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Traversing gendered spaces with Nicole Brossard's Lesbians: Figurations of Nomadic Subjectivity in Picture Theory

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TRAVERSING GENDERED SPACES

with Nicole Brossard's *Lesbians: Figurations of Nomadic Subjectivity in Picture Theory*

Abstraction urges the future like reality. To see: infraction/ reflection or hologram. Each time I lack space on the her/i/ zon, my mouth opens, the tongue finds the opening.

Nicole Brossard (2006: 25)

Faith in the creative powers of the imagination is an integral part of feminists' appraisal of embodiment and the bodily roots of subjectivity. Nomadic subjects attempt to valorize the cognitive, theoretical and political importance of inventing modes of representation which adequately express the complex singularities that feminist women have become.

Rosi Braidotti (2006: 273)

Published in French in 1982, *Picture Theory* is undoubtedly one of Nicole Brossard's most formally and thematically complex works and a superb articulation of the discursive strategy of the French Canadian women's language-oriented writing known as *écriture au féminin* (writing in the feminine), not to be confused with Cixous's *écriture féminine* (feminine writing), that Brossard's translator and scholar Barbara Godard aptly defined as 'a theoretical and strategic move into abstraction prompted by the impossibility to narrate' (1982: 7). In her insightful 2000 study *Narrative in the Feminine: Daphne Marlatt and Nicole Brossard*, Susan Knutson describes *Picture Theory* as a feminist work that establishes a woman-centered world in which the default human perspective is female, and which experiments with non-patriarchal figures and codes (194). As a radical experiment in theoretical fiction (*fiction théorique*), the text communicates the imperative

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to configure an autonomous model of female subjectivity and simultaneously acknowledge and affirm the reality of lesbian identity and lesbian embodiment. Following complex trajectories of the comings and goings of a group of five lesbian women who are activists, writers, intellectuals, feminists, and lovers, this rhizomatic non-linear composition defies the Derridian law of the genre fluctuating sensuously between poetry, prose, and theory in its subsequent sections tellingly titled, respectively, the Ordinary, Perspective, Emotion, Thought, and Hologram. The chapters create a purposefully irregular movement tracing the scenes from everyday life of women, both their activity in the public sphere and their private lives underwritten by desire, through their mutual efforts to formulate a feminist perspective that would ensure their inclusion in reality, whose monolithic patriarchal structure appears overwhelming and unbearable, and to use the abstract potential of the utopian impetus of their emotion and thought to approach a politically viable albeit still necessarily utopian vision of female and lesbian presence in the world. The text insistently challenges patriarchal discourse by directly engaging with, on the one hand, the Modernist oeuvre of James Joyce and philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein that partly endow *Picture Theory* with structure, and on the other hand the long-standing tradition of subversive writing of Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, and Monique Wittig through a combinatory inter-genre fiction that eludes the confines of both the hegemonic masculine symbolic and the deceptively gender-neutral poststructuralist models of narrating identity. At the heart of Brossard's project lies the difference of the lesbian body and its transgressive potential, as well as the text's central model of the hologram (defined by Lorraine Weir as 'a trope of intertextuality encoding layers of centers as one transparency might contain multiple images superimposed in the course of successive exposures, each image capable of being resolved in turn without affecting the others' [350]) operating as the multidimensional lens in which the figure of a woman reflects and yields an infinite

Special Issue
Bodies of Canada

RIAS VOL. 5, WINTER-SPRING N° 1-2/2011

number of shifting perspectives refigured by the theoretical and literary influences of Stein's subversive broken syntax, the Modernist sophistication of Barnes's lesbian texts, as well as Wittig's radical conceptualization of lesbian subjectivity and corporeality. Through challenging and deconstructing the paradigmatic essentialist mythologies of volatile femininity, and by foregrounding lesbian difference, Brossard creates a highly complex and multilayered body-text that counters the available ready-made conceptions of female identity to reconstitute the reader's notion of femininity in anti-essentialist terms and to rehabilitate the dynamic active materiality of the woman's body in such a way as to mobilize potentialities for a radical conceptual change in the way the female identity and corporeality could be approached, theorized, and narrativized.

While Pierre Joris places Brossard's writing at the center of his formulation of a nomad poetics whose 'openness [...] has to be instable enough to allow for change [...] [through] a dynamics of "becoming"', her nomadism must be seen as further complicated by its commitment to both the philosophical feminist project and the political goals of feminism (128). Brossard's body of work is strictly related to her 'poetic politics',¹ a transgressive textual practice that has taken different forms, but that has always been preoccupied with endowing women with identity and mental space in both language and reality colonized by patriarchal exclusionary sexual politics, and, as Alice Parker observes, is written against 'the unthinkable place of woman in language which has been preempted by a colonized female body' (76). This essay is an attempt to read *Picture Theory* in the context of Rosi Braidotti's figuration of nomadic subjectivity, proposed in her 1994 study *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, as well as Elizabeth Grosz's politics of corporeal feminism and her speculative notion of nomad desire. I will argue that the narrative of *Picture Theory* can be productively read in the light of Braidotti and Grosz's feminist

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1. See Brossard's essay 'Poetic Politics', *Fluid Arguments*, p. 26–36.

speculative theorizations of nomadism as a kind of strategically deployed utopian vision with considerable political potential. As Braidotti puts it:

[A]n iconoclastic, mythic figure such as the nomadic subject is consequently a move against the settled and conventional nature of theoretical and especially philosophical thinking. This figuration translates therefore my desire to explore and legitimate political agency, while taking as historical evidence the decline of metaphysically fixed, steady identities. (1994: 4-5)

The female characters of *Picture Theory*, whose composite hybrid shifting identities work as models for rethinking female subjectivity in a characteristically Brossardian but also Braidottian manner across different geographical as well as social and political spaces, emerge as pretexts for a larger formulation of nomadic subjectivity in Braidotti's sense of 'the kind of subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity' (1994: 22). At the same time, Brossard's text offers a multifaceted pictorial image of a radically transformed feminist nomadic subject imagined as exterior to phallogocentric constructions of femininity. In their respective accounts of subjectivity, Brossard and Braidotti put particular emphasis on the political implications of embodiment in feminist theorizations of femininity, and it can be argued that they adopt, as Braidotti puts it, a 'radically anti-essentialist position' in conceptualizing the nomadic subject (1994: 4). This paper will further try to determine whether the utopian model of a nomadic female subject can become politically useful. Whereas Braidotti refers to her model as a useful myth, Brossard imagines her figuration in only apparently contradictory terms as an abstraction that is nevertheless always 'written against the abstract body' (2006: 81). In this context, I will examine the feminist model of nomadism that feminist thinkers and theorists such as Brossard, Grosz, and Braidotti advocate, paying special attention to the interrelated questions of nomad desire and utopian feminist practice.

'AERIAL ROOTS'²: FEMINIZING NOMADISM

Commonly associated with Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical model, nomadism has a long-standing, albeit chiefly masculine, tradition in contemporary philosophy. Cultural critic and translator Brian Massumi defines nomad thought in the foreword to his translation of Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, and further characterizes their *oeuvre* as the most prominent present-day articulation of 'a smooth space of thought [...] [that] goes by many names. Spinoza called it "ethics". Nietzsche called it the "gay science". Artaud called it "crowned anarchy". To Maurice Blanchot, it is the "space of literature". To Foucault, "outside thought"' (xiii). While the philosophical nomadism evoked here is attributed exclusively to male philosophers, it has been also refigured and productively deployed by many female philosophers and feminist theorists who by now forged their own mode of theoretical reflexivity regarding nomadism, and who have been insistently and systematically rewriting the originally decidedly masculine conceptualizations of nomad thought to make the practice of nomadic thinking usable for the goals of feminism.

In her on-going theoretical project advanced in *Nomadic Subjects* (1994), *Metamorphoses* (2002), and *Transpositions* (2006), Rosi Braidotti has offered women a speculative future-oriented model of nomadism inviting a feminist tradition of nomad thought as a necessary supplement to its dominant masculine theorizations. Proposing her figuration of nomadic subjectivity via Deleuze, Braidotti acknowledges Luce Irigaray's major contribution to feminist philosophy as well as a feminist version of nomadism, and further notes:

The array of terms available to describe this new female feminist subjectivity is telling: Monique Wittig chooses to represent it through the 'lesbian', echoed by Judith Butler with her 'parodic politics of the masquerade'; others, quoting Nancy Miller, prefer to describe the process as 'becoming women', in the sense of the female feminist subjects of another story. De Lauretis calls it the 'eccentric' subject; alternative feminist subjectivi-

2. *The Aerial Letter* (1988: 106).

ties have also been described as 'fellow-commuters' in an in-transit state, or as 'inappropriated others', or as 'postcolonial' subjects. (1994: 3)

Her list is by no means exhaustive and could be immediately supplemented by a number of other feminist figurations, such as, for instance, Donna Haraway's figure of the cyborg or Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of *mestizaje*, or, more to the point, Elizabeth Grosz's significant feminist revisions of the Deleuzo-Guattarian thought. Both Grosz and Braidotti subscribe to the form of materialist, or in Grosz's terms, corporeal feminism that emerged in the 1990s. Their departures from dualistic thinking, and more importantly from psychoanalysis, reconceptualization of desire as a positivity, as well as rehabilitation of issues such as embodiment and sexual difference distinguish their versions of feminism from poststructuralist constructivist approaches of the linguistic turn such as, for example, Judith Butler's. Braidotti's feminist appropriation of the Deleuzian model emerges as nomadism with a (sexual) difference that aims at acknowledging an alternative form of a hybrid and adaptable subjectivity while accounting for women's lived embodied existence. Braidotti argues that this goal can be achieved by returning to the neglected question of female embodiment and by further problematizing the binary of sexual difference, and consequently developed into a kind of nomadic political project, building on the feminist practice of strategic essentialism. Refiguring femininity as 'the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experiences, defined by overlapping variables such as class, race, age, lifestyle, and sexual preference', Braidotti envisions her concept of nomadic subjectivity as a politically empowering myth with, as I see it, utopian inflections, similar to other feminist theoretical fictions (1994: 4). Hers is a passionate feminist politics, an interdisciplinary project that does not alienate or exclude women for whom high theory appears inaccessible and elitist. Its chief forces are enhanced mobility, desire, and transgressive energy of nomadism as vehicles of feminist intellectual practice that aims at reclaiming social sectors annexed by patriarchy as well as identifying new spaces for both theory and practice.

