

Metafeminism and Post-9/11 Writing in Canada and Québec

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Writing After 9/11

WHILE SOME CANADIANS WERE ON BOARD the American and United Airline flights that crashed into the World Trade Centre, several others were inside its Twin Towers that fateful morning of 11 September 2001. As Kent Roach has argued, “the September 11 terrorist attacks on the United States had immediate consequences for Canada” and its citizens (3). Significant geographical and cultural connections have always linked Canada to the United States’ fate; perhaps this is true now more than ever in the face of terrorist threats and especially US political and international responses ensuing from 9/11. If anything, the recently ousted Conservative government of Canada aggressively reminded us of this tie. Its surveillance and information-sharing initiative law, Bill C-36, was assented to in 2014. Its new sister anti-terrorist act, Bill C-51, was passed in October 2014, assented to in June 2015, and has been under court challenge by Canadian Journalists for Free Expression and the Canadian Civil Liberties Association. Beyond the strictly political realm, 9/11 and its aftermath have also affected Canadian writers and artists. “We’ve always been close, you and us,” writes Margaret Atwood in her 2004 “Letter to America”: “History, that old entangler, has twisted us together since the early seventeenth century. . . . As for us, you’re our biggest trading partner: We know perfectly well that if you go down the plughole, we’re going with you. We have every reason to wish you well” (325-26).

Like many Canadians, Margaret Atwood and Nicole Brossard have personal ties to the 9/11 attacks. In their fiction and nonfiction alike, Atwood and Brossard have both been close observers of the terror’s aftermath and its global ramifications. Brossard was in New York City at the time of the attacks. She chronicles them in the essays of *L’horizon du fragment* in terms of “a species caught in the flagrant crime of hatred,

terror, tears and democracy tangled up” (109).¹ Atwood was waiting for her flight at Pearson International Airport in Toronto when the attacks occurred. At the time, she was still in the early stages of writing *Oryx and Crake* (Sutherland and Swan 219), the first novel of the MaddAddam Trilogy. A few weeks later, Atwood resumed *Oryx and Crake*, which she published in 2003. Brossard would go on to publish her novel *La capture du sombre* in 2007 (translated two years later as *Fences in Breathing*) and a poetry collection, *Ardeur*. Riddled with anxious prose, haunted verse, and a backdrop of terror, Brossard’s post-9/11 work is dystopian in nature and scope. Atwood’s writing dispenses dystopias more in the classic sense of the term defined by Murray Abram, that is to say, of “a very unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political, and technological order are projected in some disastrous future culmination” (qtd. in Dobson 394).

The attacks of September 11 do not, of course, comprise the only trope of social anxiety and worldly catastrophe running through contemporary writing in Québec and Canada. As Roach points out, “September 11 did not change everything. Rather, it accelerated a number of pre-existing challenges faced by Canada” (15). Moreover, gross violations of human rights, such as those of Indigenous girls and women, exist all over the globe. In the throes of conflict, violence, inequality, exploitation, and environmental disaster, Slavoj Žižek’s notion of human civilization’s unrest also comes readily to mind. “The global capitalist system is approaching an apocalyptic zero point,” Žižek writes. It is composed of “the ecological crisis, the consequences of the biogenetic revolution, imbalances within the system itself (problems with intellectual property; forthcoming struggles over raw materials, food and water), and the explosive growth of social divisions and exclusions” (x). In *Walled States*, Wendy Brown argues that we currently live with unprecedented “capacities for destruction historically unparalleled in their combined potency, miniaturization, and mobility, from bodies wired for explosion to nearly invisible biochemical toxins” (20).

Along with Rosi Braidotti and Michel Serres, Bruno Latour in turn posits the modern era in relation to the Anthropocene. Human action itself wields an actual geological force on the planet, radically and ecologically realigning the subject-object relation. According to Latour, the Anthropocene “re-describes what it means to stand in space, and it

reshuffles what it means to be entangled within animated agencies” (16). In short, rather than an original source of crisis for the United States, Canada, and the Western world, the 9/11 attacks marked a “crystallizing moment” (Kaplan 52, 55) or “turning point at which the threat-environment took on ambient thickness” (Massumi 62).²

This article considers the impact of crisis in the post-9/11 writing of Nicole Brossard and Margaret Atwood, undeniable trailblazers of literary feminism in Canada. As Ann Kaplan argued in 2003, “the era of terror is largely a US media construction — and it is partly that,” but

this construction is already having profound effects on consciousness: it is impacting materially on local and national policies as well as on economics (*e.g.* on jobs for women globally), and finally it is impacting on social practices and ways of being in daily life — things that have always concerned feminists. (47)

The post-9/11 world newly situates local and global, as well as social and economic challenges that feminism has always confronted. Atwood’s and Brossard’s post-millennial work in turn widens the scope of its own feminist social and ethical concerns. This anniversary issue of *Studies in Canadian Literature* duly concerns itself with shifts and developments in the field of Canadian production and scholarship. A critical lens focused on the post 9/11 backdrop of Atwood’s and Brossard’s work indeed reveals the different, expansive outlook of feminist writing in Canada today. Along with a sense of crisis in part as a repercussion of 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror, the dystopian and the apocalyptic have come to characterize a number of post-millennial works by Canadian authors.³ Writers such as Caroline Adderson, Nancy Lee, Annie Dulong, Mélanie Gélinas, and Maggie Helwig are also writing from gendered perspectives on the nuclear age, post-9/11 trauma, and collapsed urban landscapes. Similarly, Atwood and Brossard have recently set themes and scenes of impending, real, and perceived terrorist and bioterrorist threat, ecological and economic doom, corporate domination, torture, heightened surveillance, and state control in the face of global menace and the framework of vulnerable times. The forty-year span of these two writers’ *oeuvre* is particularly remarkable. It attests to the very trajectories of Western feminism in Canadian and Québécois literatures, and its culmination in the phenomenon and ethos I am proposing to call metafeminism.

