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Elle sera personnage : Nicole Brossard's writing of the self

Karen McPherson

- 1 Nicole Brossard's resistance to autobiography is long-standing and well-documented. In her *Journal intime*, she wrote: "Le journal ne me suffit pas. Ne me convient pas. C'est une forme d'écriture qui exige trop de moi et pas assez de ce que je suis"¹. Elaborating on this idea some fifteen years later, she described

sa résistance à toute forme de témoignage, autobiographie, mémoire, journal intime, roman, bref à tout ce qui s'écrivait sous le nom de cette chose qui portait le nom de prose et qui, selon elle, ne faisait que renforcer cette curiosité malsaine et séculaire que nous avons pour le déjà-vu de l'âme humaine dans ses comportements les plus quotidiens comme les plus extraordinaires, les plus primaires comme les plus sophistiqués.²

- 2 In a further elucidation of this theme, Brossard explains her reluctance to venture into autobiographical territory as grounded in her conviction that this is not where the (writing) self resides and matters:

In the book *She Would Be the First Sentence of My Next Novel*, [...] I say that my reserve when it comes to writing down my life constitutes my reserve of images, of hope and of energy. I also say that my resistance to writing down my lived experience is a way to reserve myself for the essential, the intuited matter that would take the form of what I would later call *theoretical fiction*.³

- 3 Alongside this professed refusal of the autobiographical, we find in Brossard's work an obsessive literary and philosophical engagement with the idea and contours of the fictional character. Evoking her first forays into the "romanesque" in her 1987 novel *Le désert mauve*, she describes a significant shift in her writing, marked primarily by a new relationship to the "personnage". Whereas in earlier less "novelistic" fictions, she had always grasped words "de manière à ce qu'ils supplantent en importance personnages et récit", she was now taking the time to love her characters, "de leur donner une identité et de les entourer d'un paysage" (ESP 10, 12). Indeed, Brossard's subsequent prose writings reflect her persistent fascination with the "personnage". But the relationship between author and characters is never a simple one.

- 4 Brossard's narrative fictions are full of characters who are writers, characters who are narrators, narrators who are characters, and their fluid roles frequently spill back and over the author herself, blurring the lines of authorial identity and agency. From the moment in *Le désert mauve* when Brossard places fictional author Laure Angstelle into dialogue with fictional translator Maude Laures only to have Maude Laures then bring the character Angela Parkins into their conversation to speak for herself and challenge her author directly, we sense what may be at stake for Brossard in the writing of a novel. The complex status of the character offers her a way to keep her distance from the "trop de moi" of autobiography in order to begin to approach the "ce que je suis" of her "theoretical fictions". The *self* in Brossard's novels is indeed theoretical for the character, in its multiple and indeterminate identities and positionings, enables her to engage with fundamental questions about authority and agency, the real and the imagined, the being behind the voice, and the identity of the other. Through her many characters, Brossard is asking what it means to write (a woman) into being⁴.
- 5 If the character sets the scene for a play on identity, the fluid and mutable first-person pronoun, the narrative *je* shimmering and circulating through Brossard's hybrid texts, poses the autobiographical question. One cannot ignore the different pronouns at play in Brossard's writings, especially the *jes* and *elles* dancing circles around the reader and each other. But the errant *I* speaks most clearly and persistently of the complex interactions between narrative and being. Several of Brossard's recent works are punctuated by first-person refrains: "Je suis une femme du présent" in *Elle serait la première phrase*, "Je suis là" in *L'horizon du fragment*, and "Je suis partout où je suis" in *La capture du sombre*. And in every case, the narrating *I* at some point reveals her complicated relationship with others in the text with whom she may share that subject position (whether these be other character/narrators or authorial *personae*). In her essay on *Hier*, Louise Dupré observes how "[b]etween th[e] narrator who claims the story and the *persona* of the author, we observe a subtle play of mirrors" and she notes that this is a "frequent technique in the postmodern novel" (NE 86). What distinguishes Brossard's work for Dupré, however, is not primarily its postmodern approach to narrative but more importantly its poetic sources and nature. The play of pronouns and subject positions is less about ludic plot twists and more about voices. Unlike "novelists' novels" which rely heavily on plotting, poets' novels "place a voice in the foreground, an intimate, inner voice [...] which always seeks to give witness to a vision of the subjective, personal world" (NE 85). One might conclude from Dupré's description, using terms like "intimate", "subjective" and "personal", that she would associate Brossard's poetic narratives within an autobiographical genre. But in fact, referencing the work of Dominique Combe, she makes the point that "the lyric or poetic *I* is neither autobiographical nor fictional, but a subject who tends toward generalisation and universalisation"(NE 92). Perhaps it is this marrying of the intimate and universal that most accurately defines the Brossardian subject with her untethered pronouns illustrating this subject's fundamentally relational nature. Dupré makes a similar observation about *Hier*: "an intimate voice can be felt, corresponding to this 'Je est un autre' [...] that individuals inevitably encounter in themselves when they plunge into their own identity" (NE 93).
- 6 Considering some of Brossard's early engagements with questions of narrative subjectivity and examples of "self-writing" in three of her more recent projects, I propose to show that Brossard's work, while containing many elements that we