Special Issue
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Grosz's philosophical reflections on nomadism, corporeality, sexual difference, and desire have been a powerful call for construing subjectivity as a sort of body-mind continuum, presupposed on anti-hierarchical harmonious intertwining of both psychical and corporeal faculties, figuratively represented as the Möbius strip. The political viability of her balanced model is contingent upon the return to the embodiment and sexual difference whose significance, as she argues, has been systematically downplayed in philosophical discussions of identity. According to Grosz, a return to the body precludes the 'neutralization and neutering of its specificity which has occurred to women as a consequence of women's submersion under male definition' (1994, ix). Another fundamental aspect of Grosz's speculative model that can be readily identified in Brossard's writing is her concept of nomad desire, elsewhere in her work also referred to as lesbian desire. Grosz looks away from the privative notion of desire as found in the thought of Plato, Hegel, Freud, and Lacan. Instead, she turns to a different, and often devalued, line in the Western philosophical tradition that she sees as originating with the thought of Spinoza, in particular his notion of desire as a force of positive production, as opposed to desire as lack. The notion was further developed by Deleuze and Guattari who see desire not exclusively as libidinal, but rather as a kind of affective (i.e.: corporeal) activity. Importantly, nomad desire as Grosz conceptualizes it is also part and parcel of Braidotti's theory. In *Metamorphoses*, Braidotti critiques the privative model of desire and says passionately: 'Translated into nomadic language: I actively yearn for a more joyful and empowering concept of desire and for a political economy that foregrounds positivity' (57). An indispensable driving force of the dynamic ontology of becoming, nomad desire is an underlying trait of Braidotti and Grosz's theories and as such it also deeply informs all aspects of Brossard's feminist project.

In Brossard's oeuvre, questions pertaining to nomadism and lesbian desire feature prominently in her theoretical writings, in particular in the collection of essays *The Aerial Letter* that followed the publication of *Picture Theory*. In this work, seen as Brossard's most important explication of *écriture*

au féminin, the writer looks back at her early gender-neutral writing inspired by Blanchot's figure of the neuter, and more generally, as Karen Gould reminds us, 'modernity's ostensibly gender-neutral preoccupations with rupture, deconstruction, and transgression' (53).³ She critiques her own early reliance on writing in the neuter as an ineffective strategy that does not only fail at putting a female writer at a safe distance from patriarchy but also condemns her to anonymity and precludes any sense of agency. Consequently, she moves from the poetics of the neuter towards a linguistically-based politics of embodied writing, *écriture au féminin*: 'Women write, but at this point in time, they write more than ever with the conscious knowledge that they cannot write if they camouflage the essential, that is, that they are women' (Brossard 1988: 73). Brossard explains the transformation of her poetics by saying that the neutral body had to be replaced by 'the body [that] has its reasons, mine, its lesbian skin, its place in a historical context, its particular environment and its political content' (1988: 77-8). The focus on sexual difference in feminine writing is necessary, according to Brossard, if women want to deconstruct the false imaginary created according to essentialist masculine parameters and to create their own symbolic. This negative imaginary based on the principle of one (male) sex must be replaced by women's embodied writing through which they can conceive of themselves outside patriarchy and male-oppression, imagine themselves as autonomous, create positive images of femininity for themselves, and thus re-enter reality on their own terms. Brossard writes: 'The female body, long frozen (besieged) in the ice of the interpretation system and in fantasies relentlessly repeated by patriarchal sex, today travels through, in its *rapprochement* to other women's bodies, previously unknown dimensions, which bring it back to its reality' (1988: 83). Along similar lines, as Louise H. Forsyth aptly observes in her foreword to *The Aerial Letter*, Brossard's rejection of gender-neutral language and her subsequent emphasis

3. For Blanchot's sense of the neuter that informed Brossard's early poetics, see chapters 'René Char and the Thought of the Neutral' and 'The Fragment Word' in *The Infinite Conversation*. pp. 298-313.

on the body have been brought about by a recognition that 'human beings can never achieve the state of pure thought' because '[t]hey are always in a physical body, in the material world, and in the flow of historical time. Their thought is always, therefore, a function of their material condition' (26). Brossard's feminist project can be therefore inscribed in Grosz's politics of corporeal feminism in so far as it insists upon the need for balancing the reality of the transgressive quality of bodies and the emotional landscape of thought, bridge the realities of body and mind, through the embodied practice of writing in the feminine (NB: the body-text is also frequently referred to as 'cortex' in Brossard's writing, which is an amalgam of French words 'corps' and 'texte', and at the same time relates in complex ways to the activity of the brain):

Taking on reality in order that *an aerial vision of all realities arises from the body and emotion of thought*. Realities which, crossing over each other, form the matrix material of my writing. This text matter, like a fabulous mathematics, relates words to one another. All bodies carry within themselves a project of sensual high technology; writing is a hologram. (1988: 68, my emphasis).

Brossard envisions a horizon, or rather *herizon*, of the future in which the feminine intellectual practice would be conceived of as distinct from the masculine legacy instead of merely deriving from it or being *rooted* in it and thus being always in some way both indebted and inferior to it. As Forsyth notes: 'Roots unseen and unnoticed, though nonetheless vital as the original, nourishing part of plants or words, serve well as an image for the situation of women in patriarchal culture. This situation must be reversed so that roots, without being ripped from their essential environment, are brought to the light' (17). Experimenting with images of roots and radicles (simultaneously playing with the meaning of the latter through its similarity to the word 'radical'), Brossard perversely proposes a reversal of the tradition of women's writing and further says:

Now with intensity, will I root myself in the place that resembles me. Now with intensity will I initiate myself to other women. The roots are aerial.

