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# Alternative Biographies: (Re)telling Feminine (Hi)stories in Selected 20th-Century Texts by Québécois Women Writers

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# Alternative Biographies: (Re)telling Feminine (Hi)stories in Selected 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Texts

by Québécois Women Writers

Jessica A. McBride, PhD

University of Connecticut, 2017

The objective of this dissertation is to examine the tendency on the part of several québécois women authors from the 20<sup>th</sup> century to create alternative feminine biographies for forgotten, undervalued, or misrepresented women from the past. Given the complex relationship the Québécois have with their provincial history, and the central role chauvinistic representations of women and the “Québec national text” play in safeguarding the québécois cultural identity, contemporary women writers from Québec are singularly poised to resurrect, recreate, revive, and rewrite the feminine historical experience into the traditional discourse of History. From Québec’s most famous woman writer, Anne Hébert, to a lesser known militant lesbian playwright, Jovette Marchessault, and other québécois women writers along the spectrum, there exists a common trope: plays and novels in which homo- or heterodiegetic women narrators feel compelled to (re)tell another woman’s feminine (hi)story. Some examples of this practice appear initially to be somewhat traditional works of historical fiction, others ignore almost entirely the referential world beyond the confines of their pages. Québec and its history dominate some works examined here, while in other the province that promises “*Je me souviens*” plays virtually no important role. Despite these variations, this dissertation will demonstrate that alternative biographies, whether based in referential foundations or on purely fictional inventions, allow for a combination of history and fiction necessary to (re)tell feminine (hi)stories in a more complete, truthful way than has been possible with traditional historical discourse or fiction. For these authors, alternative biographies allow women past, present, and future to assume a more active role in the construction of their own (hi)story. In creating a literary present that honors the fictional and historical past, they have created a past for the present.

Alternative Biographies: (Re)telling Feminine (Hi)stories in Selected 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Texts

by Québécois Women Writers

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B.A., Skidmore College, **2005**

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Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation

Alternative Biographies: (Re)telling Feminine (Hi)stories in Selected 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Texts

by Québécois Women Writers

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*For “my boys,” Graham and Colin.*

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## Introduction

Until relatively recently, historians and readers accepted a simple definition of history and historiography and held a basic understanding about how the two interact (or don't). This mutual understanding assumed that "[all] histories were narrative histories [and that a] history was a true story about the past" (Berkhofer 26), while it was also consequently understood that all fiction was based on invention. However, the mid-1900s brought new waves of thinking about history, literature, and discourse—such as those espoused by poststructuralism and postmodernism—which ushered in questions about historical discourse, the role of the historian in producing histories, as well as about how to determine if a (hi)story was “true” or not. In other words, the legitimization of History as a “*récit véridique, totalisant et scientifique*” became the subject of serious interrogation, especially in France (Paterson *Moments postmodernes* 54). Challenging the absoluteness of History in this manner led several scholars such as Roland Barthes, Paul Veyne, Michel de Certeau, and others to question if, given their apparent similarities, it is even legitimate to set fiction and History in opposition.<sup>1</sup>

While the Hexagon questioned the legitimacy of grand narratives of History and Literature, regional literatures, especially those with a colonial past, confronted the legitimacy of the ways in which traditional historical discourse represented their history. As other regional literatures have experienced, literary works from the Québécois context bore witness to a shift from a “classical” use of historical fact to a modern, and eventually a postmodern approach. Attempts to understand the dynamic and often problematic reciprocity and opposition between the writing of fiction versus history in literary works is of particular importance to the contemporary Québécois context given

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Veyne *Comment on écrit l'histoire*; Roland Barthes “Le Discours de l'histoire” *Le Bruissement de la langue*; Michel de Certeau *L'Écriture de l'histoire*.

the province's particularly adamant belief that cultural survival is supported through literary creation. Although this passage from controlled, traditional historical "realemes"<sup>2</sup>—or elements that meet the standards of official historical discourse—to unstable and unreliable representations of histories not yet examined by the official historical record may often appear incomplete or unfinished, it nonetheless exposes both a questioning and response to the ontological doubts begot by the unstable bond between history and fiction. Since the Quiet Revolution<sup>3</sup> that began in the early 1960s, Québécois authors have explored the role that the "national text" has played in the formation of the province's political, cultural, and narrative identity. Québec's minority position and marginalization in the face of the Anglophone majority has historically compelled authors and readers to consider

[...] toute production, si banale soit-elle, [comme] une "pierre" dans la construction de l'édifice patriotique: tout écrivain devient un "ouvrier" dans l'édification d'une littérature nationale. Écrire est un devoir, critiquer est un sacerdoce. La communauté est encore cimentée par cette mission providentielle de la nation canadienne en terre d'Amérique à laquelle la littérature est étroitement associée.

(Robert L'Institution du littéraire au Québec 182)

Blurred or blurry borderlines between official historical fact (allegedly objective representations of events occurring in the past that are of cultural and/or existential importance to a group or community) and invented fictional heterocosms (nonreferential narratives that represent

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<sup>2</sup> "Realemes" are real-world objects presented in fictional worlds. Realist use of realemes requires them to faithfully represent the official historical record, laws and logic of physics, and other "real world" qualities or actions. Postmodern literature does not typically use realemes in this way.