It is therefore necessary to begin this study with a quick overview of feminist literary practices in Canada and Québec, so as to consider not so much the generational but the multidirectional, variable, and at times overriding directions of feminist writing today. I argue that it is still a feminist ethics that intervenes in the social and apocalyptic dystopias projected in post-9/11 writings such as those of Atwood and Brossard. However, whether affective or queer, posthuman or tied to care, this feminist intervention manifests itself differently from ways we may have come to expect politically engaged feminist writers to deal with the world, ultimately embodying what I will call, with Lori Saint-Martin, a metafeminist turn. In broad terms, metafeminism is that which both transgresses and harks back to familiar feminist positions. It marks a shift from some of the more explicit tropes that we have come to associate with the feminist practices of the late twentieth century, particularly those having to do with sexual difference.

From Feminism to Metafeminism

Both publishing since the 1960s, Margaret Atwood and Nicole Brossard could be considered “senior women writers” (269), as Marie Vautier has recently suggested about Brossard and Diane Schoemperlen. Atwood and Brossard are different writers on many fronts, but like several other women writers of their generation, they both emerged largely from second-wave Western feminism.⁴ Much of Atwood’s work has posed feminist challenges to Canada’s colonial historiography, while Brossard’s engagement with postmodernist language poetics entails its own defiance of logocentrism. Generally speaking, women’s writing in Québec, as in the rest of French and English Canada, has been first and foremost transnational over the past four decades. The transnational is a fairly recent critical category used to read contemporary Canadian writing, but the applicability of this term to women’s writing is nothing new. Feminist writers have always problematized constructions of national identity and literature by introducing questions of gender, racial, and ethnic difference, exposing “the conflictual social relations underlying the articulation of the codes of nationalism,” as the late Barbara Godard has argued (195). In an article on citizenship in the poetry of Erín Moure, Lianne Moyes recalls that Canadian women’s writing has always led a “fraught relationship with nationality”; women writers often

“affiliate differently and transnationally” (123) to nation, identity, and to one another.

The transnationalism of textual production was certainly apparent in the language poetics that marked the feminist writing of Québec in the 1970s and 1980s, those heady days of experimental production fuelled by French *modernité* and American radical feminism. Much has been written about the convergence of theories, genres, and aesthetics in the fiction theories produced by Québec writers such as Brossard, Louky Bersianik, Jovette Marchessault, and France Théoret. In turn, a theory-oriented feminist writing emerged in English Canada with the postmodern writing of Gail Scott, the ficto-criticism of Aritha van Herk, and the experimental, phenomenological poetics of Daphne Marlatt. Fuelled as they were by the powerful social justice movement that was the women’s movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, these authors were not transnational only in the way that American and French writers such as Kate Millet, Adrienne Rich, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Monique Wittig influenced them. Feminist collaborations and collectives between French- and English-speaking women were also transnational in so far as these writers read and translated each other’s work.⁵ For her part, Atwood is not associated with the language poetics that constitute this exceptional moment of literary cross-pollination among the commonly termed “two solitudes.” Her writing exemplifies a different poetic and literary tradition. Yet a brand of self-reflexive writing is nonetheless a distinctive aspect of her body of work, a prime example being the short feminist fictional prose collection, *Good Bones*, which blends essay and short story forms.⁶

In parallel to a surge of *écriture migrante* (migrant writing) in 1980s Québécois literature came new female voices which, by the early 1990s, critic, translator, and writer Lori Saint-Martin called “metafeminist.” Rejecting the postfeminist label that Toril Moi attempted to promote, Saint-Martin set out to survey the notably intimate or personal tendencies of Québécois women’s writing prevalent since the mid-1980s. In doing so, she arrived at the notion of metafeminism. In Saint-Martin’s view, revised feminist notions of subjectivity and agency could still be discerned, but differently and implicitly, in the new narratives of a younger generation of writers. The prefix “meta” appeared to designate a doubleness that the “post” in postfeminism could not: both what “exceeds and encompasses the object in question” (165). More or less

in a similar vein, but in an Anglophone and wider theoretical context, Jennifer Henderson has since proposed the prefix “crypto” to refer to “a kind of work that is feminist in a subterranean way,” in keeping with the scientific sense of “crypto” as “a life form with a concealed part that is below the observable surface” (69). Cryptofeminism, argues Henderson, is still “indebted to developments in late twentieth-century feminist thought but it is not integrated into a feminist tradition because it has exceeded what has seemed to be the proper or recognizable scope of feminist inquiry, understood as the struggle for gender equality or the enunciation of sexual difference” (69).

Echoing Henderson’s cryptofeminism, metafeminism strikes me as a particularly useful term. To continue with Henderson’s argument, Canadian and Québécois women’s writings embody an enlarged “sense of what constitutes a third wave of feminist theorizing . . . to include work that does not seek its guarantee of legitimacy or effectivity in familiar feminist ways” (68). Perhaps Kaplan’s own term, “fourth feminism,” belongs here too, as a concept that brings “second and third wave feminists together to confront a new and devastating reality that involves us all, if not equally, then at least at once” (55). This “new reality ideally cuts across racial, ethnic and national divides” (55), Kaplan continues, in a distinctly post-9/11 context. It confronts transnational feminism with the questions and crises of the global. Here again the post-9/11, post-nuclear, or post-apocalyptic writings of Adderson, Lee, Dulong, Gélinas, and Helwig come to mind, as do the futuristic dystopia of Larissa Lai’s *Automaton Biographies*, Catherine Mavrikakis’s meditation on racism and the cruelty of capital punishment in post-9/11 America in *Les derniers jours de Smokey Nelson*, and Nancy Huston’s treatment of contemporary megalomania and historical trauma in *Fault Lines*. Finally, despite its original associations with the late twentieth-century emergence (or *relève*) of younger writers in Québec by Saint-Martin, it is not as a generational phenomenon that metafeminism strikes me as most relevant. More so are metafeminism’s connotations of the shifting, conflicting, multidirectional, and, especially, outward movement of women’s writing today. Metafeminism ultimately moves away from the familiar notion of feminist waves “as a three-point linear succession” (Henderson 71). It allows us to imagine, with Joan Scott’s fitting metaphor, “reverberations, seismic shock waves moving out from dispersed epicenters, leaving shifted geological formations in their wake” (11).