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The light which nourishes them, nourishes, at the same time, the tender shoots (the culture) and the root. The root is integral and aerial, the light is coherent'. (1988: 106)

As Alice Parker observes, *Picture Theory* is informed by such an 'aerial perspective'; a *herizon* of 'a three dimensional consciousness' that can be imagined as a practice of re-inscribing and re-imagining of the patriarchal legacies and conceiving of female subjectivity anew from a multitude of different perspectives, which, however, cannot be experienced in reality (81). For Brossard, the image of aerial roots marks a necessary transition in ways of conceptualizing subjectivity from the notion of identity firmly anchored in patriarchy to a vision of the new nomadic 'aerial' integral subject position whose inherent imperatives of mobility and transformation empower women to break through the stifling patriarchal ways of thinking. Importantly, Brossard's reconceptualization of subjectivity, articulated in *Picture Theory* as an imperative to 'reconstitute the original woman from aerial roots' (2006: 174), actually predates Braidotti's feminized figuration of a nomadic subject. Brossard's nomadism is thus realized through this 'aerial' and markedly utopian perspective.

'IDENTITY IN THE TRAJECTORY OF THE BODY'⁴:
BROSSARD'S ESSENTIAL WOMAN AND THE ANTI-ESSENTIALISM
OF THE NOMADIC SUBJECT

In her 1998 study *Liminal Visions of Nicole Brossard*, Alice Parker writes that *Picture Theory* focuses on an ontological problem of 'alter[ing] the structures of subjectivity in order to constitute a lesbian presence in the world' (80). Such refiguring of subjectivity, as Parker further states, occurs in the text through the anti-representational and multi-dimensional textual practice that 'dislodge[s] the voluntarist pretensions of logocentrism and mimesis, destabilizing metaphysical, linguistic and literary structures' (88). Indeed, Brossard's experimental fiction works toward a radical reconceptualization of the essentialized unitary notion of femininity construed according to masculine parameters. She envisions

4. *Picture Theory* (2006: 111).

an alternative subject position that is never a stable or fixed one, and that is referred to in the text by a number of different attributes, such as: aerial, subliminal, essential, formal, integral, or generic. This fluctuating terminology always dovetails into her underlying idea of woman as the one who speaks from the position of an autonomous subject. The text's refusal to pin down a single definitive term that would designate this new form of subjectivity effects a process of displacement and differentiation that mimes and subverts the literal meanings and chiefly negative connotations of the words 'essential' and 'generic'. In *Picture Theory*, Brossard playfully reinvents these two adjectives by simultaneously highlighting their negative connotation of sameness and their inherent original positive meaning as productive of new multiple shifting definitions for different female subjects, as well as potentially constructive of alliances between women despite their differences. In particular, radically departing from the patriarchal notions of femininity and compulsory heterosexuality, Brossard's figure of the lesbian becomes an identity characterized by the abundance of meaning and transgressive potential; she situates herself outside of patriarchy, but becomes 'aerial' in the multiplicity of available shifting positions and locations, is 'integral' to reality and language, forms 'subliminal' images that are activated in the consciousness, operates as 'formal' through entering theory, and makes a lesbian difference in the imaginary governed by only one (male) sex. Her position is no longer presupposed on lack and absence, but on the affirmation of excess of meaning and proliferation of perspectives. Earlier in the text, we find a condensed articulation of the idea of the essential woman as inextricably related to the question of female embodiment and sexual difference, another key aspect in Brossard's version of nomadic subjectivity:

I am the thought of a woman who embodies me and whom I think integral. [...] The generic body would become the expression of woman and woman would have wings above all, she would be sign. [...] I would see this manifestly formal woman inscribe reality [...]. (163)

For Brossard, the binary of sexual difference needs to be reexamined and deconstructed if women want to sidestep the patriarchal reality structured according to the economy of only one (male) sex. The deconstructive effort notwithstanding, the author suggests that the difference in the binary gender scheme can be effected through the affirmation of the generic lesbian body as a figure of transgression capable of displacing and resignifying patriarchal codes: 'Yes this body takes up a strategic stand in the streets of the Polis of men, yes, this body dis/places the horizon of thought, if it wants, this body is generic' (2006: 157). In *Nomadic Subjects* Braidotti defines nomadism in terms of sexual difference 'as providing shifting locations for multiple female feminist embodied voices' (172). In her critique of sexual difference, Braidotti views it as 'an epistemological and political process' (148). In particular, she is critical of the dismissal of sexual difference as essentialist; she is equally wary of a short-sighted embrace of the gender-neutral approach which she sees as dangerously veering toward rehabilitating masculine patriarchal models of unitary identity under the cover of promoting an illusory symmetry between genders, or a post-gender sexually undifferentiated form of subjectivity. Instead, she calls for valorization of sexual difference as a 'nomadic political project' by emphasizing that 'the difference that women embody provides positive foundational grounds for the redefinition of female subjectivity in all of its complexity' (149). The validity of this approach lies in a set of important interconnections between female identity, feminist subjectivity, and, what Braidotti explains as 'the radical epistemology of nomadic transitions from a perspective of positive sexual difference' (149). Brossard's writing offers a similar yet much more bold and radical attempt at bypassing the problem of sexual difference. Deeply preoccupied with the female body as an active and transgressive materiality that relentlessly inscribes reality from which sexual difference has been erased and which has been imagined as governed by men, her chief concern is the specificity of the lesbian body and the radical rupture that it makes in the binary scheme of sexual difference. Following Monique Wittig, Brossard

