the Caliph's perception of her use-value. The mind and voice that weaves the narrative are as valuable as the body that offers sexual and emotional release. But she remains contaminated by the situation, which, remembering Elizabeth Grosz's terms, suggests she remains jealous and desirous of it. While she avoids becoming a victim of the Caliph's physical violence, she is complicit with the system that permits it, even rebirthing it as she bears the Caliph's children and heirs.

Scheherezade does not threaten a phallocratic hegemony. She continues it, but reshapes it until it is somewhat less hostile to her, refusing to be a mute virgin sacrifice like those in Alex Thomas's *Sakiel-Norn*. Mute virgin sacrifices are pre-programmed toward self-sacrifice, and often fail to survive. But for her sister's sake as well as her own, Scheherezade cannot afford to fail. In Scheherezade's story, failure is coded as tragic obliteration. Failure and obliteration as outcomes have dominated the past world and cannot be laughed at. Obliteration never seems to be a serious threat to Coyote, for whom failure is simply another opportunity for continuation, and for whom all worlds, past, present, and future, are laughable.

Trickster discourse has a way of revealing ideological error, identifying the banal illusion that has concealed the "real" and "important" thing that huddles beneath. One real and important thing that lies beneath the ideologies of citizenship is the right to pursue joy, and the corollary right to avoid harming others in that pursuit. If aspects of tricksterism—notably the right to fail, the right to experience contamination, the right to persist, and the right to play—are valuable to the full and equal experience of citizenship, then this area requires further exploration. As a specific trickster, Coyote hops back and

forth from acceptable to unacceptable regions, but the unacceptable is still defined by simultaneously androcentric and Eurocentric norms.

Women's tricksterism is still acceptable only so long as it does not substantially disorder the existing hegemonic ideologies. Gail Scott, Lisa Moore, and Margaret Atwood belong either to the Anglo-Canadian or the Franco-Canadian diaspora. As such, they seem more comfortable with what may read as a "de-ethnicized" and therefore problematic trickster—Loki, Ulysses, Scheherezade.¹⁰ They are not appreciably contaminated by (or responsible for? or jealously desirous of?) tricksters like Coyote, Nanabozho, Brer Rabbit, Monkey. Whether it is reluctance to appropriate diasporically specific materials or reluctance to explore ethically dubious regions opened up by diasporic tricksters, a distinction apparently remains between what should and shouldn't be written by Anglo- and Franco-Canadian women, and perhaps by others as well.

Should this distinction remain in place? Is it part of an ethics of respect and non-interference, or is it a means of ensuring that the status quo will not be substantially disturbed, even though more disturbance is clearly in order? Were change to be read as somewhat less of a necessity, more as a thing to be valued in itself as a sign of process and vitality, would improvement be the likelier?

The answer is:

<Insert dissertation here.>

¹⁰ All of these, even Scheherezade, have formed part of a European cultural tradition since the Renaissance, if not earlier. The Renaissance saw the development of the novel into the form in which we currently recognize it, so that the tradition of Scheherezade in European cultural tradition is concurrent with the novel tradition in Europe.

6. More Books, More Play, More Sex, More Fun?: Toward a Future

There is within narrative a pronounced potential for playfulness and pleasure outside a win-lose discourse. The relevance of this to theories of the subject as citizen is extensive. A citizen, according to Roy Miki (2005), is a person who performs the power and the limits of the cultural, where the cultural becomes the matrix for the social imagination of embodied subjects, as differentiated from culture, which is an achieved state that can be possessed, commodified, and so forth. The social imagination of embodied subjects accommodates and may be empowered by play, leisure, and pleasure as well as responsibility and obligation, and it responds to reciprocity. The citizen is distinguishable from the subject at least in part because the citizen brings the social imagination of her collective into existence by living it. The subject is subject to limitation, where the citizen admits of potential, and the playing citizen, whom Schiller would choose to read as the most human of all, explores the limits and power of the possible as well as the actual.