Again, both Scott and Kaplan are writing their essays in the relentless aftermath of the 9/11 attacks on the United States. In her 2004 piece, Scott confronts the discursive constructions of otherness in an era of fear and aggressive US patriotism, which elevated to new heights and “to new legitimacy the ventings of longtime conservative antifeminists, who were accorded a far greater media presence after the attacks” (22), as Susan Faludi records in *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America*. Throughout this work, Faludi demonstrates the extent to which curious though pervasive anti-feminist and crudely misogynist rants emerged with the declared domestic war on terror. Aimed at America’s “susceptibilities as a ‘feminized society’ unmanned by feminist dictates” (12), such commentaries have included breathless, if not cartoonish, indictments of feminism on both sides of the border.⁷ As Scott further reminds us, the “old feminist claim that women’s interests are society’s interests” still holds fast, perhaps now more than ever, in a “postcolonial, post-cold war, postmodern” world (20). “Here is a movement,” Scott advances, “that is not narrowly restricted to things of interest to women, but that takes the domain of large-scale politics as its own” (19).

Today, feminist critique plays a crucial role in the analysis of the discursive social representations of such realities. As I will argue below, Atwood’s and Brossard’s work shows this particularly well. Feminism cannot afford not to think globally (Kaplan 53); nor can the effects of globalization afford not to be examined by feminism’s longstanding methodologies of critique and analysis where hegemonic claims of domination — over women, peoples, minorities, individuals, and the environment — are concerned. “So it is,” as Sara Ahmed indicates,

when feminism is no longer directed towards a critique of patriarchy, or secured by the categories of “women” or “gender,” that it is doing the most “moving” work. *The loss of such an object is not the failure of feminist activism, but is indicative of its capacity to move, or to become a movement.* (*Cultural Politics* 176)

Ahmed’s argument is a perfect expression of metafeminism, along with Kaplan’s and Scott’s planetary widening of feminism’s object, scope, and effects. In line with Saint-Martin, I thus define metafeminism as the literary practice of and ethos resulting from both surpassing and embracing second- and third-wave feminist tropes and frameworks.

But I further view metafeminism in terms of the widening and different emphases of feminist writing today. Metafeminism delineates such deflected and sometimes concealed feminist adherences to past practices, as well as the current globalized, transnational, post-9/11 reality that writers now confront and challenge. In what follows, I would like to show how metafeminism begins with current Canadian feminist literature and extends beyond it; how metafeminism marks the post-9/11 moment as well as the internal trajectories of Atwood's and Brossard's twenty-first-century writing.

The Angle of Destruction

As mentioned above, Nicole Brossard is known widely for her experimental feminist fiction, poetry, and essays. The affective potential of language has been a distinctive feature of her poetics since her days at the helm of the feminist journal, *La nouvelle barre du jour* (1977-90). It has served to express lesbian desire and intersubjectivity seeking to counter normative heterosexuality and inscribe new forms of corporeality. What characterizes Brossard's twenty-first-century writing is still affective representation, but now of post-9/11 events and how these relate to the writing subject's experience of social, personal, and aesthetic crisis. Intimacy, a term used in Francophone criticism to denote the personal forms and tones characterizing Québec literature for the past two decades, has also become a surprisingly defining aspect of Brossard's recent, more personal, even lyrical, writing style.⁸

The configuration of world events and particularly of 9/11 is never far from the expressed affects of a narrator's personal history in Brossard's post-millennial writing. Nor is it far from her characters' or speakers' intimate ponderings both of the limits and the possibilities of literature's agency and of their own as subjects being in and acting upon the world. One striking example of Scott's notion of reverberation, or of the elasticity of the rapport of feminism with contemporary writing, is indeed Brossard's recent work. In a distinctly metafeminist gesture, Brossard places her writing in an oscillatory, rather than a linear or an evolutionary, relationship to feminism — and even to her *own* feminism. As more closely analyzed elsewhere,⁹ the utopian, radical, experimental Nicole Brossard of *Amantes* (1980), *Le désert mauve* (1987), or *L'amèr* (1977), where "Écrire: je suis une femme est plein de consé-

quences” (“To write: I am a woman is full of consequences”; 43), seems worlds apart from the sombre, globally grounded Brossard of the post-9/11 novel, *La capture du sombre* (2007), the gloomy poems of *Ardeur* (2008), or the worried, personal essays of *L’horizon du fragment* (2004).

These works situate themselves in the aftermath of the terror in New York City. They respond in particular to the internally and externally aggressive responses of the United States as well as the mass-media manipulation of the discourse of terror and crisis. Brossard addresses a certain “wearing out” (97), to borrow Lauren Berlant’s expression, of her own aesthetic and political convictions about a transformable world, as the opening essay of *L’horizon du fragment* indicates: “After all these years, never would I have believed that the question, ‘What can literature do,’ would again loom on the horizon of my thoughts like a necessity, a derisory repentance of having dropped too easily the curious and the utopian, the fascinating and the devastating” (11). This can come as an astonishing statement for a reader of Brossard’s work up until this point. Having diverted from the exclusively lesbian focus of her utopian imaginary, Brossard’s writing now positions itself as more nuanced and mitigated, and certainly troubled. Mostly lesbian protagonists still populate her work. But their de-territorialized, and to some extent utopian, dimensions are thrown into question and doubt. Whereas a troubled but promising “horizon” was one of the symbolic tropes of renewal in the postmodern novel *Le désert mauve*, in *La capture du sombre* (*Fences in Breathing*) “[t]here is black on the horizon, a surface that does not reflect light and steals space from the very precious volume of life” (8). Meanwhile, the speech act, “I am here,” appears throughout the essays of *L’horizon du fragment* as it does in *Fences in Breathing*, yet without the consistent conviction of its own agency: “I was there and I was worrying,” Brossard writes; “[e]very day, I am at the edge of the abyss” (*L’horizon* 9). At stake in Brossard’s new writing are no less than the limitations of this agency, notably in the face of a post-9/11 world of surveillance, war, and civil and ecological breakdown: the “global hardship” that haunts the prose, “the irrationality of the world, that chaos without volume and without a face, molten in its own erosion” (*L’horizon* 58, 67).