envisions the transgressive utopian potential of the lesbian identity and the lesbian body that defy essentialist notions constructive of heteronormative perspective on femininity that is always considered against the default heterosexual masculine perspective. Committed to a radical departure from the heteronormative perspective, Brossard's vision of the lesbian, rather than emphasizing the malaise of her victimized position on the margins of the patriarchal society, finds empowerment through embracing the minoritarian position that the lesbian comes to occupy and in the affirmation of the lesbian difference in language: '[Y]es, language could be reconstituted in three dimensions from the part called pleasure where the lesbian body, language and energy fuse' (2006: 176).

There is a pervasive sense of heightened awareness of the potential of lesbian identity and its minoritarian position, as well as the kind of difference that it can make in the patriarchal world that *Picture Theory* dismantles and deeply refigures from the ordinary scene of feminist struggle to the utopian vision of female and lesbian autonomy and freedom from the forces of social construction. The urban radical lesbians of the text are engaged in an intellectual networking practice and together produce energy capable of altering the structures of reality: 'These were women who had read a lot of books and who all lived in big cities; women made to endure in time, sea, city and love. Border crossers, radical city dwellers, lesbians today electric day, their energy took on form like electricity through the structure of matter itself' (85). Brossard's women actively participate in the creation of a new subversive global feminine consciousness of becoming, through mobilizing the corporeal/textual *dérive* (drift) that carries them through time and space on the waves of bodily desire: 'Perspective: metaphysical photos or about the singular interior, all knowledge braided, global feminine working on architecture, time, I/her force familiar in becoming. Identity in the trajectory of the body, a condensation of inscriptions: celebrates the her/i/zon' (111). Seen as a form of dynamically evolving collective identity, Brossard's 'global

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feminine' can be also considered *vis-à-vis* Braidotti's notion of the nomadic politics practiced by a collectivity of subjects who have abandoned all claims to forming a fixed and unitary identity for themselves (1994: 22). While Braidotti envisions this nomadic consciousness via Foucault's notion of counter-memory, as a 'form of political resistance to hegemonic and exclusionary views of subjectivity' (23), Brossard engages in an analogous form of resistance through affirming solidarity and intersubjectivity, emphasizing that 'networks exist' yet at the same time reminding women, quoting from Wittgenstein, that there might be a discrepancy between the individual knowing the rule and acting accordingly, since '[f]ollowing a rule is a practice and therefore one cannot follow a rule privately' (174–5). Importantly, neither Brossard nor Braidotti endorse nomadic subjectivity as an individualistic or isolationist solipsistic position of a solitary woman warrior. Instead, they speak of a nomadic consciousness as a form of intersubjectivity: 'The nomad is a transgressive identity, whose transitory nature is precisely the reason why s/he can make connections at all. Nomadic politics is a matter of bonding, of coalitions, of interconnections' (1994: 35).

'ITINERANT AND SO MUCH A WOMAN'¹⁵: SEXING SPACE THROUGH NOMAD DESIRE.

In her article titled 'Deconstructing formal space/accelerating motion in the work of Nicole Brossard', Louise H. Forsyth writes that in Brossard's writing space is 'constituted by movement and form, by the transformation back and forth of energy and matter through pulsing acceleration, as opposed to space which has been mapped by tradition and convention' (334). Indeed, *Picture Theory* has come to be defined as a dynamic textual space activated through a series of interrelated and constantly evolving spatial metaphors and images, such as the aerial letter, hologram, white scene, spiral, horizon (often provocatively spelled as *her/iz/on*), perspective, or surface of sense. Brossard offers a set of shifting multidimensional images that mobilize the

5. *Picture Theory* (2006: 162).

text serving as an imaginary alternative to conventional linear narrative underwritten by the hierarchies and binarisms characteristic of patriarchal thought. In her article 'Moving into the Third Dimension: Nicole Brossard's *Picture Theory*', Katharine Conley concentrates on the interrelated questions of spatiality and mobility in *Picture Theory* as the main vehicles of the text. She locates Brossard's focus on space and movement as an articulation of *écriture de dérive*; subversive non-linear writing that is perpetually adrift. Conley further explains that writing marked by the *dérive* is characterized by the ebbs and flows of thought drifting across textual and actual spaces, deriving from Brossard's engagement with other texts, as well as an ecstatic movement of thought oriented toward the future. This kind of nomadic writing not only presupposes a radical intellectual networking of female characters inhabiting the Brossardian fictional world, but also suggests a dynamic form of interactive textuality that engages the reader whose 'gaze upon the screen of words activates them, setting them into mental circulation' (127). What further corroborates Brossard's dynamics of spatial metaphors is the role played by desire and its multiple functions in activating both the conceptual logic and the emotional register of the text. The desire of Brossard's text can be better explained if we read it through the lens of Grosz's proposition that lesbian desire is in fact nomadic.