<sup>3</sup>The Quiet Revolution was a period of intense socio-political and socio-cultural change that followed the "Grande Noirceur." During the 1960s, the provincial government rapidly worked to limit the power of the Roman Catholic church in policies and administration of healthcare and education. Most aspects of society were scrutinized and reformed, since many felt that it was "time for a change," which was also the slogan of the Liberal Party led by Jean Lesage that won power over the provincial government in 1960.

events in a universe created by an author) recur in both dramatic and novelistic works of contemporary Québécois fiction. Male authors like Jacques Godbout, Réjean Ducharme, Roch Carrier, and others challenged the “grand narratives” of religious ideology promoted by patriarchal figures like l’Abbé Casgrain, whose version of the Québec national text dominated literary production for decades. However, despite this rejection of Catholic, insular ideology, male Québécois authors largely replaced one version of the Québec national text for another—a more modern, secular, intellectual national text that focused primarily on Québec’s linguistic singularity.<sup>4</sup> Challenging History’s metanarratives in the Québécois context implies confronting innumerable longstanding cultural, religious, and psychological assumptions that still remain paramount to Québécois identity. Even today, the Québécois struggle with the preferred method to communicate their provincial/national history, which they believe is based on a “founding truth [...] that it is a tumultuous saga dominated by the conflictual relationship between anglophones and francophones” (Létourneau 6-7).<sup>5</sup>

As important as this linguistic and culture conflict may have been and continues to be for the Québécois, some primarily female authors suggest that reducing the entire province’s history

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<sup>4</sup> Godbout’s famous work, *Salut Galarneau!* (1967) was admittedly intended to replace the outdated Québec national text based on “*survivance*” ideology proposed by Lionel Groulx and l’Abbé Casgrain (Green *Women and Narrative Identity* 9). Réjean Ducharme was a reclusive author and dramaturge whose works feature fiercely individualistic protagonists confronting hypocrisies and limitations of their contemporary society. His most famous work was *L’Avalée des avalés* (1966). Roch Carrier is one of Québec’s most well known and well loved authors, most famous for his *contes* and he has also produced a considerable amount of work for children. Beginning with one of his first books, *La Guerre, yes sir!* (1968), Carrier’s work explores the effect of war, nationalism, the Catholic church’s hold on the province, sexual repression in Québec society and culture, as well as the French Canadian distrust of “*les Anglais*.”

<sup>5</sup> Jocelyn Létourneau describes the heated debate that followed a 1996 report by the Ministry of Education in Québec called *Learning from the Past: Report of the Task Force on the Teaching of History*. The report presented reflections on how history was being taught in the province and made recommendations for curriculum at each level of education. Because of the difficult relationship many Québécois have with their history, the report was polarizing. Some considered its recommendations an “insult to the memory, history, and destiny of the Québec people,” while others viewed the report more favorably since it “opened the door to a reappraisal of the narrative of Québec’s past” (Létourneau 4).

and modern identity in such a manner eliminates the possibility for adequate representations of other existential aspects of Québec's past, such as gender. While women everywhere have struggled against stories imposed upon them by men, this imposition has been even more pronounced in the case of Québécois women since "the dominant plots of literature and society have historically been enmeshed in the political project of Québec's cultural survival, always threatened, which endowed these narratives with unusual ideological force" (Green *Women and Narrative Identity* 7). Due to the aforementioned importance of the "national text," women writers from Québec have been doubly oppressed in both historical discourse and literary creations as well as in their relationships with men and patriarchal institutions. Thus women writers from Québec have been particularly inclined to provide alternative biographical texts that challenge established notions of the distinctions between history and fiction, as well as power struggles between the dominant figures in their society—both their English colonial oppressors and agents of patriarchal institutions and practices like the Catholic church and their husbands or fathers.

In order to maintain cultural survival, women in Québec and representations of female québécois characters have historically been constrained to stay within well-defined bounds, thus limiting what women writers could create and how feminine (hi)stories were told. In order to explore how women in Québec can move beyond the limitations of the Québec national text (both their role within its productions and in producing them as writers), this study examines how several women authors from Québec employ a combination of historical/referential information and fictional invention to challenge grand narratives by (re)telling feminine (hi)stories and offering alternative biographies of women from the past. This tendency appears to be particularly prevalent amongst women writers from Québec because of the double mission they assign to themselves and their work: to both address the restrictive vision of women represented in the Québécois national

text, and the restrictions placed on Québécois women writers in the production of their works. In order to be accepted by the “priesthood” of critics, “writers have been expected to produce texts capable of serving as identity narratives, but, in a sort of double jeopardy, texts that risked being perceived as statements about identity were subject to severe critical constraints” (Green *Women and Narrative Identity* 10). We will then explore here texts by women authors from Québec in which this double jeopardy is exposed and subverted.

In exploring a selection of alternative biographies written by Québécois women authors in the late 20th century, it becomes clear that despite various subjects, divergent reliance on historical “fact” and fictional invention, and different genres, many of these texts can be considered “*romans historiques postmodernes*” as a result of their tendency to “[penser] à l’Histoire, se penser dans l’Histoire, repenser l’Histoire ou même se situer historiquement pour s’interroger comme sujet écrivant [pour que] le discours de l’Histoire [soit] soumis à une remise en cause fondamentalement à l’intérieur même de la fiction” (Paterson *Moments postmodernes* 53). In so doing, these women authors not only challenge notions of what is historically “true,” they attempt to prove that while all historical discourse may not be a fiction, one should not consider the combination of history and fiction to be *a priori* any less “true” than works of normal historical practice, especially as they relate to women.