consider to be “autobiographical”, dramatically nuances these categories. I will further undertake to reveal how her writings enact her theorizing of the autobiographical in order to subvert, trouble and perhaps even ultimately transform our understanding of the autobiographical project.

- 7 In her preface to the 1998 reissue of Brossard's *L'amèr, ou le chapitre effrité*⁵, Louise Dupré notes that the work's first readers focused primarily on its “portée théorique”, tending to overlook the more “personal” aspects that are perhaps more evident to readers a decade later: “Bref, il y a là un autobiographisme qui, faisant contrepoint aux autres livres de Nicole Brossard, incarne la textualité” (*Préface* 9). Citing Brossard's own affirmation of a subjectivity grounded in the primacy of writing rather than in any individual lived experience, Dupré acknowledges the author's “démarche scriptuaire où l'émotion ressentie à la lecture est plus intellectuelle que sentimentale” but then goes on to declare that “*L'Amèr* reste l'exception qui confirme la règle” (*Préface* 10)⁶. Clearly, Brossard's 1977 *L'amèr* marked an important foray into the complex territory of narrative subjectivity. It is there that she posed a question characteristic of her “théorie/ fiction”: “Où commence le privé où s'arrête le politique, le fictif, le réel?” (55)⁷ It is also there that she first inscribed the phrase for which she is perhaps best known: “Écrire *je suis une femme* est plein de conséquences” (53). This striking formulation exemplifies how fundamentally interconnected identity, gender and writing are for Brossard. The embedded articulation *je suis une femme* does three things at once: it identifies and voices the first person (*je*); it performs that person's identity through the linking of subject and verb copula (*je suis*); and it predicates that identity on gender (*je suis une femme*). But embedded as it is within the implied condition whose consequences it also asserts (*quand j'écris je suis une femme il y a plein de conséquences*), it reflects (on) its own utterance, revealing a many-layered first-person pronoun that is both describing and accomplishing the enunciative gesture, both in the present and in the future. With the formulation of this “signature” phrase in *L'amèr*, Brossard accomplished a significantly “autobiographical” (self-writing) gesture. Furthermore, one of the consequences of writing *je suis une femme* is that the woman in the text is *real(ized)*. Thus, echoing Dupré's observation that in *L'amèr* “un autobiographisme [...] incarne la textualité”, Alice Parker puts it bluntly: “Henceforth the Brossardian text would have a woman's body”⁸.
- 8 Brossard continues to explore the territory of narrative subjectivity in her writings throughout the 1980s, up to and including *Le désert mauve* in 1987. Indeed, this novel, with its constant play along fiction's many borders, represents one of the author's best known and most compelling ventures into the territory of the narrative subject. But as Barbara Godard notes, with her “probing of the boundaries and limits of the writing subject”, Brossard is here exploring strategies that she “embraced throughout the 1980s, strategies that, with significant variations, shaped *Journal intime*”⁹. *Journal intime* was originally commissioned for a series of Radio-Canada broadcasts in 1983 and published the next year under the title *Journal intime, ou Voilà donc un manuscrit*. The title suggests something of Brossard's ambivalence toward the project and signals from the beginning that this exercise in self-writing is conscious of its own problematic status as both literary and public. In the liminal pages of the published text Brossard writes: “Le journal, à moins qu'il ne serve d'annales, me semble être un lieu où le sujet tourne en rond jusqu'à l'épuisement de lui-même” (*Jl* 9). She further explains that since “on n'a qu'une vie et tant d'autres”, she felt the need to insert after each journal entry “ce que j'appelle une posture du texte et un poème. Sans doute pour que *rien* ne