The limits and power of the social imagination available to be embodied by the citizen may reflect the particular type of body that the citizen has. It is a commonplace that white male bodies, such as those belonging to Laurence Sterne, Miguel de Cervantes and Jorge Luis Borges, embody a social imaginary that is predicated on a differential access to privilege based on class, sex, ethnicity, religion, or any other arbitrary distinction. Sterne's *Tristram* plays with the idea of exclusivity; it lies behind his wish for competent, willing readers who are ready to meet and exceed the vagaries of his narrative and of himself. Compromise of a sexual sort is gleefully suggested by this match, but

becomes part of the process that interrogates exclusivity. A double bind arises. All the world is sexually compromised, and Tristram himself comes from a family heritage of sexual compromise and has no qualms about similarly compromising his reader. At the same time, the more people admitted to the sexualized universe, the less exclusive it becomes, and the more vulnerable Tristram grows as admitter.

The utopian situation of writing an exclusive—tight, enclosed, intimate—world where the mutually-enamoured writer and reader are the only inhabitants of importance may suggest a Tristram-like desire that the fictional should be made real. The implication is that writing a (loving) world into existence should not mimic but effect actuality, even while a disparity must always exist between writing and experience. What could be utopian emerges as dystopian; the social imaginaries of embodied citizens may endorse the triumph-defeat dialectic inherent in an agonistic ontology. In this situation, the strongest contest seems to involve writing and experience. Gabriele Helms (2003) considers the possibility that communication can be forced rather than free, making dialogue an exercise in coercion rather than co-operative construction (25-7). Thus the relationship between reader, writer and text is characterized through power, and even the beneficial effects of the communication produced by it are occluded. Privileging experience over representation becomes a strategic move. It characterizes dystopia as being generated by writing, conceived by writers, and endorsed by readers, a product of the coerced interaction between the three.

Nicole Brossard and Jeanette Winterson neatly invert this move by assigning the greater privilege to writing. Like Tristram, Winterson's writing I enjoys her occupation,

and particularly the access to potential that it grants her. For Winterson, utopian potential will persist as long as people remain to write it. If it is not actualized, the problem may lie with the reader. Yet the failure to actualize utopian promise does not automatically produce a dystopia. Brossard takes this still further. For her, writing itself is a process that encourages utopian potential. As an act, it brings forth harmonious co-existence—perhaps in small increments, but in definite increments nevertheless—and as such, along with reading, it is assertively beneficial to the social imaginary and the citizens that enact it. Writers and readers of texts continue to rely on experience to contextualize literary production, but potential trumps actuality every time.

Where fictions privilege potential over actuality, they also frequently assume that this potential is inherently beneficial. Whether by positive or negative example, then, the potential worlds that inhere in fictions seem to operate within the cultural imaginary as modelling means of achieving positive change in the actual world. In Nicole Brossard's *Le Désert Mauve*, frequent deictic shifting among ontologically divergent protagonists, writers, and readers models a spectrum of possibilities to achieve such changes. For the reader, the need to continually relocate one's deictic centre while reading this text may resemble participating in a serial masquerade; and at the same time this constant shifting performs the imperative for positive change in an extraordinarily visceral way. Brossard writes both Angstelle and Laures expressing Melanie's voice in a teller mode, which circumvents self-reflection in favour of environmental exploration. This seems to disarm some of the selective screens and baffles that separate the reader's actuality from the

fictional world, which makes the positive changes that are effected, however rarely, in her worlds seem perhaps more proximate to actuality and more urgent to achieve.

There is a single deictic centre available in Margaret Atwood's *Lady Oracle*, but what should offer stability offers flux instead. As protagonist Joan must navigate between the different discursive pressures she has selected: the Gothic and the screwball. Joan experiences this situation as binding or entrapping, even while it opens the door for her to make narratives from the material of her lived experience. She awaits interpellation, fearing it and desiring it at once, but her ability to hear seems compromised due to her resistance of the many bonds that embrace and fetter her. The narratives she writes are designed for a group largely outside her own experience, but she ascribes to them—both narratives and readers—a demanding confluence of power and limits. Thus the narratives and the readers Joan writes them for have always already predetermined her life. Now that she has redesigned herself in their image, the question mark of her future seems simultaneously promising and threatening.