Theorized by Grosz in her compelling 1994 speculative essay titled 'Refiguring Lesbian Desire', lesbian desire is reconsidered within and without the sphere of same-sex sexual practices among women and emerges as a nomadic force capable of 'mak[ing] things happen, mov[ing] fixed positions, transform[ing] our everyday expectations and our habitual conceptual schemas' (69). Grosz envisions here a sort of 'excessive analysis' outside the well-charted territories that have been negatively theorized through the one-dimensional paradigms of 'psychoanalysis, theories of representation and signification, and by notions of the functioning of power relations—all of which implicitly presume the notion of a masculine or apparently sexually neutral subject and the ontology

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of lack and depth' (69). Significantly, Grosz sees lesbian sexuality and desire 'in terms of bodies, pleasures, surfaces, [and] intensities' (76). In her project, desire and sexuality are 'actions, movements, [and] practices' enacted daily by our bodies seen in the following way:

To use the machinic connections a body part forms with another, whether it be organic or inorganic, to form an intensity, an investment of libido, is to see desire and sexuality as productive. Productive, though in no way reproductive, for this pleasure can serve no other purpose, can have no other function than its own augmentation, its own proliferation: a production, then, that makes but reproduces nothing—a truly nomad desire unfettered by anything external, for anything can form part of its circuit and be absorbed into its operations. (78-79)

A possibility of imagining lesbian nomad desire realized through literary language as a kind of lesbian *war-machine* clearly evokes Wittig's writing. As such, it strikes me as particularly useful for thinking about the kind of desiring production that Brossard mobilizes in *Picture Theory*. Hers is a *war-machine*-like text in which the desiring production of textual and actual space is contingent upon a recognition of the transgressive materiality of the desiring lesbian body, and in which Brossard simultaneously attempts to carry out one of the fundamental tasks that she envisions for the literary criticism of the 1980s: 'To make ideological and theoretical space for a new consciousness' (2005: 23).

While Brossard's radical project certainly feeds off the fiction of feminist utopia, it is no longer conceptualized as merely a dream or a desire for a no-place, but an active conceptual quest for a new form of nomadic subjectivity:

I'm the thought of a woman who embodies me and whom I think integral. SKIN (UTOPIA) gesture is going to come. [...]

Utopia integral woman

[...] The generic body would become the expression of woman and woman would have wings above all, she would be sign. Plunged into the centre of the city, I would dream of raising my eyes. FEMME SKIN TRAJECTOIRE. *Donna lesbiana* dome of knowledge and helix, already I would have entered into a spiral and my being of air aerial urban would reproduce itself

in the glass city like an origin. I would see this manifestly formal woman inscribe reality then, ecosystem. (2006: 163; emphases in original.)

Whereas Brossard realizes that utopia may not 'ensure [women's] insertion into reality', she believes that the 'Utopian testimony on [women's] part could stimulate in [them] a quality of emotion favorable for our insertion into history' (2006: 81). Her attempt to refigure utopian space as embodied and marked by sexual (lesbian) difference can be productively read alongside Grosz's theorizations of utopia in her 2001 book *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*, where Grosz proposes a reconsideration of the traditional conceptualizations of utopian spaces and postulates a concept of embodied utopia as a privileged space of *becoming* traceable beyond the usual understanding of utopia as 'the present's projection of a singular and universal ideal' (146). She argues that utopia should be reconceptualized as 'a mode of temporality and thus a mode of becoming' that takes into account the movement of time and engages in 'the process of endless questioning' (136, 150). For Brossard, the thought of utopia does not stop at a desire for non-existent ideal spaces, the idea of which one embraces in search of a certain undefined future-oriented fictitious horizon of thought. It is not so much a *no-place* any more, but rather *an act* of a radical intellectual networking practice of women that relentlessly inscribe reality, remodeling it to serve feminine needs. In one important sense, therefore, Brossard's embodied utopia is a transgressive vision of the evolving autonomous interworld of lesbians outside of the heterosexist order of patriarchy. In another sense, as Susan Knutson observes in her narratological reading of *Picture Theory*, the text emerges as a feminist 'protean travelogue' that reinvents the notions of narrative and spatiality (197).

Foregrounding the notion of spatiality as constantly activated and traversed by her feminist nomadic characters, Brossard clearly privileges urban spaces as sites of feminist struggle. In *Nomadic Subjects*, Braidotti writes that urban space is 'one huge map that requires special decoding and interpreting skills' so that 'the city becomes text, signify-

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ing artifact' (20). Mapping gendered urban space throughout her text, Brossard underscores the energy, spectacular quality, and mobility characteristic of urban space that is always inextricably conceptually linked to and complicated by questions of embodiment and sexual difference. Forsyth identifies this link commenting on Brossard's earlier work *French Kiss* and notes: 'The space of the city, with its arteries and incessant movement, is homologous with the space of the body' (338). In *Picture Theory*, urban space is always embodied in ways that can be further illuminated by Gail Weiss's phenomenological figuration of *urban flesh* as a new mode of 'understanding the dynamic relationship between bodies and cities' (164). Doing away with the violent artificial nature/culture divide (analogical to the Cartesian mind/body dualism), Weiss theorizes the city not so much as the confining Foucauldian emplacement, but rather as a fluid, richly textured emotional cityscape defined by a heightened awareness of corporeality, as well as by the bodies' constant mobility and transactionality. She points to the ways in which the body in urban space 'exceeds its epidermal boundaries', relentlessly spreading and expanding 'in its ek-static projection toward its future projects' (157). In *Architecture from the Outside*, Grosz similarly complicates the relationship between bodies and urban architecture by identifying its 'outside' as 'the lived and gendered body' and pointing out that, whereas architecture does not exclude embodiment, what seems to be absent from it is the idea of sexual difference (13). Even though Grosz repeatedly emphasizes the absence of woman-only urban spaces, she is aware that the social production of such spaces would be a separatist and reactive practice; instead, she calls for 'rethinking [of] the relations between women and space' (25). Brossard's writing features the same set of concerns. As Forsyth observes: 'Rejecting the commonsense view that the forms and coordinates of space are simply there, Brossard conceived that operative notions about human space form part of a network of patterns produced by collective behavior. Far from being immutable, they can and should be examined, renewed, replaced' (336). *Picture Theory* does just