Because of the firm focus on the province’s linguistic and cultural differences with anglophone Canada, as well as several attempts to become an independent nation, the multiple, multi-dimensional feminine stories of Québec have been ignored and women’s histories in general have been undervalued and misrepresented. Nevertheless, women have not been completely erased or ignored, and some women writers and historical figures prevailed despite the exceptional restrictions placed upon their literary production. A handful of individual women, such as Marie

de l'Incarnation and Marguerite Bourgeoys,<sup>6</sup> have been recognized for their roles in founding the province's two major cities and helping to establish the Catholic church in the colony. Several feminine archetypes, such as the mythical Québécois mother,<sup>7</sup> have also been honored in traditional historical discourse for their contributions to Québec's cultural identity, but through homogenous, global recognition. Some (predominantly male and/or devoutly Catholic<sup>8</sup>) thinkers even go as far as to consider traditional, pre-Quiet Revolution Québec a matriarchal society because of the cultural importance placed on the mother figure, since "the ideology of national survival that presided over literature from its beginnings depended entirely for its coherence on the adherence of women to their traditional reproductive role" (Smart *Writing in the Father's House* 12). However, the self-sacrificing, isolated, solitary archetypal mothers and nuns of Québécois mythology were created by patriarchal institutions like the Catholic church from the male perspective and for what Mulvey calls the "male gaze" 62). The ideological constructs of homogenized feminine archetypes like the mythical Québécois mother served to limit the power and freedom of women rather than amplify it. In a 1976 article, France Théoret explained how

[au] nom de l'immense pouvoir qu'on lui attribuait au sein de la famille, la femme québécoise a longtemps été privée, dans notre société, de toute participation à la vie extérieure de la cité. Lorsqu'elle voulait obtenir le droit de s'instruire, de travailler, ou de voter, c'est en évoquant le rôle important et secret qu'elle jouait au sein de la

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<sup>6</sup> Marie de l'Incarnation (1599-1672) and Marguerite Bourgeoys (1620-1700) were two Ursuline nuns who were instrumental in settling modern day Québec City and Montréal through their efforts to educate and convert indigenous peoples, care for the "*filles du Roi*" and male settlers as they arrived in New France, and any other activities that supported the mission to make the "*terre sauvage*" as civilized, i.e. European, as possible.

<sup>7</sup> We will discuss this figure at length in chapters 2 and 4.

<sup>8</sup> Clerical leaders were the strongest proponents of what feminist writers like France Théoret would later describe as an empty, misleading matriarchy that ironically restricted women by promulgating their domestic, familial, and cultural power.

famille qu'on lui refusa ces droits si nécessaires à quiconque veut participer tant soit peu aux destinées d'une nation. Chargée au nom d'un messianisme délirant d'assurer la conservation de la langue, de la foi et des bonnes mœurs aussi bien que de faire monter en flèche la population de la catholique province, la femme devait pour se faire, demeurer à la maison et prendre soin de sa ribambelle d'enfants" ("Le Matriarcat québécois analysé par les reines du foyer.")

In much the same way as postcolonial/postmodern works from other regions, these "*romans historiques postmodernes*" originating from Québec and written by women demonstrate that "non seulement le récit historique est-il limité, [...] il est également *subjectif*" (Paterson *Moments postmodernes* 55), and in refuting the dominant culture that once oppressed them, a new space opens up where new histories can emerge (Bhaba *The Location of Culture*). What sets the feminine Québec context apart, however, is that in literature and in cultural norms, women were the means by which the French Canadian society was to be safeguarded. Through the process of creating alternative biographies, the authors discussed here suggest that feminine (hi)stories from the province's national History are not entirely truthful, since they have not been told by women and their narratives have been "emplotted," to use Hayden White's terminology, by male historians who have told his story, rather than her story (*Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*). On the contrary, the texts we are going to focus on aim to provide a hybrid historical/fictional space in which these feminine (hi)stories can be (re)told by another feminine voice.

Although historical fiction, postmodern historical fiction, and the difference between History and fiction have all been treated at length in previous works,<sup>9</sup> the question of historical fiction and fictional truth have not been adequately examined in regard to Québécois literature specifically, especially given the importance of History, Literature, and women in protecting the province's cultural identity. Add to this a focus on feminine (hi)stories written by women, and the lack of attention becomes even more pronounced. In fact, there appears to be a recurrent practice on the part of many contemporary "*écrivaines québécoises*" to reconstruct, reinterpret, rewrite, and re-create historical/fictional universes, yet little attention has been paid to these works beyond traditional literary critique. Along with the works and authors discussed in the following chapters, we could cite examples such as *La Maison Trestler* by Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska (1984),<sup>10</sup> *Instruments des ténèbres* by Nancy Huston (1996),<sup>11</sup> *Nous parlerons comme on écrit* by France Théoret (1982),<sup>12</sup> *Les Fées ont soif* by Denise Boucher (1978),<sup>13</sup> and *La Nef des sorcières*, a

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<sup>9</sup> For example, Martha Tuck Rozzett's "Constructing a world: how postmodern historical fiction reimagines the past," *CLIO* 25(2) 1996; 145-165; Susan Griffin's *Women's postmodern historical fiction: the art of reconstruction* 1999; and several works by Hayden White, including "The History Fiction Divide" *Holocaust Studies* 20(1-2) 2014; 17-34, *The content of the form: narrative discourse and historical representation* 1987; and *Tropics of discourse: essays in cultural criticism* 1986.

<sup>10</sup> In her postmodern novel *La Maison Trestler*, Madeleine Ouellette-Michalska reconstructs the story of an historic home from the eighteenth century while also deconstructing the patriarchal discourse of the time. As she recounts the rebellious acts of one of the inhabitants of the house, Catherine Trestler, against her father who serves as the representation of bourgeois values and norms, Ouellette-Michalska also challenges notions of History and the past.

<sup>11</sup> While Nancy Huston is actually an anglophone Canadian, approximately half of her texts are written in French. *Instruments des ténèbres* tells the story of Nada, a divorced American writer who explores her past while researching another woman's life. This woman is Barbe Durand, a French servant from the eighteenth century. While her original aim was to tell the story of Barbe's life, Nada ultimately shares her own autobiography.