m'échappe et que tout puisse commencer" (JI 10). In general, *Journal intime* maintains the borders of the genre of the writer's diary with its chronological entries and more or less coherent first-person pronoun. But these borders are persistently nudged not only by the insertion of the "postures" and poems and the text's own meta-commentary, but also by the liberties that the author takes with the genre's conventions, such as her inclusion of diary excerpts from earlier years or her playful manipulations of chronological referents¹⁰. In Barbara Havercroft's nuanced analysis of this text's "hétérogénéité énonciative", she confirms its place among Brossard's ongoing subversions of the autobiographical: "Se servir d'un journal intime pour se prononcer résolument contre le genre, voilà qui pourrait sembler antinomique. [...] Au contraire, Nicole Brossard utilise précisément sa propre résistance pour renouveler le genre"¹¹.

- 9 One focus of Havercroft's reading is on Brossard's use of pronouns to signal the relationship between the writing subject and her "others": "[le *Journal intime* de Brossard] convoque *plusieurs* narrataires pronominaux et chaque pronom utilisé est susceptible de renvoyer à des référents féminins divers" (HE 32). Given the *Journal*'s evident interest in the pronominal subject, it is interesting to consider that in *Domaine d'écriture*, a short volume published by Brossard the following year, the "autobiographical" markers of a subject seem to be strikingly absent¹². There are no personal pronouns; these poems are largely constructed around fragments, infinitives, and impersonal constructions, with a major refrain being variants on "rien ne pouvait plus s'écrire"¹³. Where/what is the subject here? This "domaine d'écriture" — apparently uninhabited by narrator, writer, speaker, character— is a what without a who. But a closer reading then suggests that the missing subject may in fact be hiding, that the writing itself may be seeking its subject¹⁴. This suspicion first arises with the dedication (*À qui en ce domaine*) and is reinforced with repeated references to the phrase "sur le qui-vive" which speaks metaphorically of a state of alertness but linguistically contains the question of the existence of a being. In the final pages of *Domaine*, the poems seem to approach the missing subject. After a first indication of a possible first person: "*la langue s'installe en automatisme du moi*" (DE 45), there follows a suggestive transformation of the "sur le qui-vive" expression: "*la fiction reconstitue les actes du corps de ses pensées et certitude de l'être en qui-vive*" (DE 46, bold in original). Previously only words and writing had been described as "sur le qui-vive". Now there is a *being*, one who seems to have been there all along but who finally makes her appearance in the book's closing passage, naming herself and voicing her desire: "*Pendant ce temps, sur le qui-vive, j'aime dans l'indistincte réalité, la tempe appuyée sur la main libre, un peu parler de vivre comme une manière de faire des signes*" (DE 47, emphasis added in bold).
- 10 If *Domaine d'écriture* is tentatively seeking its missing subject, *Installations*, published in 1989, could be read as an explosive response to that search. The full title of the volume is *Installations (avec et sans pronoms)* and the entire work seems to be about pronouns¹⁵. A significant number of the poems are indeed *without* pronouns, but the vast majority contain a first-person pronominal subject boldly declaring itself. A line in the opening poem describes and affirms the speaking (narrating) subject as a starting point ("toutefois je vivais là relance/ le rêve" [IN 9]) and then a series of first-person pronouns repeatedly voices their presence in the poems that follow¹⁶. In addition, a line in the poem "Installation" suggests that the "installations" of this volume concern the inscription and incarnation of a self: "je m'installe dans mon corps/ de manière à pouvoir bouger/ quand une femme me fait signe" (IN 47). And if this installation of the *je* "dans mon corps" seems to confirm Parker's observation that Brossard's work would

now “have a woman’s body”, we also find, in the poem “Site”, an articulation of the challenges still facing that writing self. While it may be possible in the language to avoid the uneasiness associated with the “pur je” (“chaque fois que je m’installe/ dans un pronom mis à part le pur je/ je me soustrais à l’inquiétude/ en pointant du doigt/ la forme mouvante des relations” [IN 38]), there nevertheless persists a troubling tension in the poetic imaginary, a delirious and perhaps deadly game (*jeu fatal*) played out between the lyric subject and the “impersonal beauty” of a poetic language in which “au loin/ un je fatal délire” (IN 38). But it is the poem “Autobiographie” that most clearly anticipates where Brossard’s writing of the self will take her in the 1990s. Beginning with a series of recognizably autobiographical markers (“la naissance recommence bien relatée/ aux frontières du moi et de *ma mère*”), the poem closes with the lines “auprès de vous/ d’une oreille bien attentive/ je verse dans la fiction” (IN 107, italics in original), marking this *I* as in relation to an other. Furthermore, that a poem called “Autobiographie” should conclude with the line “je verse dans la fiction” (my emphasis) shows how intertwined the literary genres of autobiography, poetry, and fiction are for Brossard.