Anne, the protagonist/writer/translator of *Fences in Breathing* — a familiar figure in Brossard’s fiction — faces the “unnameable” menace and extinction of her ability to find meaning through words, a “task

of consolation” (13) that no longer seems to be in her grasp. Brossard’s novel is also a critique of George W. Bush’s 2001 Patriot Act and the mainstream media discourse on the war on terror. In the aftermath of 9/11, former and surer convictions about the power of writing itself are thus destabilized:

Since September 11, planes are bombs, *trompe l’œil* tombs in the sky, and I have lost some of that happiness, which, while it was never quite tranquility, nonetheless left me with joy deep in my soul, certain that the world and the meaning of my life could not so readily fall apart. Ever since then, words can no longer rise to the task of consolation. (13)

Having taken refuge in Switzerland to relearn her craft in another language, the disillusioned narrator is daunted by the possibility of facing a worn-out language:

In my language, I have exhausted the vocabulary that would have allowed me to name that intriguing, approaching black: raven, vulture, feline, the black of volcanic sand, of marble, of ink and soot, of leather, of cassocks, of niqab and chador, and of burnt corpses. In need of other words for this darkness of nature and civilization now encroaching. (9)

Amid the apocalyptic “ruins” of “September 2001,” where fire “devours the things of life” and “the sun has disappeared” into “the darkness of the great fog of civilization” (24), the narrator finds herself “caught in the trap of words that do not drown out suffering so many cleft words and worried embraces that I no longer know how to make use or hope of so evil and mean has the world become” (56).

Brossard’s floating, differing “I” and fictional characters find themselves facing (or unable to face) the unstable, global, and violent world that surrounds and to a large extent defines them and their sense of agency. The poet speaker of *Ardeur* grapples with emptiness, anger, the incapacity of dialogue, destruction, mourning, sadness, darkness, and oblivion: “the angle of destruction,” “the simple present of the abyss” (29, 93); “thousands of unclassifiable gestures / at the bottom of oceans and in the outline of wars / thousands of bodies, and we would like to cut corners? / yet I am vast / when everything strikes carnage around us” (39). In the next passage, several readers will recognize the refer-

ences to civilization, futures, and abysses as familiar dystopian tropes throughout Brossard's work:

yet I cannot get used to
 the darkness the soldiers and the archives
 I do not know in what order
 to repeat the opaque of civilizations
 the grey appetite for mercantile immoderation
 what can I say over and above that
 without harming the future and getting nowhere
 let us leave: old abyss of the horizon (27)

But to stop at the pessimistic, abject tone of Brossard's recent writing would be both misleading and a misreading of the complexities of this author's reflection. It is Ahmed again who reminds us that unhappiness, like her figure of the "feminist killjoy," can be affirmative. Antiracist, queer, and feminist critiques as well as "the very exposure of these unhappy effects," argues Ahmed, can lead to "an alternative set of imaginings of what might count as a good or better life. If injustice does have unhappy effects, then the story does not end there. Unhappiness is not our endpoint" ("Happy" 50).

And the story does not end there for Brossard either. To ask alongside Judith Butler's post-9/11 meditation in *Precarious Life*: "what, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war" (xii)? The "desire to take up again the senseless quest for meaning and beauty" (90) still drives Brossard's reflections on writing in the essays of *L'horizon du fragment*. This search is still first and foremost for zones of poetic intimacy and the transformative eroticism of women's words, for "the unpredictable tenderness / and the strong core of words," attempting to "ramify the senses and the caresses / all form of loving thwarted" (*Ardeur* 16, 56). The language of affect does not restrict itself to discontent or terror, but figures as one of transgressive desire and corporeality in Brossard's well-known poetics of the senses. The familiar Brossardian metaphor of the spiral emerges in *Ardeur*, a symbolic representation of the poet speaker's gesture towards shared, embodied, and desirous spaces of meaning that characterize earlier works such as *Picture Theory* (1982) and *La lettre aérienne* (1988). The eponymous ardour of one poem is described as an "aerial journey of exhilaration" (*Ardeur* 13). Elsewhere, a "whirl" of "togetherness" creates "paragraphs of eternity" (31), the "we" of the

poems “fine-new” (57) and “ready to intoxicate themselves of tongue and eternity / suspended acrobats” (109).

On the one hand, projections of renewal can be quickly, even within the one poem, mitigated by images of planetary breakdown — “[t]he tenderness you could see it / coming at the moment of waking / and comparisons, yet at night / fragments of words and *fucking chaos*” (*Ardeur* 71). On the other, love and desire, for intimacy and for language, continue to entail an ethical concern with social well-being: “for oneself and for us / in the breathing space of living tongues” (*Ardeur* 7). Overall, as a writer Brossard recognizes the necessity not of exclusive utopian projections — as some of the earlier work may suggest. Instead, she sets out to face and act upon the harsh and difficult world of her post-millennial writing. Thereby stands the “need to reinterpret reality” (*L’horizon* 131). In both its deviation from and re-inscription of its own poetics as an ethical gesture towards transformation, Brossard’s radical feminism has become a form of metafeminism — more anxious and less utopian, looking for ways to “still dare believe” in the “fertile aspect of the other in me” (*Ardeur* 35). *Fences in Breathing* in turn seeks self- and social renewal in another’s language, for “the ideas necessary to comprehend the world” (106) no matter how dreadful it may appear. According to Brossard’s narrator, it is “imperative to dive into the heart of reality in order to thwart lies and the filthy imprints they’ve left on time” (91). “How to translate,” she asks further, “what would be our nature in the face of darkness and light?” (95).