<sup>12</sup> This novel explores the feminine experience by telling a woman's life from childhood until her eventual "*prise de parole*" in adulthood. Throughout the work, memories form the woman's life surge forth and interrupt her in the present. The woman's life history is formed from these fragments, which include dreams, memories, songs, and family photos.

<sup>13</sup> This play was presented in one long act, and features three female archetypes—a whore named Madeleine, a mother on Valium named Marie, and a Statue of the Virgin Mary. These feminine figures



collection of seven monologues by different authors (1976),<sup>14</sup> to name just a few that have not received the attention they deserve as alternative biographies or (re)tellings of feminine (hi)stories.

Similarly, although the practice of writing alternative biographies was relatively common in post-Quiet Revolution Québec, its analysis is largely absent from current literary study. Two somewhat recent dissertations (*She must write herself”: Feminist poetics of deconstruction and inscription [six Canadian women writing]* written in 1998 by Sydney Margaret Hill and *Poetic License: Inventions and Intentions in Historical Novels* written in 2005 by Guru Paran Gunaratnam) and one book (“*Trading Magic for Fact,*” *Fact for Magic: Myth and Mythologizing in Postmodern Canadian Historical Fiction* written by Marc Colavincenzo in 2003) all discuss changes in official History. While the first does compare the practice in the Anglophone Canadian and Québécois context and focuses primarily on subversion through de/reconstruction of language, the second and third do not consider Québécois texts at all. Several articles and books that touch upon the combination of history and fiction have been used in this analysis; in most cases, however, their focus is less on the subversive quality of the texts, and they are also limited in terms of scope given their length. One text, *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebec National Text* (2001), written by preeminent scholar of Québécois literary studies, Mary Jean Green, analyzes the implications of fiction, history, and writing in the formation of Québécois culture; nevertheless, this work is organized chronologically and thematically, beginning with the first Québécois novel

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describe how they wish to find liberation and self-realization, and they denounce the patriarchal representations of women that have long served as the basis for their identities.

<sup>14</sup> While each of the monologues reflects a different aspect of the feminine experience that has served to limit women’s opportunities and activism, one monologue is particularly interesting for this study. In one section, Guilbeault the “Mad Actress” who, in the middle of a “*mise en abyme*” performance as Agnès in Molière’s *L’école des femmes*, explains directly to the audience that she has forgotten her lines. She runs through some other character’s lines (all of which were created by male writers) as she tries to correct course, but ultimately the monologue serves to criticize female roles and representations of women’s stories developed by men. In chapter four, we will meet another actress trying to find herself and her past after having played many different feminine roles throughout her lifetime and career.

written by a woman—Laure Conan’s *Angéline de Montbrun* (1882). The book endeavors to reread a selection of critically and culturally important literary texts written by Québécois women about a variety of subjects in order to rewrite the Québec national text, rather than examine texts that themselves feature “rewriting” or alternative biographies. The current study aims to combine several of the elements touched upon in other analyses in order to more fully explore the reasons for and outcomes of alternative biographies written by Québécois women writers in the 20th century.

In order to do this, we will examine a selection of several exemplary texts in which Québécois women writers give an alternative view of the feminine experience in the near or distant past. While some of the fundamental elements of these texts differ, they are all written post-Quiet Revolution, between 1970 and 2000. The selection includes 11 texts by five women authors from Québec that range in popularity from the most famous Québécois author of the 20th century (Anne Hébert) to a much lesser known writer who garnered most attention for her fantastical plays (Jovette Marchessault). Some are works and authors that were critically acclaimed, yet another is an author who has had considerable commercial success for her popular works of historical fiction (Marie Laberge). Some of the authors rely heavily on Québec and its history in their works, while others take a more global approach and place no emphasis on Québécois geographic or cultural specificity (Madeleine Monette). While all of the works studied here contain elements common to postmodern literature, they rely on these techniques to varying degrees. Finally, the selected authors vary both between each other and within each of their texts in terms of their political engagement and attention to social or gender politics.

This varied selection of works underscores even further the commonality of techniques used by these authors to produce alternative feminine biographies and write a more complete, and thus potentially more truthful, vision of the feminine historical experience into the historical discourse of Québec and beyond. As mentioned previously, there are several other texts that could have been appropriate in this work, such as *La Maison Trestler* or *Instruments des ténèbres*; however, they were not included in the present study for several reasons. First, it appeared that five chapters and almost a dozen texts adequately demonstrated the problematic of this work with a balance of variety and detail. Also, while the two texts cited above, for instance, do include examples of contemporary women providing alternative feminine biographies about women from the past, both feature narrative elements that set them apart sufficiently to justify not including them in the present study.<sup>15</sup>

While initially being possible to categorize as “(re)tellings of feminine (hi)stories,” the selected works did not immediately seem to be legitimate “biographies,” since some are entirely fictional with no real basis in fact. Yet, through the course of this analysis, it became apparent that one could consider all of the texts analyzed within this study to be biographies, regardless of whether they were based on historical figures or not. Although there may be no external, referential basis in “reality” for characters like Manon in *Le Double suspect* and Laure Angstelle in *Le Désert mauve*, they are presented as such within the fictional worlds created by Monette and Brossard. Because of the “*mise en abyme*” technique used in both works, the found texts (which I call

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<sup>15</sup> In the case of *La Maison Trestler*, it would be possible to include it. However, because the story begins not with an author intrigued by another woman, but rather an author intrigued by a house/building, it did complement the other texts sufficiently to warrant inclusion in the corpus of this study. In many ways, the home built by her father is what entices the main character to rewrite an alternative biography, rather than something experienced by the feminine figure. For Nancy Huston, as mentioned before, her status as an anglophone Canadian who writes in French and lives in Paris rendered her “un-Québécoise” enough in my mind to exclude her text.