- 11 Twenty years after the publication of *Journal intime*, Brossard once again responded to a request for an “autobiographical” text. Asked to contribute a piece reflecting on her own writing process, she published *L’horizon du fragment* in 2004¹⁷. The distance travelled since *Journal intime* is obvious in this volume where the narrative *je* circulates freely through texts that refuse clear boundaries and definition. Despite the series’ promise that these works “par les auteurs eux-mêmes” will recount “le pourquoi et le comment de leur écriture”¹⁸, *L’horizon du fragment* opens with a first-person narrator who will not be easily and simply contained by the book’s author: “J’étais là et je m’inquiétais. J’étais là et je voulais tout” (HF 9). When we read these lines, we might be hearing Mélanie from *Le désert mauve* or the narrator of *Hier*. And then the second paragraph—describing “[d]epuis quelques jours, la nécessité d’écrire un livre dans une langue qui n’est pas la mienne [...] [u]ne véritable envie de plonger dans une mer déchaînée” (HF 9)—unmistakably anticipates the opening narration in Brossard’s novel *La capture du sombre* that will appear three years later¹⁹. Thus, when we read in the next paragraph, “C’est le jour de mon anniversaire”, we have no way of determining whether we are now hearing the voice of the author Nicole Brossard or the voice of one of her fictional narrators. But, as that voice says, finishing her sentence, “et cela n’est sans doute pas important” (HF 10). This is precisely the point for Brossard: “Virtuelle, réelle, je sais que la réalité n’est plus la même quand passe la métaphore. Surtout ne pas faire semblant que la réalité est la réalité” (HF 11).
- 12 *L’horizon du fragment* illustrates the central role of fiction in Brossard’s self-reflective writing. After the initial untitled opening pages, there are twenty-four titled sections, and scattered somewhat randomly among these are nine more untitled first-person narratives, each beginning with the phrase “Je suis là”, autobiographical marker *par excellence*. Like *Journal intime*, this is a hybrid text in which multiple approaches and mutable narrators attempt to respond to the challenge of writing the self. Yet whereas the inserted “postures” and poems in *Journal intime* were in counterpoint to the journal entries, here the different texts bleed into one another so thoroughly that by the end of the book the voice declaring “je suis là” is speaking from within the titled sections. A number of the short pieces in this collection show Brossard grappling directly with the question of autobiography, reflecting once again on her relationship to pronouns, and drawing her self-portrait as a series of “personnages”. But it is in the accompanying

untitled texts that many of these theoretical reflections play out most tellingly. In a passage following “La Question de l’Autobiographie”, the narrator deftly complicates the question :

J’écris depuis ce matin et je comprends que je suis dans un autre monde. Alors, dans cet autre monde, il se pourrait que je sois quelqu’un d’autre. S’il est vrai que quand j’écris je suis ailleurs, je sais que je ne suis jamais quelqu’un d’autre quand j’écris. (HF 51).

- 13 Similarly, in the section called “Les Pronoms”, the narrator explains that “[sa] méfiance envers un usage de plus en plus répandu du je tient sans doute au fait que l’introspection ne constitue pas une nécessité, un a priori pour écrire” (HF 76). For Brossard the writing comes first since the work of writing is to realize its subject. She thus articulates the important role of pronouns in opening up the narrative space:

Je mise d’abord et avant tout sur la matière linguistique pour dégager l’horizon, ouvrir un passage. Je veux travailler dans l’excès du pronom, travailler son ombre, son flou et signer au scalpel. Sujet délicat. Je veux du mouvement dans la mémoire archivée du pronom. (HF 76)

- 14 And in fact she has already accomplished this in the untitled passage that immediately precedes this section, where the narration moves through unsettling pronoun shifts and referential sleights of hand that both declare and subvert the text’s autobiographical status:

Je suis là. Debout au milieu d’une grande salle du Musée des beaux Arts de Montréal où l’on présente une exposition sur les années 60. Je fus là, petit point d’ombre dans le coin gauche de la photo [...] Nous fûmes là dans les boîtes à chansons [...] les odeurs d’octobre et de révolution, tu avais une telle soif de connaissance et de justice. Vous nous regardiez étrangement [...] Tu écrivais *French Kiss*. [...] Parfois celle qui te ressemble s’approchait de toi, intime comme un personnage. On l’aimait [...] (HF 69-70)²⁰