The trickster enacts transformation and process, making sure that nothing stays finished, particularly connections between representation and reality. Her bathetic interventions impose dynamic disorder on situations that threaten to become complacent. Thus Thomas King's Eli is baffled by pop-culture representations of First Nations people bearing no resemblance to anyone he knows, and Bowering's Caprice is drawn into a quest that her poetic skill does not match. Where tricksters are women, reality and representation are no closer together, and the chaos that follows their trickster interventions frequently stems from obstructed vision. Gail Scott's G.S. perceives with

irony that the conventional narrative structures of myth and romance are not suitable to determine the narrative of her life. Lisa Moore's Madeleine is fixated on her film and what she sees as its ability to forever change the popular conception of Newfoundland and the process of filming. But Madeleine's pursuit of pleasure distracts her from seeing the trouble her friend Isobel is in, as her heart attack kills the film before its gestation is complete. Margaret Atwood's Iris Chase-Griffen finds not only that her "real and important" life with Alex dissipates into nothing but that it has disguised the "real and important" traumatic experience of her sister Laura, that she had ignored as banal.

Many of the writers examined here are the products of privileged cultures, and many of them question the basis of that privilege in their writings. The question of privilege is a vexed one, particularly where it concerns postcolonial cultures like Canada's. Governmental policies supporting multiculturalism, for example, tend to cause problems as well as solve them because the balance between the interests of the state, the interests of the privileged, and the interests of the underprivileged remains elusive. This is perhaps clearest in Thomas King's *Green Grass, Running Water* and also in Nicole Brossard's two narratives, *Baroque d'Aube* and *Désert Mauve*, all of which speak to being a "minority" citizen in a society that can be inept at accommodating minorities. Lisa Moore's *Alligator* also explores the issue, since the unique situation of Newfoundland's past sovereignty combined with its troubled economic status within the nation has generated both a unique cultural image for this island province and a unique echo perspective on the repercussions of being postcolonial twice over.

But playfulness is not reserved for the privileged, and may be of even more intense concern to writers from elsewhere than the European diaspora. Shani Mootoo's *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1998), Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), SKY Lee's *Disappearing Moon Café* (1990/1991), Dionne Brand's *What We All Long For* (2005) and Shyam Selvadurai's *Funny Boy* (1994/1997) are a few ludically-engaged narratives by Canadian writers whose memberships in non-European diasporas sharply inflect their narratives. The growing academic preoccupation with the impact of globalization, cultural and otherwise, makes relevant the ways in which texts such as these deploy playfulness as a means of resistance, and sexuality as a means of opening up communication. The necessary process of carving out habitable positions within an imperfectly hospitable world may place activities such as these, which connect resistance with compliance, in very illuminating situations. Already unstable and highly charged, the confluence of sex, play and writing leads to even more equivocal positions, and highlights how tenuous are the security and "power" to which many citizens might feel entitled.

There is a thinness to the limen that joins the effectively engaged citizen to the less than successful one, emphasizing that citizenship must embrace both extremes while protecting against its own insidious other, the criminal. One next step might be to examine the ways in which play and game not only interrogate the definition of the citizen, but mediate between the citizen and the criminal. An increasingly popular usage of the term "player" (or "playa") indicates an individual who does inhabit the murky areas between the two, moving from one territory to the other. She can use aspects of

both worlds to advantage, and being cognizant of her value in both systems, recognizes herself as a commodity and invests herself accordingly (see G.T. Esplin, 55).

Part of the appeal of texts by Mootoo and Lai especially is their exploration of comparatively dubious territories, which are outside the usual interest areas of Atwood and Brossard but which promise to yield interesting insights into the elasticity of the concept of citizenship. To what extent do they challenge established writers' (Atwood, Brossard, King) approaches to issues of interpellation and how they connect with a reading/writing dialectic? Where do the projects of the already-established and the newly-emerging coincide or diverge, and why? What directions do their questioning representations of sex, play and writing, and embodiment open up with regard to contemporary theories about embodiment, culture, ethics and citizenship? How do they enable us to read against the grain of play and citizenship? What do they suggest about the impact of narrative on these things, and the avenues on which narrative opens and forecloses?