“artifacts”—Manon’s journal and Laure Angstelle’s novel) and the women who wrote them must be considered “real” and “historical” in the context of the fictional world. Even though the process of (re)telling happens strictly in and with elements from the fictional world, the same process and techniques are in play as in the works discussed here that rely on “true” historical figures and facts about their lives. As a result, the terminology in both the title of this work and subsequent sections of the analysis use “alternative biographies” as well as “(re)telling” and “(hi)stories.”

Beginning with the most famous woman writer and the most famous of her texts, which both employ a *fait divers* as the basis of the (re)telling, we will discuss Anne Hébert’s *Kamouraska* (1970) and *Les Fous de Bassan* (1982) in chapter one. This first chapter discusses texts inspired by a *fait divers*, or minor historical event, which is used to reconstruct the incident and to create the text’s heterocosm, or alternative fictional world. While Hébert is not the only writer to rely on minor histories in fiction, she is the most well-known to do so in the Québécois context. Some literary scholars also argue that these texts are the most aligned with realistic historical fiction; however, we will see that this is not actually the case. Created with the use of a historically accurate “realeme,” Hébert’s heterocosms seem at first glance to be stable, recognizable alternative worlds common to modern works of fiction. However, despite using many of the foundational techniques of the “*roman policier*” (murder mystery) genre—which Brian McHale believes to be the modernist genre *par excellence*—such as reverse chronology and multiple perspectives, it is clear that the two texts discussed in this chapter break distinctly from convention and rely heavily on several postmodern literary and historiographical techniques, such as polyvocality, challenging of the historian’s/journalist’s role, etc. This break with convention results from the shifting of narrative focalization from the objective of traditional murder mysteries—to simply expose the killer—to a compulsion to hear the voices that such stories typically disregard: the victim, the

perpetrator, and the accomplice. In either case, there results a sort of constant oscillation between different eras, different voices, and different fictional worlds that greatly disrupts the stable, reliable heterocosm thought to be grounding the text and the story therein. With this instability comes the opportunity to create something new and to tell a different (hi)story that more fully explores the specificity of the feminine historical experience ignored by traditional historical discourse.

The texts analyzed in the second chapter also attempt to shift the focus of feminine (hi)stories from traditional discourse by employing techniques such as polyvocality and instability. These alternative biographies again take aim at normal historical practice and the discourse it generates by focusing on women whom History has not ignored, but who were nonetheless denied full, multi-dimensional representations. It examines certain authors' use of infamous legendary and/or mythical historical feminine figures, allowing for their personal literary reinterpretations to emerge. Indeed, we consider the works of three very different authors treating the histories of three very different women from very different times, cultures, and situations. However, all of our texts are theatrical works intended to be performed live, and more importantly, all shift the focus to non-standard aspects of the legendary woman's identity and experience. Marie Laberge offers a dramatic poem in *Pierre ou la Consolation* (1992) about Héloïse d'Argenteuil (the heroin of the famous Héloïse and Abélard romance) in her later years, long after her affair with and separation from Pierre Abélard. Along with many other works by English and French Canadian authors, Anne Hébert revisits a Canadian legend in *La Cage* (1990). Her alternative biography (re)tells the legend of la Corriveau, a French Canadian woman whose corpse was displayed in a cage as punishment by the English in the late 1700s for the alleged murder of her husband. In Hébert's version though, la Corriveau will never inhabit her cage, nor will her story be distorted by patriarchal historians.

And finally Jovette Marchessault's *Madame Blavatsky, spirite* (1998) offers an alternative vision of the life of a controversial figure, who some considered to be unworldly and other's just considered to be untrustworthy. Helena Petrovna Blavatsky was a nineteenth-century mystic who bucked tradition when she abandoned her husband in Russia, traveled the world, and eventually founded the Theosophical Society in America. In order to fully explore Madame Blavatsky's historical experience and her impact on those who loved and hated her, Marchessault relies on both the histories told by her detractors and her admirers instead of choosing a side.

Despite the subjects' diverse degrees of renown, many of the same processes and literary techniques are employed in their alternative biographies to arrive at the same outcome: a more, complete and potentially truthful version of the feminine (hi)story, which is possible only through the inclusion of fictional "invention" as well as historical "truths." In the process of becoming legends or myths, these women have all come to represent a flattened, one-dimensional version of their authentic historical selves that aligns with the identity chosen for them by traditional historical discourse and patriarchal institutions. Marie-Josephte Dodier, who became la Corriveau in Québécois literary history, is reduced to a murderer and witch; Héroïse is known as the quintessential self-sacrificing lover; and Madame Blavatsky plays the role of the mystic or the imposter, depending on which version of her legend one accepts. Paradoxically however, as a consequence of becoming legendary and/or mythical, and thus very famous, these three feminine figures lose their individual identities, in fact disappearing in a sense from History. Through the literary and biographical reinventions created, Laberge, Hébert, and Marchessault attempt to return and restore to these legendary figures their personal identities that History has effaced. Their alternative biographies offer fuller, more truthful versions of these legendary feminine figures.