- 15 This is a typical example of Brossardian “characters” who are, as Dupré noted, “creatures of language, born from the words” (NE 91)²¹. What Dupré finds in *Hier* seems to be characteristic of *L’horizon du fragment* as well as of much of Brossard’s recent writing: “Subjects create themselves in language and so create through fiction some possibilities for agency” (NE 93)²².
- 16 If *L’horizon du fragment* nuances its own self-writing in ways that subvert, trouble and may ultimately transform our understanding of the (theoretical) dimensions of the autobiographical project, two other recent Brossardian texts offer striking enactments of her engagement with the subject of self-writing: the novel *Hier* and the playfully “autofictive” work *Elle serait la première phrase de mon prochain roman*²³.
- 17 Any one of Brossard’s novels might be cited as an example of self-realizing narrative performance, but *Hier*, with its scripting and staging of the death of Descartes, may be the most explicit²⁴. One might well ask why Descartes is “haunting not only [the fictional novelist] Carla’s text and consciousness but the text and consciousness of *Hier* as well” and answer that a focus not on Descartes’ death but on his dying is a way “to interrogate being [by] stag[ing] the encounter of being and nothingness”²⁵. But I would go even further and suggest that any enactment of being will at some point stumble into Descartes whose singular subject (the *cogito*) is an underpinning for so much modern thought about the subject. Alice Parker thus describes Brossard’s return to Descartes as a feminist reclamation of the drama of subjectivity:

Cartesian thought continued to influence western metaphysics and francophone culture well into the twentieth century. [...] Brossard chooses to restage the final

moments of the philosopher's life, his passage from the material realm [...]. Significantly, the drama is filtered through the consciousness and sensibility of Carla and her mother, recounted, re-cited, re-enacted, refracted through the lens of gender as one scenario follows another.²⁶

- 18 But there is a second narrative of being that weaves its way through this novel, a page of text described by the narrator as having been discovered in a museum library:

je suis tombée sur un feuillet dactylographié [...]. Il m'arrive de la relire plusieurs fois dans une même journée. [...] Je ne crois pas que la page ait fait partie d'un journal intime. Peut-être d'un roman. [...] Aujourd'hui, j'ai mémorisé la page. Elle fait désormais partie de moi [...] (H 46)

- 19 What is this page and why is it then inserted five times into the novel? When we read it, we discover that it narrates the encounter between a *je* and another woman:

Elle me regarde avec une intensité qui me dissout dans la première lumière de l'aube. Son visage, monde vivide, je ne sais plus si j'existe dans un cliché ou si j'ai un jour existé dans la blancheur du matin devant cette femme aux gestes lents [...] Je suis cette autre. [...] Maintenant le regard de la femme s'engouffre dans le futur. (H 49)

- 20 The resonance between the central phrase "Je suis cette autre" and the earlier description of the page ("Elle fait désormais partie de moi") illustrates the imbrication of the subject of writing and the writing subject. But I would argue that the repeated return to this page also invites us to read it in counterpoint to the *cogito* represented by Descartes' haunting presence. The philosopher's "je pense donc je suis" —already challenged by the event of his dying and the "relating" of and to that event by the women gathered around his deathbed—now stands in contrast to a different affirmation of being: "elle me regarde" (in both senses of the term: *she looks at me* and *she matters to me*) and "je suis cette autre".

- 21 A second text that dramatically enacts Brossard's writing self is *Elle serait la première phrase de mon prochain roman*, published in 1998. In its ceaseless play between *je* and *elle*, this hybrid text inscribes both a determined resistance to any fixed inscription of a self and a *je* that throughout the book nevertheless repeatedly declares herself: "*Je suis une femme du présent*". The book's title sets up this play on identity through the polysemy of the pronoun *elle*. Occupying the place of a personal pronoun, a subject, a person, and (by way of the conditional verb copula) also a sentence, "she" focuses both present and anticipated future narratives on the stakes (for a woman) of self-writing. The title also establishes a fundamental and ongoing relationship between that *elle* and the *je* behind the title's utterance (the *je* of "mon prochain roman"). The cover signature might tempt us to equate this *je* with Brossard, but early extradiegetic references, offering tantalizing hints of a *pacte autobiographique*, immediately trouble that pact through the use of a third person narration: "Depuis la parution de son dernier roman *Le Désert mauve* [...] elle semblait s'être réconciliée avec la prose" (ESP 10). The errancy of the text's pronouns and the complex ways in which they alternate and share subject positions becomes more and more obvious. References to "son prochain roman" fracture the identification of narrator and novelist but then the novelist's obsession with and possible discovery of her novel's "subject" seem to reconfigure their connection:

De tout cela nous avons longuement parlé un soir de juillet en marchant dans les rues de Montréal. Côte à côte, bras dessus, bras dessous comme des amies de longue date. Il y avait maintenant plus d'un an qu'elle pensait à son prochain roman et ce

soir-là, peut-être en avait-elle trouvé le sujet, elle était particulièrement fébrile.
(ESP 52)

- 22 This passage hints at the possibility that finding her *subject* arises in some intimate way from the encounter with the other woman. In its subversions of the autobiographical pact, this book seems to be making the bold claim that *she* may indeed be the subject of *my* story. The most striking evidence for this idea occurs in the café scene near the end of the book. “Rapprochements” among women are a hallmark of Brossard’s fiction. In this case, the meeting of three women happens both in the café and in the text. In the café they observe one another and notice a resemblance:

Il devait être six heures du matin, lorsqu’une femme est entrée dans le restaurant. Nous nous sommes alors exclamées en même temps : comme elle vous ressemble ! La femme s’installe à une table au fond. Tout au fond. Elle sort un grand cahier [...]
(ESP 130)

- 23 But several pages later, in the text, the subject has shifted:

Six heures du matin. Le restaurant est désert. Les femmes que j’avais remarquées à mon arrivée sont maintenant parties. (ESP 136)

- 24 There follows an italicized passage that might be what this woman narrator is writing in her notebook:

J’écris en pensant à mon prochain roman. Elle sera personnage, me surprendra à chaque phrase. [...] Elle sera poète. Je ne céderai pas à la vraisemblance là où le malheur est toujours trop près des femmes. I want this she alive. (ESP 138, English in original)

- 25 Here we see that for the *je* the “elle”, object of desire, is both character and writer, subject and text. She then writes, “J’écris : je sais ce qu’est la réalité parce que je suis une femme d’imagination” (ESP 140), but in another abrupt series of shifts, the *jes* and *elles* in the text then begin to flash and turn like mirrors in the sunlight :

Dehors, les bruits de la circulation. La vie fait sens un matin de plus. Dans quelques instants, j’existe encore au présent. Maintenant, elle ferme son cahier de notes, se lève, se dirige vers la sortie du Lux. Dans le matin ensoleillé de juillet, je pense à mon prochain roman [...] (ESP 142, emphasis added)

- 26 And finally, the ending of this sentence inscribes its multiple and relational subject in a litany of three first-person declarations (following that *je pense* with its Cartesian echoes) :

Dans le matin ensoleillé de juillet, je pense à mon prochain roman comme on dit, je médite une forme, je me réfléchis ou je l’imagine quelques mots plus loin, quelques mois plus tard [...] (ESP 142, emphasis added)

- 27 We cannot miss the *je m’édite* embedded in the first phrase, moving the thinking *je* into the realm of writing. Then the self-reflection and the imagination of the other (woman) are related, with the conjunction “ou” making them possibly interchangeable. This passage is emblematic of why it makes sense to read Brossard as both a feminist theorist of identity and a self-fictionalizing author (fictionalizing not *herself* but the self/selves). Throughout her corpus we find her reflecting on the *je* and imagining the *elle* even as her writings persist in calling the category of self-writing into question. And ultimately, at each step of the way, we find ourselves where she started, with the signature phrase “Écrire *je suis une femme* est plein de conséquences”. Indeed, this phrase closes *Elle serait la première phrase de mon prochain roman* (opening it to the future) :

je médite une forme, je me réfléchis ou je l'imagine quelques mots plus loin, quelques mois plus tard, c'était dans une salle de conférence, elle était sur le point de terminer la lecture de son texte en disant : "Écrire *je suis une femme* est plein de conséquences". (ESP 142)²⁷

- 28 With this embedded utterance, Brossard says what she has been saying all along, that as we create ourselves in language and invent ourselves in texts, these gestures are both real and consequential. Something happens in the writing that makes identity matter.