We could say that the speaker of Brossard’s recent texts is a sporadic, uncertain witness of a present (rather than future) dystopian world. Again, feminism becomes metafeminism in so far as this troubled response is at once anxious and hopeful of its capacity for self- and social transformation. As the idea of agency in the first person emerges from the fictional narrative — “I am everywhere I am. I am here to understand and to escape” (*Fences* 7) — it is its ambivalence that closes the text: “I am tenacious in the landscape. I would love to be able to give darkness a new name. *The war is still raging over the Northwest Passage*. I am everywhere I am. I don’t dare write: I am frozen, fossilized in combat position” (114). Brossard’s metafeminist treatment of global crisis is a form of response that ensues in both susceptibility and outrage, which in turn opens up to the possibility of agency, and thus the alternative futurity and spaces of connection and social change ultimately projected

in the poems of *Ardeur*. “I become again a piece of time / set in our species” (58), in “the fragile strangeness / of dawn and of lucidity” (60), and always through the very act of writing: “over the ink / with each fiction / one less sorrow” (69). The need to “think all that / humanity in one gesture” (68) in *Ardeur* echoes the speaker’s renewed promise, in *L’horizon du fragment*, “to say yes again I am there,” to be “everywhere well and alive, with my attention turned to the world” (112), “perfectly anchored in the present of the world” (139).

Now That History Is Over

From Margaret Atwood’s earliest works, such as *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970) and *Surfacing* (1972), to the novels *Alias Grace* (1996) and *The Blind Assassin* (2000), unruly female heroines emerge to disrupt the nation and its colonial history and mindset. The gothic, macabre, and disorderly aspects of these protagonists have not been lost on the plethora of Atwood critics. The recent MaddAddam Trilogy distinguishes itself from the feminist disruptions of grand national narratives characterizing Atwood’s earlier works. Similar to Brossard’s recent poetics, this marks a shift, though obviously in different ways, in Atwood’s oeuvre: a post-millennial pursuit of her earlier interest in speculative fiction. The MaddAddam Trilogy, which includes *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013), falls more in line with the speculative fiction of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, Atwood’s 1985 Orwellian depiction of a patriarchal, totalitarian theocracy.¹⁰ However, as Sharon Sutherland and Sarah Swan have demonstrated about *Oryx and Crake*, the backdrop of the Trilogy is now fuelled by the repercussions of 9/11. The three novels, and especially the final volume, still present historiography as a form of feminist defiance of logocentric narrative. However, this work belongs to a more expansive, indeed metafeminist outlook that both surpasses and encompasses Atwood’s concerns with sexual difference, social transformation, and even the human. In a familiar feminist form of storytelling, the processes of historiography are initially taken over by Atwood’s female protagonist Toby in *MaddAddam*. Yet this role will be passed on to — and perhaps somewhat pirated by — the young, bioengineered humanoid “Craker” boy named Blackbeard.

In one of her essays from *Moving Targets*, Atwood writes that “with the legendary 9/11 World Trade Centre attack in the year 2001 . . . it appears we face the prospect of two contradictory dystopias at once —

open markets, closed minds — because state surveillance is back again with a vengeance” (“George Orwell” 337). This description corresponds to the corporate and state-controlled, terror-wielding, and, ultimately, post-apocalyptic world of the MaddAddam Trilogy. The Trilogy’s apocalyptic tone is perhaps most strongly evoked by *The Year of the Flood’s* cultish, egalitarian, and ecofriendly (as well as semi-satirized) God’s Gardeners. Depicted at length in the novel, the Gardeners prepare for a cleansing “waterless flood,” which will indeed materialize, but as the man-made haemorrhagic virus unleashed by Crake on all of humanity. Toby’s foray into the post-apocalyptic world captures the profoundly dystopian nature of the Trilogy as a whole:

This was not an ordinary pandemic: it wouldn’t be contained after a few hundred thousand deaths, then obliterated with biotools and bleach. This was the Waterless Flood the Gardeners so often had warned about. It had all the signs: it travelled through the air as if on wings, it burned through cities like fire, spreading germ-ridden mobs, terror, and butchery. (*Year 20*)

As Sutherland and Swan argue about *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood’s fiction “is a truly Canadian comment on an exaggerated and dystopian America, showing the worst excesses of Canadian fears regarding the American response to 9/11” (220). The very real threats of bioterrorism, environmental collapse, and the end of individual freedoms reach their worst and full conclusion in the speculative Trilogy. Moreover, Atwood’s “Letter to America” explicitly denounces the US Patriot Act, referenced as well by Brossard in *Fences in Breathing*, whose character Laure Ravin becomes obsessed with critiquing the document word by word. The Act’s sanctioning of limited freedoms and the rhetoric of state security reach their nightmarish conclusion in Atwood’s Trilogy.

As one might expect from Atwood’s fiction, women fare especially badly in this dystopia, whether it is after the great disaster that prevails upon the whole of humanity or in a “time before” that is evocative of Brossard’s own apocalyptic “chaos.” Like the young Ren and Amanda Payne, Toby is among the nonaffluent and thus outsider masses who have survived the “waterless flood.” Before the devastation, Crake (Glen) and Snowman (Jimmy) in turn belonged to the higher caste of scientists and businessmen living in luxurious but highly surveyed gated communities and scientific compounds. Recounted in *Oryx and Crake*, and

then in the flashback chapters of *The Year of the Flood* as well as through Toby's transmission of personal histories to the Crakers in *MaddAddam*, wild consumerism, environmental extinction, and unregulated corporations surge and prosper in the pre-apocalyptic world, at the expense of the "Pleebland" majority, until Crake unleashes his terrible lethal virus with the worldwide distribution of the Blyss-Pluss sex pill. Atwood's dystopian women are commoditized, enslaved, objectified, and abused. No social institution exists to represent or protect ordinary citizens, that is to say, anyone not employed by one of the mega ruling corporations — anyone with a "precarious life," in Butler's terms, not valued enough to be saved. To recall Kaplan's notion of the fourth wave, Atwood's writing exhibits a metafeminist practice in that it confronts planetary devastation that involves and affects all, if not equally, then at least simultaneously.