that in as much as the female characters remodel *urban flesh* through a desire for refiguring the space and through collective intellectual activity. As embodied, urban space is no longer seen exclusively as a scene of patriarchal oppression but also becomes a site of radical possibility:

At sunrise, we were five women madly seeing the origin of bodies going into the city, where writing surfaces again, condenses, solution of waters, sweat beading on our foreheads. [...] Studious girls, we will divert the course of fiction, dragging with us words turn and turn about, igneous spiral, **picture theory**, an existence in these terms while the crepuscular bodies, we walk in the direction of the boat, surrounded by tourists. An expression can be read right on our faces: tending to abstraction is an issue. (99; emphasis in original.)

Since the cityscapes of Brossard's text are imagined as gendered spaces from which the idea of sexual (and lesbian) difference continues to be effectively erased to the advantage of the male sex as the only sex that rightfully occupies the cities, Brossard's warrior-like female urban radicals must boldly claim their inclusion in the male city and face the imperative of engaging in a desiring production: the practice of transgressing masculine space, relentlessly sexing it with their bodies, inscribing it with writing, formulating new subject positions for themselves, and thus changing the space they inhabit. What transpires in Braidotti's examination of the semantic root of the word 'nomad', *noumos*, is that it used to signify a 'principle of distribution of the land, and as such it came to represent the opposition of the power of the polis because it was a space without enclosures or borders. It was the pastoral, open, nomadic space in opposition to which the sedentary power of the city was erected. Metropolitan space versus nomadic trajectories' (1994: 27). Whereas the cities of *Picture Theory* become significant sites of feminist activity, the other plane of resistance across which feminist movements are enacted is precisely this open-ended nomadic space, seen in the text as both virtual (imagined) and real. In Brossard's text, the island off Cape Cod where the women get together for a short vacation becomes another crucial destination and image. Knutson points out the essential ambiguity that Bros-

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sard plays with using the French word 'vacance' which actually signifies both 'void' and 'vacation' to denote that the women gather together to counter the symbolic absence of the female culture and build culture 'au féminin' (in the feminine) (199). Temporarily liberated from the distractions and spectacular excesses of the city, they come to the island as an *actual*, rather than virtual, site of pleasure and intellectual activity that is immediately interpreted as a promise of freedom: 'We moved ahead toward the island without having to dream it [...]. The island was in front of us, concrete like a milky goat announcing liberty' (73–4). As the women joyously *interpellate* each other, calling each other into being and reconstituting each other as subjects, they initiate a symbolic exchange that involves the undeniable pleasures of reading, writing, and discussions that finally lead to encountering a utopian vision. Importantly, the opposition between urban space and the island in *Picture Theory* is blurred; after all, the two major metropolitan areas mentioned in the narrative, New York City and Montreal are simultaneously cities and islands. Brossard's writing clearly resists dichotomies; instead, she focuses on the possibilities of multiple nomadic trajectories displayed on the horizon of thought that is always in the process of becoming. In *Picture Theory*, the island sojourn functions as a necessary suspension of feminist urban combat, offering a space of repose, intellectual regeneration, lesbian pleasures of amorous encounters, but also a space where motivation for further struggle can be effectively gathered: 'Gravitate aerial and engrave the shores with suspended islands. I shall then be tempted by reality like a verbal vision which alternates my senses while another woman conquers the horizon at work' (2006: 163). Nomadism in *Picture Theory*, therefore, becomes a matter of *traversal* and not *crossing* of the actual and virtual borders, and, as Brossard points out in *Fluid Arguments*, denoting a crucial shift in thinking from transgression to a future-oriented sustainable vision (86).

Special Issue
Bodies of Canada

RIAS VOL. 5, WINTER-SPRING N° 1-2/2011

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CONCLUSION:
ON THE CONSEQUENCES OF WRITING *I AM A WOMAN*,
UTOPIAN FEMINIST PRACTICE,
AND THE QUESTION OF NOMADIC ETHICS

Brossard, like Braidotti, refuses to accept the simplified, romanticized position of a solitary migrant nomad whose erratic peregrinations become an evasive tactic disconnecting her from social reality and freeing her from accountability for the actual and intellectual movements she chooses to make. Braidotti frames her theoretical model as 'a passionate form of post-humanism, based on feminist nomadic ethics' inherent in the 'nomadic consciousness [as] an epistemological position' (1994 29, 23). A similar stance reverberates in Brossard's frequently quoted statement that 'There are words that, like the body, are irreducible: to write *I am a woman* is full of consequences' (2005: 107). But what *are* the consequences of saying *I am a woman writer, poet, theorist*, and of positing feminist nomadic ethics informed by nomad desire? What are the consequences of bringing Brossard's desiring textual practice and Grosz's and Braidotti's models of feminized nomadism together? What, to evoke Hélène Cixous's famous words from 'The Laugh of the Medusa', does Brossard's writing *do*?⁶