Play is politically engaged in that it interrogates the sources, deployment, and existence of power. The playful citizen stretches and reaches. Her actions are provocative and compelling; they lead to questions and problems, and they question actuality and fictionality. She challenges the limits of narrative and of political engagement, of the acceptable and the suspect. And as such she demands to be written, just as she demands to be read.

Appendix 1: Excerpt from Nicole Brossard's *Le Désert Mauve*, 48-51

“Chapitre Huit,” *Le Désert Mauve*, Laure Angstelle; Mélanie's section

Le Bar commence à se remplir. C'est un jeudi soir. Beaucoup de tourists et d'accents. Quelques habitués qui viennent directement s'asseoir sur les tabourets en demi-cercle autour du comptoir. Je connais tout ça.

Le désert dénoue toutes les intrigues y compris celle qui derrière les yeux sollicite à l'horizon l'humanité invisible. Dans le désert, on ne survit pas sans ses quinze ans. Il faut toujours être prête à tout, imaginer des cascades, des torrents, la pluie, arrêter le soleil et enverser les probabilités dans le désir. Ici, dans le Bar du *Red Arrow Motel*, le désert n'existe pas vraiment. Seule la soif qui disperse les désirs, petits débris dans l'âme. J'ai grandi dans le désert et je n'ai de mérite à l'aimer qu'en la solitude qui me préserve de l'immonde.

L'homme à l'accent vient d'entrer. Il fait un petit signe de la tête en direction de la table où sont assises les femmes de la piscine. Je commande une bière. La propriétaire répète comme pour elle-même que je dois sans doute avoir dix-neuf ans maintenant. Elle salue les nouveaux arrivants d'un air qui tout à la fois accueille et discipline. La musique est trop forte. Quelques couples dansent. Tauromachie des corps souples et des peaux bronzées. Au fond de la salle, l'homme mince est appuyé sur le mur et il fume.

L'aube est un principe que exacerbe l'énergie. Je veux comprendre jusqu'à l'excès de mon désir de l'aube, mon besoin de l'aube. Je demande une autre bière. Quelqu'un me touche à l'épaule. Angela Parkins est là, alerte, vive, crue et je suis si lente à comprendre combien sa présence m'exalte. Elle dit une banalité puis circule entre les

tables. La musique est trop forte. Les trois femmes ont trouvé des partenaires. L'homme de la piscine est maintenant assis à une table avec deux hommes. La musique est trop forte. Rien n'est sensuel. Les corps s'allongent et font des ombres comme des cheveux dans le visage des filles, disposent de leur sourire basané. Tout est sensuel. Angela Parkins regarde dans ma direction, dessine dans l'air un mouvement circulaire avec sa main, oui comme si elle me faisait signe, puis elle pointe du doigt en direction de la piste de danse. La musique est trop forte. La musique est trop douce. Le corps d'Angela Parkins est fanatique, rempli d'urgence. Il bondit comme un animal fougueux, capricieux, voltige et plane éperdument, éperdue Angela Parkins. Il y a des yeux posés sur chacun de nos mouvements, de nos regards. La beauté est suspendue, la beauté qui précède la réalité, Angela Parkins chante passionnément, moitié *lipsing*, moitié *live*, la bouche arrondie par des sons éclatés. Ses mains virevoltent au-dessus de nos têtes. La paume de nos mains, parfois, nos doigts acrobates et aériens se saisissent comme pour tourner le sens des sons au-dessus de nos têtes, tout autour de nous, parfois son regard, sa joue.