As opposed to science fiction, and in Atwood's own words in "Writing *Oryx and Crake*," speculative fiction "invents nothing we haven't already invented or started to invent" (330). As she also remarks in the acknowledgments to *The Year of the Flood*: "*The Year of the Flood* is fiction, but the general tendencies and many of the details in it are alarmingly close to fact" (433); and as the final novel's own acknowledgments page states: "Although *MaddAddam* is a work of fiction, it does not include any technologies or biobeings that do not already exist, are not under construction, or are not possible in theory" (393). In *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*, women and girls, like animals and plants, systematically figure as assets for exchange and profit, serving the corporate capitalist elite of Atwood's future, while sexual abuse, rape, and femicide are sanctioned and normalized. Such practices are widespread, daily, and thus rendered banal (to use Hannah Arendt's term), taking place in the "SeksMarts" and highbrow brothels such as the "Snake & Scales." Young Ren, from *The Year of the Flood* and *MaddAddam*, also works there, a situation not unlike Oryx's, from the first novel, who recounts having been sold into the child sex trade and porn industry by her family once crops failed due to climate change in her third-world country of origin.

Just as Offred chronicles the terrible history of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Toby's historical constructions or inventions are vital to the continuation of a post-apocalyptic humanity, or at least its genetically engineered version in the form of the multi-coloured Crakers.¹¹

In *MaddAddam*, historical narrative comes to function as a form of resistance to the *tabula rasa* of apocalyptic revelation itself:

About the events of that evening — the events that set human malice loose in the world again — Toby later made two stories. The first story was the one she told out loud, to the Children of Crake; it had a happy outcome, or as happy as she could manage. The second, for herself alone, was not so cheerful. (*MaddAddam* 9)

Storytelling as well as the very practice of writing are instilled among the Crakers through Toby's legacy, and then through the Craker boy Blackbeard, who will take over as the community's scribe to create "new Words . . . called the Story of Toby" (387):

"I am writing the story," she says. "The story of you, and me, and the Pigoons, and everyone." . . . "Oh Toby, when you are too tired to do it, next time I will write the story. I will be your helper." "Thank you," says Toby. "That is kind." Blackbeard smiles like daybreak. (374-75)

Only if Toby tells them their story will the Crakers make sense of their existence, their short past, and the pre-apocalyptic world of a now fallen humanity. Only then will they carry these stories into the uncertain future. Again, Toby's retelling in *MaddAddam* does not fall in line so much with the feminist deconstruction of a long and carefully monitored past, as in Atwood's previous feminist novels, these having been mostly concerned with Canada's colonial and patriarchal history. For, "history is over" (33) in *MaddAddam*, and only at this point does Toby's metafeminist retelling/inventing for the Crakers begin.

The *MaddAddam* Trilogy is still steeped in typically Atwoodian animal-person imagery: birds, insects, vultures, wild animals abound in all three novels. They offer up what we might call, along with Braidotti, a posthuman worldview, which extends to the biolife forms such as "liolambs," "wolvogs," and "pigoons." Created for corporate profit and now roaming the earth, these bio species exist "under the imperative of the market" whose "excesses threaten the sustainability of our planet as a whole" (Braidotti 63). "The global economy is post-anthropocentric," Braidotti reminds us, as if echoing Atwood's speculative fiction, whose dystopian negativity or seeming "mode of neo-gothic horror" Braidotti would probably reject (64). Yet Atwood's post-9/11 fiction

also steps away from Gothic fairy tale and horror as a lens with which to view history through female narrators. The reconstruction of history through a female and feminist voice, although an important feature of *MaddAddam*, quickly gives way to a random, again metafeminist, telling of multiple life stories. Various narratives flow through the text, including those of Oryx and Crake; their friend Jimmy (now known as Jimmy-the-Snowman); Zeb (Toby's endearing, equally wounded and unreliable lover); his eco-spiritual leader, brother Adam; MaddAddam undercover cyber terrorists such as Pilar; Ren and a deeply traumatized Amanda brutalized by psychotic former Painballers who have also survived the Flood; and, finally, Blackbeard.

As the first historian of the newly crafted Crakers after Crake's fatal act of bioterrorism, Jimmy (or Snowman) has already begun to present tales about their maker in *Oryx and Crake*. Jimmy's initial creation of a mythical worldview is monolithic, starting with the Crakers' conception within "The Egg" of the laboratory. However, Toby's tales are immediately unwieldy, radically subjective, and polyvocal when she takes over the Crakers' historiography. Post-apocalyptic and inevitably posthuman history, as Toby offers it to the Crakers, aims at the construction of their sense of self and place in the world. But again, it is an ultimately random composition of life stories, rather than a grand narrative of origin and creation, that Toby spins together through the vagaries of the various male and female, human and nonhuman, subject and animal lives that she narrates and often invents: "I am writing the story," she says. "The story of you, and me, and the Pigoons, and everyone" (374). What becomes of Toby's tales and journals is "the Book that Toby made when she lived among us" (385), which Blackbeard will continue to relate and to supplement: "And these new Words I have made are called the Story of Toby" (387). If the biblical undertone is unmistakable, "the Book that Toby made" is multilayered, brimming with a multiplicity of stories and truths, thus defying the authoritarianism of monolithic history:

And in the book she put the Words of Crake, and the Words of Oryx as well, and of how together they made us, and made also this safe and beautiful World for us to live in. And in the Book too are the Words of Zeb, and of his brother, Adam; and the Words of Zeb Ate a Bear; and how he became our Defender against the bad men

who did cruel and hurtful things; and the Words of Zeb's Helpers, Pilar and Rhino and Katrina WooWoo and March the Snake, and of all the MaddAddamites; and the Words of Snowman-the-Jimmy, who was there in the beginning. . . . And Toby set down also the Words about Amanda and Ren and Swift Fox, our Beloved Three Oryx Mothers. . . . (385-86)

Toby's teachings, moreover, set out to stop new forms of biological determinism, hegemony, and human-centered morality from establishing themselves. Now consisting of the surviving humans, the Crakers, and the Pigoons with their human neo-cortex, MaddAddam's fragile post-apocalyptic community hardly comprises a utopia of gender parity and equity; just on the human side alone, the women basically cook and hold house while it is mostly the men who go hunting for goods left over from the disaster. Some of the men in the group even prompt the women to not "waste any increasingly rare human DNA" and to procreate with the remaining malignant Painballers (369). Still, over the course of *MaddAddam*, a realignment of reactionary and normative gender roles does occur, a considerable deviation from Crake's schema of biological determination. Whereas Crake has designed particularly the male Crakers to engage in constant sexual activity, Toby teaches the humanoids codes of sexual consent and equal participation. Meanwhile, Amanda, Ren, and Swift Fox will have borne hybrid human-Craker offspring by the end of the novel, and they will have conceived freely and under their own terms. The three women will go on to teach the Crakers about various forms of difference, undermining Crake's ultimately sexist and racist anti-human zealotry and extreme environmental eugenics:

And Toby set down also the Words about Amanda and Ren and Swift Fox, our Beloved Oryx Mothers, who showed us that we and the two-skinned ones are all people and helpers, though we have different gifts, and some of us turn blue and some do not.

So Toby said we must be respectful, and always ask first, to see if a woman is really blue or is just smelling blue, when there is a question about blue things. (386)

Practices of violent objectification and merchandizing women's bodies are not, after all, far off, as so brutally portrayed in *The Year of the Flood*; nor are the horrible consequences of the relentlessly consumed

and marketed natural world and terror-wielding state of surveillance of *Oryx and Crake*. The “time after” the world of *MaddAddam* still carries the burden of the “time before,” just as Atwood’s futuristic dystopia carries the post-9/11 ills of our own here and now.

In the final novel of the Trilogy, the dualistic worldview of social and hierarchical domination is undone by the recognition of nature within culture. An eco-ethical understanding that numerous power, culture, and life systems mutually reinforce one another even begins to prevail. Again, Atwood’s metafeminist intervention in the known and dystopian world order she has imagined manifests itself, but now through a post-human perspective. The hope for humanity seems arguably to rest with the transgenetically modified Crakers — and thus Atwood’s speculative imagination. However, hope also rests with Atwood’s women characters (“our Beloved Three Oryx Mothers” as “set down” in words by Toby), if not entirely, then at least through their alliances with others, human and nonhuman — Craker, pigeon, clairvoyant bee, human — their “friendship and interspecies co-operation” (*MaddAddam* 373). In Braidotti’s words, this is “a post-anthropocentric configuration of knowledge that grants the earth the same role and agency as the human subjects that inhabit it” (Braidotti 160); in this way, Atwood’s novel is set in the anthropocene and also in a posthuman framework. These alliances are what become fundamental to everyone’s survival, making Ren’s idea to “rebuild the human race” in *The Year of the Flood* not as “hopeless” as it once seemed to her fellow survivors (389).

Finally, while Crake’s pharmaceutical research exterminates a good part of the human race through its global reach, Toby’s knowledge and manipulation of herbs, mushrooms, and insects are used locally to heal the wounded survivors who end up in her care. A former university student of Holistic Healing, and then tutored by spiritual healer Pilar among God’s Gardeners, Toby performs what could be termed a feminist ethics and life-giving agency of care — in the sense that Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto have defined such an ethics: “a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible.”¹² It is in fact through this emphasis on care that feminist intervention also emerges in the Trilogy. Toby stands in stark contrast to the anti-human zealotry that drove Crake to unleash such devastating destruction on the world. The value of solidarity, forgiveness, and preservation, indeed of precar-

ious lives, runs throughout Atwood's storylines involving the characters of Ren, Toby, and Amanda. Each of these characters endangers her own life to save another in *The Year of the Flood*. In Year Twenty-Five, Toby cares for Ren, who has barely made it out alive from the sadistic grip of the psychotic Painball Gold Team members. Toby and Ren then venture out to save Amanda, who is still enslaved by the same men, just as the three women will continue to care for one another and for others (the rogue scientists of a former bioresistance cell called MaddAddam) in the sequel. *The Year of the Flood* demonstrates the worst perils of environmental destruction and corporatized nature, namely through the horrific sexual violence and mercantile exploitation in the first two novels. However, and like its sequel, the novel does provide a glimpse of what Karen Stein calls "an environmental feminist praxis that fosters the vital, healthy, inextricable co-flourishing of homo-sapiens and the more-than-human world" (198-99). In the end, The MaddAddam Trilogy posits a metafeminist care praxis through Atwood's female survivors and their posthuman, uncertain futurity.

Late Feminism

I recalled at the outset that Atwood and Brossard can and have been considered "senior women writers" in Canada. The designation is meaningful not so much in relation to the authors' actual age (both are now in their seventies) or even their established, decidedly influential standing in Canadian and Québécois literature. It is productive to think about Atwood's and Brossard's "maturity" in relation to their late works' connections and reconnections with feminism — in turn a late feminism consisting of multiple adherences to its own former practices. I have considered how their metafeminist writing inscribes the difficulty with living in the present and the apprehension of annihilation in the global, post-9/11, biogenetic, advanced capitalist, and anthropocene era through dystopian tropes. Perhaps we can think of Atwood and Brossard as late feminist writers because their writing projects the sense of an ending in the dystopian dimensions of their fiction and social imaginaries. I have argued that it is this lateness that places the writing of Atwood and Brossard in a relationship both of rupture and of continuity to their own feminist literary practice. Again, just as the feminist perspectives of several women writers (Brand, Chen, Connelly, etc.) are as expansive as

the creative work they produce, a discernable feature of Atwood's and Brossard's late feminism is its planetary outlook on subjectivity and personal and social histories.