NOTES

1. *Journal intime* (henceforth *Jl*), second edition, Montreal, Les Herbes rouges, 1998 [1984], 65. I quote from the 1998 edition.
2. *Elle serait la première phrase de mon prochain roman* (henceforth *ESP*), Toronto, Mercury Press, 1998. This passage in the third person calls into question Lejeune's "pacte autobiographique" as, in typical Brossardian fashion, the author makes herself a character in the story she is telling.
3. "A State of Mind in the Garden", *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 4:4, 2000, 39. Significantly, Brossard here claims narrative authority for statements originally articulated in the third person: "sa réserve devant la réalité et l'illusion qui la récompose [...] doit être comprise comme la mise à distance d'un monde dans lequel, *she knows by all means that she as a she is not even in the sentence, cannot get even with the sentence.* [...] Cette distance constitue sa réserve d'images, d'espoir, et d'énergie. [...] il n'était pas à exclure que sa résistance à la prose fut une façon de se réserver pour l'essentielle, matière intuitionnée qui prendrait la forme de ce qu'elle appellera fiction théorique" (ESP 34, 38). The self-displacement evident in the English sentence further complicates the agency and positioning of the writing self.
4. In *Baroque d'aube* (Montreal, Éd. Québec Amérique, 2001), the realization and agency of the *personnage* is explicitly foregrounded in a passage describing a narrator's relationship to her character(s): "*Le personnage peut sombrer dans le vaste des possibilités, multiplier les miroirs. [...] Il faut que l'ombre vraie du désir recouvre l'ombre vraie du personnage. Elle dessine toujours le même verbe être replié sur soi en forme de collier autour du nombril. On peut se rapprocher du personnage*" (112, italics in original). In "Novels on the Edge" (henceforth *NE*), in *Nicole Brossard: Essays on Her Works* (ed. Louise Forsyth, Toronto, Guernica Editions, 2005), Dupré noted that characters in Brossard's *Hier* "are created in the present through the process of enunciation" (91).
5. "Préface. Du propre au figuré" (henceforth *Préface*) is Dupré's introduction to *L'amèr ou le chapitre effrité* (henceforth *L'amèr*), Montreal, l'Hexagone, 1988 [1977]. I quote from the 1988 edition of *L'amèr*.
6. Reference is to a 1982 interview in which Brossard remarked: "Je sais que pour beaucoup de femmes la souffrance est à l'origine de l'écriture; pour moi, l'écriture est à l'origine de l'écriture" (quoted in *Préface* 10). In *Mothers of Invention* (Montreal, McGill Queen's UP, 2002), Miléna Santoro notes that "while Brossard herself may explicitly call *L'Amèr* fiction [...], she is also challenging the distinction between fiction and autobiography" (194).
7. This was the first novel to which Brossard affixed the label "théorie/fiction". Both Santoro and Alice A. Parker (*Liminal Visions of Nicole Brossard*, New York, Peter Lang, 1998) offer insightful readings of *L'amèr* and "fiction/theory". Santoro points out, however, that this subtitle only

appeared in the novel's second edition (307 note 86) and that "[Brossard's] own classification of *théorie/fiction* [...] tells only part of the story, for *L'Amèr* even transgresses the limits of such an embracing label" (205).

8. Parker *Liminal Visions* 7. It is also Parker who refers to this key sentence as Brossard's "signature" (7).

9. Godard, "Life (in) Writing: Or a Writing Machine for Producing the Subject" in Forsyth, 205.

10. There are entries labelled with markers like "*Dix heures vingt et une secondes*" and others that are purposely misdated.

11. "Hétérogenéité énonciative et renouvellement du genre: le *Journal intime* de Nicole Brossard" (henceforth *HE*), *Voix et Images* 22:1, 1996, 25.

12. *Domaine d'écriture* (henceforth *DE*), Montreal. Éd. nouvelle barre du jour, 1985. In *Stratégies du vertige* (Montreal, Éditions du remue-ménage, 1989), Louise Dupré situates *Domaine* at the beginning of "une nouvelle période formaliste" in the poet's work. Dupré's reading of Brossard's poetry of this period includes an analysis of "Le *Je en Jeu*" in which she notes that "[o]n assiste au déplacement incessante d'un sujet qui ne se considère pas comme fixé dans le symbolique, mais qui continue son exploration, déplace les frontières, la barre" (95). It seems, however, that beginning with *L'amèr* we see the focus shifting away from what Dupré describes as "[une] subjectivité qui [semble] cache[r] la nostalgie d'une unité perdue, d'une intégralité à retrouver" (88) to try to imagine a different (multiple, mutable, relational) subject altogether.