Je ne connais pas vraiment Angela Parkins et voici pourtant nos corps rapprochés un instant, puis distants, lents et longs dans la distance de l'Amérique. Nous sommes inséparables et distantes en pleine éternité. Nous sommes le désert et l'évidence au coucher des ombres. Peut-être la nuit et la couleur de l'aube. Les femmes se sont rapprochées de nous. Elles ont l'air de s'amuser. La musique est trop forte. Angela Parkins m'offre à boire. "*The same.*" Puis je cesse d'exister. Elle parle, parle, part vers je ne sais où, elle dit que ça recommence paroles, sentiers, papillons et qu'elle aime ça la lenteur obligée des mots, elle dit que dans la détresse tout est envahi par le son des mots et

qu'alors tout devient impossible à comprendre, elle dit que ça explose dans sa tête et que tout est à recommencer comme un revers, un lob dans l'espace du cerveau, elle répète le cerveau est fragile mais les yeux, Mélanie, elle dit qu'il ne faut pas renoncer, que rien n'est impossible si la mémoire accomplit dans l'improbable la certitude que en soi veille à l'horizon à la beauté, elle parle de l'attachement que nous avons pour certains mots et que ceux-ci sont comme de petites morts lentes dans la réalité concise.

Il est minuit trente et le Bar est encore plein de clients. La musique s'empare de tout. Tout est fluide et lent dans les bras d'Angela Parkins. Le temps me manque pour comprendre. Il n'y a plus de temps. Le temps est entré en nous avec minutie comme un scalpel, le temps nous oblige à la réalité. Le temps s'est glissé entre nos jambes. Chaque muscle, chaque nerf, chaque cellule tient lieu de musique dans nos corps, absolument. Puis le corps d'Angela Parkins remue lentement. Tout son corps est attiré vers le bas. Son corps est lourd entre mes bras. Mes bras sont lourds du corps d'Angela Parkins. Il n'y a plus de musique. La sueur sur ma main. Angela, le silence est cru. Angela! Un tout petit dessin sur la tempe, un tout petit trou, ocelle. Angela, nous dansons, *yes?* Angela Parkins n'a plus de hanches, plus d'épaules et de nuque. Elle se dissipe. Les yeux d'Angela, vite les yeux! Il n'y a plus d'équilibre entre nous. Tout mon corps est devant le désastre. Plus un son. L'agitation tout autour comme dans un film muet. Au fond de la salle, il y a le regard impassible de l'homme long. Le désert est grand. Angela Parkins est allongée, là, exposée à tous les regards. Angela se dissipe dans le noir et le blanc de la réalité. Que s'est-il passé? C'était pourtant un homme de génie. *Of course Mélanie is night teen.*

La réalité, l'aube. La fureur dans l'aube et les galaxies. Les policiers, la craie autour du corps d'Angela Parkins. Les clients n'ont rien vu. Je n'ai rien vu. Le désert est indescriptible. Le regard fond.

Puis ce fut le mauve de l'aube, le désert et la route comme un profil sanglant. Il y a des mémoires pour creuser les mots sans souiller les tombes. Je ne peux tutoyer personne.

Appendix 2: Excerpt from Nicole Brossard's *Le Désert Mauve*, 218-20.

“Chaptitre 8,” Mauve, l’Horizon, Maude Laures.

C’est jeudi soir. Les clients arrivent en couples ou un à un. Le Bar est rempli d’accents, des touristes, quelques familiers qui font la ronde, la parade autour du bar. Je connais tout ça.

Aucune intrigue ne résiste au désert. Le désert boit tout, l’anatomie, les pensées capable en apparence d’espoir. Il faut pouvoir inventer autour de ses 15 ans. Tout pouvoir. Dramatiser, cascade audacieuse au-dessus de l’horizon, transformer l’eau vive des cascates en puits de lumière, immobiliser l’ombre, d’un seul élan traverser toutes les probabilités. Ici dans le Bar du Motel Rouge, le désert est déplacé. Ne reste que la soif débridée comme un torrent pouvant emporter tous les ossements, le noyau sec de l’âme. J’ai grandi dans le désert. Je n’ai aucun mérite à le désirer vrai. J’ai grandi dans la solitude. Je me protège contre l’aspect craspec du monde.

L’homme à l’accent vient de faire son entrée. Il salue les femmes de la piscine. Je commande une bière. La propriétaire murmure quelques mots qui font certainement de moi une jeune femme. Elle accueille tout son monde aimablement. La musique joue à tue-tête. Des gens dansent, cherchent à accoupler leurs pas, à s’accorder en plaçant leur corps dans le rythme. Les bras se soulèvent en forme de cape comme pour capter le hâle chaud des visages. Au fond de la salle, l’homme maigre est appuyé sur le mur et il fume.