The question of feminist ethics and agency is still at stake, but otherwise and elsewhere than in necessarily or avowedly politicized texts. Although they may not always work within explicit feminist frameworks, Brossard and Atwood, like many of their contemporaries, do not write out of a vacuum or a medium devoid of feminist historicity or literary legacy. They are metafeminist in their thematic concerns and writing strategies, whereby the political effectiveness of feminist intervention is posited but not necessarily guaranteed. The post-9/11 turn in Brossard's work is at times steeped in the anguish of doubt and paralysis, while Atwood's *Trilogy* begins with catastrophe and ends in melancholia with Toby's suicide. Could we still say, though, with Canadian author Kerri Sakamoto, that "writing is a hopeful act" (2), as guarded as this hopefulness may be in the post-millennial work of these two writers and a number of their contemporaries? If Lawrence Buell is correct in pointing out that apocalyptic fictions "create images of doom to avert gloom" (295), then there are powerful alternative futurities to consider in these twenty-first century texts. Again, as we see in Atwood's post-apocalyptic conclusion as well as the unhappy affects cutting across Brossard's work since 9/11, their stories, thankfully, do not end in gloom. The place, function, and necessity of a metafeminist ethos in Canadian and Québécois writing today do not end there either.

NOTES

¹ English translations from Brossard's *L'horizon du fragment* and *Ardeur* are my own.

² Massumi continues: 9/11 "achieved a consistency, which gave the preemptive power mechanisms dedicated to its modulation an advantage over other regimes of power" (62).

³ These could easily include Adderson, Brand, Chen, Connelly, Coupland, Dickner, Dulong, Gartner, Gélinas, Helwig, Hill, Huston, King, Lai, D. Lee, N. Lee, Mandel, Mavrikakis, Robinson, Thompson, and Vonarburg, particularly for their works listed in the Works Cited.

⁴ Although their early writing could be said to pre-date feminism, especially in the case of Brossard's *formaliste* forays in the early sixties.

⁵ Examples of cross-cultural collaboration that stemmed from the women's movement include the bilingual feminist journal *Tessera* founded by Barbara Godard, Daphne Marlatt, Kathy Mezei, and Gail Scott; the English-French collaborations of Marlatt and Brossard in *Mauve*; or the 1983 "Women and Words/Les femmes et les mots" conference.

⁶ In addition, with Canada's profile within the context of the new national rhetoric of multiculturalism in the early 1990s, critics have also examined the extent to which Canadian and Québécois women's writing, notably by racialized, migrant, and queer authors, have drawn out significant reconfigurations of colonial, Indigenous, normative, immigrant, and national affiliations, over and beyond a multicultural discourse criticized for its nominal, glossing over, and ghettoizing effects. See the work of such leading critical figures as Bannerji, Bissoondath, Harel, and Kamboureli. A transcultural, and indeed transnational, perspective seemed better suited to theorize and propose alternative, suppressed female voices of history, mixed-race affiliations, and transgressive sexualities in the construction and performativity of subjectivity. Female, queer, postcolonial, anti-racist, and multiple subject formations emerge in texts by such authors as Dionne Brand, Eden Robinson, Shani Mootoo, and Kerri Sakamoto, or Nadine Ltaif, Gloria Escomel, Abla Farhoud, and Kim Thúy, not so much within the nation as through and across cultures, locations, generations, lands, and histories both collective and personal.

⁷ The political blogosphere and world of television talk shows and editorials that advanced feminist bashing, were also backed by authoritative voices such as those of military historian Martin van Creveld, *New York Times* columnist John Tierney, and the "first lady of antifeminism (herself), Anne Coulter" (Faludi 25). With feminism now clearly a scapegoat of an enfeebled North American continent, the scenario for feminist-minded commentators in Canada was no more welcoming. Well-known writers Arundhati Roy and Naomi Klein, and University of British Columbia women's studies professor Sunera Thobani, were vilified with hateful propaganda for their critiques of post-9/11 American foreign policy. See Faludi 32-33.

⁸ On this intimate turn in Brossard's recent writing, see Gagnon, and on poetic intimacy in Québec, see Dolce.

⁹ See Carrière, "L'écriture."

¹⁰ Margaret Atwood also published her speculative-fiction novella *I'm Starved for You*, through the digital publisher Byliner Fiction. It began the series Positron, which ended with "The Heart Goes Last" in June 2013. "Positron features a dysfunctional society much like that of Atwood's print trilogy MaddAddam: mass unemployment, starvation, street violence" (orlando.cambridge.org). The latter story transformed into the novel *When the Heart Goes Last* (2015), Atwood's latest fictional foray into dystopia and the disturbing politics of modern-day security and surveillance.

¹¹ First secretly created by a brilliant transgenic scientist named Glen (better known as Crake in the Paradise Dome of a top scientific compound), the biochemically engineered, humanoid, vegetarian, and all-recycling Crakers have limited environmental impact and a close to zero need for the consumption of resources. In addition, they are supposedly free of traits such as prejudice, greed, jealousy, spirituality, and abstract or symbolic thinking that can only, according to their maker, lead to pain and warfare, but will prove later to be a welcome fallacy.

¹² As a fairly recent return to and appropriation of Carol Gilligan's psychological theories of care ethics and justice, the resurgence of the ethics of care in feminist thought and its adaptation to contemporary concerns also correspond to metafeminism, surpassing and encompassing the object — Gilligan's 1970s or second-wave feminist care ethics — in question. See Tronto again (2013), Laugier and Paperman, Noddings, and Nurock.

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