13. Phrases like "il était permis de croire" and "sur la ligne se pencher de l'éveil du soupçon" are typical of the fragmentary, impersonal nature of this text. The opening phrase "Rien ne pouvait plus s'écrire" is repeated and then transforms into "c'était écrire", an insistent refrain. I am grateful to Louise Forsyth for drawing my attention to the startling absence of personal voice in this work.

14. Near the middle of the text we encounter a line that suggests that this writing is all too aware of what it is paradoxically both resisting and seeking: "*l'effet sournois du vrai la tentation d'écrire familièrement*" (*DE* 26, bold in original).

15. *Installations (avec et sans pronoms)* (henceforth *IN*), Trois-Rivières, Écrits des Forges, 1989.

16. A few representative lines: "à vrai dire je m'oriente" (*IN* 11); "je m'étends et prépare de longs touchers" (*IN* 14); "je fais attention / quand je rêve avec ma langue" (*IN* 18); "je parlerai d'horizon" (*IN* 20); "je m'absorbe dans l'imaginaire" (*IN* 45); "j'attrape la vie comme un livre récent" (*IN* 82); "je joue d'énergie contre la mort" (*IN* 105); "je veille sous les étoiles" (*IN* 125).

17. *L'horizon du fragment* (henceforth *HF*), Paroisse Notre-Dame-des-Neiges, Éditions Trois-Pistoles, <Écrire>, 2004.

18. *HF*, cover flap.

19. *La capture du sombre*, Ottawa, Leméac, 2007. The corresponding passage in this novel: "Depuis hier, [...] envie d'écrire lentement un livre dans une langue qui ne serait pas la mienne. [...] je veux plonger dans le paysage d'un monde provisoire" (5).

20. The most striking twist in this dance of pronouns is the extradiegetic reference in "Tu écrivais *French Kiss*". Brossard published a novel called *French Kiss* in 1974. Who/where is the author and who/where is the narrator here?

21. Dupré here quotes Jean-Yves Tadié's *Le récit poétique*.

22. *L'horizon du fragment* in many ways illustrates the "poétique des différences" to which Barbara Havercroft refers in her analysis of the complex and contested state of contemporary autobiographical discourse. Havercroft concludes "Le discours autobiographique: enjeux et écarts", (Lucie Bourassa [ed.], *La discursivité*, Quebec, Nuit blanche, 1995), with the suggestion that such a conceptual approach might best accommodate "les divers types actuels de sujets autobiographiques" since "[s]elon cette conception, les sujets autobiographiques des textes contemporains seraient produits par et dans le discours, ils deviendraient des lieux de différences (les leurs et celles des autres sujets), sans contours figés" (178, emphasis added).

23. *Elle serait la première phrase* may not fit into a precisely defined concept of “autofiction”, but one might nonetheless consider it a work of “auto-fiction” in its inventive inscription of the author’s many selves.

24. *Hier* (henceforth *H*), Montreal, Éd. Québec Amérique, 2001.

25. Karen McPherson, “Since Yesterday : Nicole Brossard’s Writing After Loss” in Forsyth, 60-61.

26. Parker, “Performativity in *Hier*” in Forsyth, 74-5.

27. This conclusion also offers another way to read the book’s title. For Brossard, this sentence is always the starting point for what comes next. It is “la première phrase”.

ABSTRACTS

La résistance de Brossard aux genres autobiographiques est assez notoire pour que frappe ce je mutable et fluide qui circule dans ses textes hybrides. Cet article retrace l’intérêt de Brossard pour les questions de subjectivité narrative depuis sa phrase célèbre, “Écrire ‘je suis une femme’ est plein de conséquences”. Nous avons choisi de lire Brossard non seulement en tant que théoricienne féministe de l’identité mais aussi comme une auteure qui se fictionnalise dans des “autofictions” qui —paradoxalement— remettent en cause cette catégorie. L’analyse se concentre sur ses préoccupations littéraires et philosophiques qui touchent au “personnage”; ses jeux constants aux frontières de la fiction; ses pronoms errants mettant en scène les relations complexes entre la narration et la vie; et son exploration de la façon dont le soi qui écrit semble penser la construction d’un sujet parlant et sexué.

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Mots-clés: Nicole Brossard, autobiographie, narration, subjectivité, autofiction

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