L’aube oriente l’énergie. J’ai besoin de l’aube. Je veux tout comprendre. J’ai soif. Quelqu’un me frôle. Angela Parkins remue tout autour de moi, joyeuse et cavalière. Le temps ralentit, sa présence m’exalte. La musique éclate dans ma tête. Les 3 femmes de la

piscine ont trouvé des partenaires. L'homme maigre converse avec deux autres hommes. La musique tape fort. Les corps s'élancent chevaux au grand galop, crinières happées par l'éclairage, yeux bleus, visages blonds, des ombres sur le front, le sourire emporté des filles, la couleur des gestes basanés. Tout est sensuel. Je regarde Angela Parkins. Elle me fait un grand signe, vient vers moi, me prend par la taille. La musique est trop forte. La musique est encore trop douce. Le corps d'Angela Parkins cabriole, chevreuil fou aux yeux pleins de lubies. Corps de voltige, corps de vertige. On nous regarde. On nous observe. La beauté soudain, sournoisement. Ça chante entre les lèvres d'Angela, ça braille, ça brame, ça psalmodie. Nos mains se croisent, se figent, longeant de velouté de la peau, se retiennent dans le tout bas des mots. C'est comme un grand tournoi de sons. Puis sa joue enfin rapprochée.

Il y a si peu de temps que je connais Angela Parkins et pourtant nous voici dans un état de telle rapprochement. Hormis l'éternité, il n'y a plus d'espace entre nous. Nous somme le désert et l'évidence. Dans nos yeux, plus de remous, seulement l'Amérique sonore et distante qui se confond à la couleur des peaux. Peut-être encore un peu de nuit. Les 3 femmes dansent ensemble en évitant de trop se rapprocher. La musique est trop forte. Angela Parkins propose de s'asseoir. Nous buvons la même chose. Puis dans ma tête le brouhaha cesse et Angela parle d'exister. Elle dit que tout va recommencer, paroles, sentiers, sentiments, elle dit que pleurer oblige à ralentir, que dans la détresse tous les sons envahissent les mots, qu'ils sont tout crus dans la bouche, que ça devient alors difficile de se comprendre, elle dit que ça saute dans sa tête et que s'il fallait recommencer le monde, il faudrait encore des orages, de l'électricité partout dans le

cerveau, elle dit qu'il faut espérer, que la mémoire peut encore accomplir de beaux ouvrages, mais les yeux, Mélanie, elle dit qu'en réalité il suffit de quelques mots concis pour changer le cours de la mort, pour effrayer les petites douleurs, elle parle et réveille en moi l'horizon.

Il est minuit trente. La nuit continue dans la musique à se frayer un espace, creuse son nid entre nos jambes. Le temps travaille minutieusement. Muscle, nerf, cellule, peau de vertige organisent en nous les mirages, les visions. Encore un temps, une musique, nous dansons allègrement. Puis le corps d'Angela Parkins bouge si peu. Je resserre l'étreinte à la taille. Il fait chaud entre nous, sur les tempes, dans les cheveux. Angela, nous dansons? Plus d'écho, plus de musique. Nos corps ne tiennent plus ensemble. Le silence est cru. Les yeux, vite les yeux! La pupille grand oeuvre du désir se fane. Des bruits de chaise, l'agitation, des voix que portent. Le ravage est grand. L'hom'oblong regarde devant lui, complètement détaché de la scène. Angela Parkins est allongée sur le bois blond de la piste, le corps à tout jamais inflexible, exhibé, point de mire. Mélanie, fille de la nuit, que s'est-il donc passé?

La réalité, l'aube. Néant. Tout mon corps va se soumettre. Des policiers, la craie autour du corps. Personne n'a rien vu. Je n'ai rien vu venir. Le désert est indescriptible. Les yeux se fanent.

Puis ce fut le profil menaçant de toute chose. Puis l'aube, le désert et mauve, l'horizon. Il y a des mémoires pour creuser les mots sans souiller les tombes. Je ne peux tutoyer personne.

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