The third chapter explores other alternative biographies written for the stage, but here the focus is on women who the author feels *should be* legendary or mythical, rather than ones who already are. In this section, we will discuss three theatrical works by Jovette Marchessault, who is by far the most militant of the writers in this study regarding her political engagement. Marchessault offers alternative biographies for some women writers who, she suggests, have been undervalued both while they were alive and after their deaths (when compared with their male counterparts). She uses theatrical representations to reclaim their legacies and take back public space so that their (hi)stories can be heard in historical/fictional/mythical (re)tellings performed by a community of women. Through her plays and because of the historical subjects chosen, we begin to see the importance that the process of (re)telling has on the whole of feminine identity through the examination of the specific experiences of this particular group of subjugated women, a group that was targeted specifically because of their ability to effect change through their writing. While Marchessault has created alternative biographies for several women authors in both novels and plays,<sup>16</sup> *Alice & Gertrude*, *Natalie & Renée, et ce cher Ernest* (1984), *Anaïs dans la queue de la comète* (1985), and *La Saga des poules mouillées* (1989) are especially representative of her way of addressing this issue. It is most particularly in these three plays that Marchessault shows the degree to which feminine literary creation subverts patriarchal institutions, which she calls the “syndicat du crime” (Smith, 54). Relying on a combination of historically accurate details and fictional and fantastical elements, Marchessault demonstrates how much literary women from the past contributed to the political project of feminism by ending the isolation, imprisonment, and violence committed against their literal and figurative mothers, daughters, and sisters by agents of

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<sup>16</sup> Marchessault wrote alternative biographies about anglophone Canadian painter, Emily Carr, in the three-act play written in French titled *Le Voyage Magnifique d'Emily Carr* (1992) and another about French writer Violette Leduc in *La Terre est trop courte, Violette Leduc* (1982).

the “syndicat du crime.” She, too, continues to contribute to this project with her own alternative biographies for the stage because “il nous faut [les femmes], nous aussi, un lieu où nous pourrions nous imaginer sans perte” (Marchessault “Il m’est encore impossible de chanter, mais j’écris” 208).

The fourth chapter marks a major shift in our corpus, as we take a step away from referential historical subjects and focus more on the process of creating an alternative biography in a world where fictional and referential biographies meet. Indeed, in Anne Hébert’s *Le Premier Jardin* (2000) an aging Québécois actress returns home to play a role and also to confront her past(s). Flora Fontanges explores the streets of Québec as well as the (hi)stories of forgotten historical women who were largely responsible for the city’s foundation. While imagining the experiences of nuns, “*les filles du Roi*,” maids, and her own life, Flora begins to break down the mythical view of Québécois women that has long been the mainstay of traditional historical discourse and literature. In fact, the women whom Flora “reanimates” through her quest have been anonymized and reduced to the role they played, rather than recognized for the people they were, much in the same way that legendary women like la Corriveau, Héloïse, or Madame Blavatsky have been stripped of their individual identities through the process of becoming legendary.

Nevertheless, while the stories of these women are certainly important *per se*, the primary function of the alternative biographies in *Le Premier Jardin* serves to expose *how* one is created and *why* they are needed for women in the present. Rather than just “*sœur*,” “*fille*,” “*femme*,” or “*mère*,” individuals from the archetypal groups of Québécois women regain their individual identities and histories through a creative, contemporary feminine figure struggling with her own pasts. As an actress, Flora simultaneously gives voice to others, but is deprived of her own authentic identity. Only through the process of telling another’s (or hundreds of others’) feminine



experiences from both the historical and literary past can Flora eventually confront and accept her own personal history in order to survive in the present. Throughout the novel, readers learn that Flora began her life as an unnamed orphan abandoned by an anonymous mother. She was first given the name Pierrette Paul by the nuns who cared for her at the orphanage, but would later be renamed Marie Eventurel by her adoptive family. Not until Flora was 18 and rejected her bourgeois family's plans for her would she finally choose her own identity and her own name. Her continued struggle with her past selves throughout the novel reflects the negative effect in the present that ignoring women in the past continues to have on contemporary Québécois women. Flora's exploration of global feminine (hi)stories from Québec's past in *Le Premier Jardin* allows her to finally confront her own personal, individual past and, at least attempt, to construct a full, complete alternative (auto)biography for a less tortured present. By including fictional and historical elements and a demonstration of the process by which they allow for the creation of a new historical space, Hébert shows how a more complete version of the feminine historical experience can be integrated into traditional historical discourse to benefit the women of Québec's past, present, and future.

Further elucidating and focuses on the process by which the other (woman)'s (hi)story is (re)told, the final chapter analyzes the two works in this study that rely the least (i.e. not at all) on referential information or grand historical narratives. In these two postmodern novels, fictional women find historical "artifacts" left behind by other fictional women and are then compelled to write/translate their own versions. *Le Double suspect* by Madeleine Monette (1988) and *Le Désert mauve* (1987) by Nicole Brossard do not utilize any historical referential individuals or events as

foundational elements,<sup>17</sup> nor do they feature Québec in a prominent role. In fact, the province is barely mentioned or considered in either text. Despite this major disconnect from the other works discussed in this study, these novels utilize many of the same postmodern techniques to challenge established institutions and the treatment of feminine (hi)stories, albeit from within entirely fictional heterocosms. Liberated from the past and the painful legacy of literary ideology related to the creation of a Québécois national text, Brossard and Monette focus on other things, other struggles, rather than the need to correct the historical record to include the feminine experience. In providing alternative biographies for two fictional women writers and the characters they created, Monette and Brossard continue working towards a more ample, “truthful” representation of the human and feminine experience, instead of the particular Québécois feminine experience alone.