The model of nomadic subjectivity that Braidotti proposed in *Nomadic Subjects* provoked a number of questions about accountability and ethics of nomadism as a privileged position available to the chosen few who can afford the luxury of 'non-belonging', becoming conveniently disengaged from discussions of the politics of location, and shirking responsibility for their movements and actions. In answer to these criticisms, Braidotti proposed a model of nomadic ethics that hinges on the idea of intersubjectivity as an 'effect of the constant flows or in-between interconnections' not to be confused with 'individualism or particularity', because, as she further emphasized, 'subjectivity is a socially mediated process' (2002: 7). For Braidotti, corporeality becomes a fundamental aspect

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6. Shifting the emphasis from representation to performativity, Cixous opens her influential essay by saying: 'I shall speak about women's writing: about *what it will do*'. p. 245.

of a non-dualistic ethics of mind and body acting in unison through 'the desire to become and to increase the intensity of one's becoming' (134–5). In *Transpositions*, she argues that such a 'non-unitary vision of the subject endorses a radical ethics of transformation' (265). By the non-unitary subjectivity, she means 'a nomadic, dispersed, fragmented vision, which is nonetheless functional, coherent and accountable, mostly because it is embedded and embodied' (4). Braidotti's theory offers such an evolving model by repeatedly urging feminists to join her in a quest for a stimulating and sustainable vision that continues to evolve. Undeniably, during over forty years of writing Nicole Brossard has been offering her readers such an evolving open-ended vision. What underwrites it is a desire that can be called lesbian, nomad, and utopian. Considering both Brossard's more theoretical writings and the fiction theory of *Picture Theory* in conjunction with, rather than merely through, Grosz's and Braidotti's theory, the intersections of which have been a focus of this essay, it becomes evident that nomadic subjectivity *in the feminine* has had a long-standing tradition in feminist thought and literature. The sustainability and significance of feminist work performed in *Picture Theory* are not going to lose currency as long as the words 'woman' and 'lesbian' continue to either remain unspeakable or wrapped up in negativity and harmful mythologies. The focal point of abstraction that in the text concentrates on the impossibility to narrate woman (or lesbian) and paradoxically endows her with form bringing her back to reality and to language accounts for the most crucial aspect of the book that lies in the potential that abstraction and utopian thinking carry: 'Each abstraction is a potential form in mental space. And when the abstraction takes form, it is radically inscribed as enigma and affirmation' (2006: 85). In one important sense, therefore, the text repeatedly urges us to see that it is precisely in utopian thinking and abstraction where 'reality condenses' (174).

While there is no single model of feminist thought that can speak with equal significance, emphasis, and currency about and to every woman, there are models that have imaginative,

emotional, and intellectual potential for transformation and that seek a vision that is sustainable. Brossard's writing, which in many ways predates and prefigures the concerns found in Braidotti's and Grosz's theoretical work, may not be an all-encompassing project that holds equal value for a white lesbian academic living in a big city and, say, an Afro-American mother of six living in a small town somewhere in the deep American south. It is, however, an imaginative intellectual project proposed by a Québécoise speaking and writing in a particular language from a particular location defined by its own political and social context and its own sense of urgency. From the vantage point of a lesbian author writing in French despite gaining considerable popularity in North America after publication of English translations of her works, and from the position of a feminist activist who participated in the radical social and political transformations of Québec during and after the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, Brossard continues to make her own unique contribution to the discussions of the politics of lesbian difference by saying something apparently very simple yet surprisingly current and resonant for all women: 'The difference is that I cannot live deferred' (1988: 51). Her writing may be approached in relation to Braidotti's model of feminist nomadism in as much as it is an embedded, embodied, future-oriented quest for a reinvented grammar of feminist language-oriented experimental writing. Imbued with powerful political energy, it formulates a 'revised ontology' of the writing in the feminine (Parker 1988: 110). It is also a sustainable vision of intersubjectivity made manifest in a collective presence of integral radical feminists called forth into the critical space of *The Aerial Letter*⁷. Brossard makes women, and lesbian women in particular, *visible* and *readable* against the disturbing or otherwise anodyne ontologies of either 'monstrosity' of the female body or 'volatile' female corporeality according to which, as Grosz reminds

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7. The translator of *The Aerial Letter*, Marlene Wildeman, explains the significance of the original French word *l'intégrales* as 'a singular noun populated by the plural collective subjectivity' (see Wildeman's footnote to *The Aerial Letter*, p. 114).

us, 'the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking uncontrollable, seeping liquid; [...] a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order' (1994: 203). As a sophisticated exercise in innovative writing, and as an indispensable exercise in abstract thinking, the utopian vision of *Picture Theory* manages to sidestep the problem of speaking about the lesbian body in negative or abstract terms by arriving at an affirmative vision of the woman who loves other women and who indeed 'had come to the point in full fiction abundant(ly) to re/cite herself perfectly readable' (165).

Special Issue
Bodies of Canada

RIAS VOL. 5, WINTER-SPRING N° 1-2/2011

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