In departing from referential figures and events, the final chapter instead focuses more fully on the writing process and its importance in exposing, promoting, and respecting the (hi)stories of those whom official History has marginalized. Unlike chapter three where (re)telling the *life* of women writers was the primary goal, in this chapter the *act* of writing as performed by women is as much the subject matter as the (hi)stories being written. Here, more so than in the previous chapters, fundamental elements of postmodern literature become more and more striking. These elements include an increased importance placed on how the text appears on the page, the use of images, the appearance of a more destabilizing recursive structure, etc. Despite this significant shift inherent in examining two entirely fictional texts that are devoid of any historically referential elements, it becomes apparent that *Le Désert mauve* and *Le Double suspect* share many of the

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<sup>17</sup> Except for the ambiguous inclusion of a character who some critics hypothesize resembles J. Robert Oppenheimer in *Le Désert mauve*, neither this text nor *Le Double suspect*, include any minor or major historical events as the basis for their (re)tellings.

same qualities with the rest of the texts discussed in this corpus through the use of “artifacts,” or historical materials that exist only within the fictional heterocosms created by Brossard and Monette. These “artifacts” serve as the historical basis (within the fictional heterocosm), much as works of traditional historical discourse are the basis for (re)telling the referential (hi)stories of historical women like Héloïse or Madame Blavatsky, and they give Brossard and Monette the chance to (re)tell the other’s feminine (hi)story more fully.

While the authors and texts described above do not comprise a comprehensive selection of all the instances in which Québécois women authors provide alternative biographies for feminine figures, they provide ample material for analysis and variety to prove the prevalence of this tendency in the late 20th century. As such, they constitute a relevant and appropriate sample to help produce a survey of the historical and literary landscape through detailed analyses of how selected women writers attempt to right/write (hi)story and open the possibility for a more complete, truthful vision of the feminine historical experience in Québec and beyond.

## Chapter One

### Reexamining the Historical “*Fait divers*” in Two Novels by Anne Hébert

#### Introduction

It is almost impossible to study Québécois literature, contemporary or otherwise, without being introduced to Anne Hébert. One of Québec’s most prolific writers, Hébert’s career spanned over fifty years and several genres. Poetry, novels, plays, film scripts: Anne Hébert has done it all. Although the varied nature of her œuvre makes it difficult to categorize or classify this commercially and critically popular author, her importance and influence in Québec’s literary history and future is uncontested. It is also difficult if not impossible to define her work as strictly realist or fantastic, and the degree to which her texts contribute to political or cultural debate is also fluid. Although her texts “ne s’insèrent véritablement dans aucun grand courant littéraire, [...] ils participent tous, par un biais ou par un autre, à ces divers mouvements. Il s’agit donc d’une écriture qui résiste par sa pluralité aux étiquettes critiques et aux interprétations univoques” (Paterson *Anne Hébert: Architexture romanesque* 13). In fact, most commentators seem to agree that what distinguishes Anne Hébert from her contemporaries in Québécois literature is exactly this impossibility of classification, the singularity of her work, and the solitude in which she created it. She remains in a position of “in-between,” according to Michel Biron because

elle n’a rien de l’écrivain marginal, mais elle écrit de façon solitaire, sans chercher à s’intégrer au milieu littéraire—ni à le fuir du reste. Elle s’impose par son œuvre seule, non par des interventions sur la place publique. (Biron et al. 310)

Perhaps it is exactly this combination of participation and isolation, clarity and obscurity that intrigues her readers, makes Anne Hébert one of the most important writers in Québec's literary history, and uniquely positions her to reexamine specific moments in the province's past.

Hébert often seems preoccupied with the constraints placed on the Québécois by institutional forces such as the Catholic church (whose beliefs could certainly be described as Jansenist), by the English-run federal government, and by the traditional family structure. In other words, Hébert's Québec seems dominated by a violent patriarchy that has negative implications for the society as a whole. Publishing her first collection of poems, *Les Songes en équilibre*, in 1942, Hébert was not immediately recognized as important to the changing tides in Québec's literary or political scene. At a moment when rupture from traditional norms and structures of literary creation were paramount,<sup>1</sup> Anne Hébert's style was relatively conventional. It was not until the 1950 publication of *Le Torrent*, a collection of short stories, that Hébert truly exposed her innovative and unique perspective. The sixty-page novella that gives the collection its title rocked the literary scene in Québec, so much so that Hébert had to fund the project personally in order for it to be published due to its extreme violence (Biron et al. 312). In the eyes of the critics, the collection's namesake, "Le Torrent," a brutal short story that had been inspired by an actual "*fait divers*,"<sup>2</sup> had "parfaitement cristallisé [...] la condition historique de leur peuple [qui était] encore aliéné, prisonnier de chaînes psychologiques, socio-politiques et économiques [...]" (Bishop 131).

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<sup>1</sup> In 1945, Gabrielle Roy published *Bonheur d'occasion*, offering an image of urban life and all its difficulties. In 1948, Paul-Emile Borduas and other "*automatiste*" artists expressed their dissent by publishing an anti-religious, anti-establishment manifesto entitled *Refus global*.

<sup>2</sup> Unlike the other "*fait divers*" Hébert uses in her œuvre, the one that inspires "Le Torrent" has virtually disappeared from official historical discourse. In a 1963 interview with the women's magazine *La Châtelaine*, Hébert explains how she heard of the story: "J'avais lu dans les journaux [...] que dans la Beauce un étudiant au Grand Séminaire avait tué sa mère. L'affaire avait été rapidement enterrée, il n'y avait pas eu de procès. J'ai été attirée par ce drame, parce que c'était resté inachevé. Je me suis demandée pourquoi c'était arrivé et j'ai pensé que ç'avait dû être une vocation forcée. Je connaissais le torrent, j'ai imaginé une maison à côté" (76).

From this early work, the reader becomes aware of two fundamental tendencies in Anne Hébert's œuvre: the importance of Québec's political and cultural history through the subtly critical eye cast upon them by the author and the frequent use of "*fait divers*" as a means to revisit, reexamine, and reinvent the past.

Although she does illustrate to a certain degree how societal norms can be problematic for men,<sup>3</sup> Hébert focuses her attention primarily on women and how society and History ignore their role in Québec's past, present, and future. Consequently, the reader finds in Hébert's œuvre several female main characters whose voices or stories have been stifled, ignored, or forgotten. In many instances, these female characters are not purely inventions of Hébert's imagination, but are in fact actual women from history. Needless to say there is a bold mix of History and fiction, yet the inclusion of actual historical information must be considered, for these stories not only fill in the historical "gaps" that result from a woman's story being forgotten, but they also tear down and reconstruct the accepted image created by History, or in other words by the patriarchal society. Actual historical events from Québec's past seem to allow Hébert to reference and criticize fundamental elements of Québécois identity through an examination of the province's history, as well as the past's implications on the present and future.

Despite this interest in real historical events, Hébert tends to avoid using well-known historical figures and rejects using the commercially popular structure of the historical novel. In keeping with the recurrent themes of her œuvre, Anne Hébert seems to prefer historically-inspired subjects that are violent, somewhat marginal, and fueled by a passion both for and against death that seems impossible. Thus without question the "*fait divers*" inspires Anne Hébert's œuvre more than any other sort of actual historical information.

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<sup>3</sup> See for example "Le Torrent" and *Enfant chargé de songes*.

Thematic implications can certainly explain Anne Hébert's penchant for employing actual *faits divers* as foundation for her novels, but why not more contemporary *faits divers*? Why only *faits divers* from Québec?<sup>4</sup> Both implicitly with her texts and explicitly in interviews, Anne Hébert asserts the important, if not supreme role, Québec's history and landscape play in her œuvre. Despite spending much of her adult life in Paris, Hébert stresses the omnipresence of Québec in her work: "[...] je n'écris pas sur ce que je vois autour de moi. J'écris sur ce que j'ai en moi. **Le Québec est en moi profondément.** Il est tricoté avec moi. Il fait partie de ma vie" (Gauvin 226, emphasis in original). From this quote, it becomes apparent that not only is Québec important to Hébert's writing, but that it is in fact *part* of her, composing the fabric of her existential, identitary, and literary being. The relationship she has with her province as a child —specifically its landscape—resonates loudly in all of Hébert's texts regardless of the geographic setting. In fact, Hébert appropriates the "*terre québécoise*" for herself:

Québec, Sainte-Catherine, Kamouraska, Sainte-Luce, lac Édouard, Berthier, Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, Cap à l'aigle, Percé, Port Daniel, Pont-Rouge, Montréal. Mes noms de pays. Mes pays vivants. Mes lieux de naissance et d'enfance. Mes adolescences. Mes arbres. Mes chambres. Mes voyages. Mes frères et sœurs. Mes parents. Mes rues. Mes amis. Mes routes. Ma rivière. Mon torrent. ("Les étés de Kamouraska... et les hivers de Québec" vii)

In *Les Fous de Bassan* and *Kamouraska*, she offers readers minor histories originating in Québec, but with a fictional revision that allows her to appropriate them just as she has done with

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<sup>4</sup> Although Hébert's text shows an Anglophone village encompassing "tous [ses] souvenirs de rive sud et de rive nord du Saint-Laurent [...] ont été fondus et livrés à l'imaginaire, pour ne faire qu'une seule terre, appelée Griffin Creek," the real historical murders of Maud and Margeurite Ascah that inspired *Les Fous de Bassan* did in fact take place in Penouille in the Gaspé region of Québec (*Les Fous de Bassan* 9).

the province's landscape. Through the use of several postmodern literary and historiographical techniques such as intertextuality, plurivocality, and the use of marginalized voices, Anne Hébert offers readers an alternative (re)telling that attempts to be more inclusive, more profound, and ultimately more real despite the inclusion of fictional elements.

### **Historical *faits divers***

Despite claims to the contrary (in the case of *Les Fous de Bassan*) and changes made to the names of those involved, both of Anne Hébert's most famous novels were largely inspired by actual *faits divers*. Both investigations received significant news coverage, and were widely discussed as the evidence surfaced—symbolically and literally in the case of “L’Affaire Ascah.” *Les Fous de Bassan*'s “Avis au lecteur” has given pause to many of Hébert's critics. Many believe her claim that she has invented both the setting and action of events, however minimal research proves the contrary. On August 31, 1933, in the small coastal gaspésien town of Peninsula, or Penouille, two young cousins went missing. This scenic village had a considerable English population, ancestors of Loyalists who had fled the United States in the 18th century, refusing to fight against the British. Eighteen-year old Marguerite and 15-year old Maud Ascah were “l'orgueil du village” (Proulx 20), and when they disappeared on the final night of summer vacation, the entire community immediately set out looking for them. Initially suspecting that the cousins ran away, villagers were horrified to learn that on October 21, 1933, a local fisherman discovered a human foot coughed up by the sea. The foot appeared to be that of a young girl, and was quickly determined to have belonged to Maud Ascah (Proulx 20).

Unlike in Hébert's tale, the community as well as law enforcement believed that bootleggers might be to blame for the crime, as they often loaded and unloaded their wares



clandestinely on the shore and also because both girls' parents worked for the Service préventif fédéral that assisted police in their attempts to protect the coast from such crimes. Eventually this theory was debunked, and officials refocused their attention on an individual seen with the girls on the night of their disappearance: their 19-year old cousin, Nelson Philips. After two weeks in custody, Philips confessed that he had been with the girls on the shore, lost consciousness, and eventually awoke to find their dead bodies at his feet. He admitted to then having tied weights to their bodies and dumping them into the sea. He gave no explanation as to why he committed these crimes.

During the trial against Philips, witnesses' accounts proved helpful for the prosecution. The girls had last been seen alive at approximately 9:30 PM, when they left their aunt Flo Peters' house to join Philips and his friend James Miller outside by the road. Miller returned home, leaving the cousins together. The Philips' family maid reported having heard Nelson return home around 10:45 PM alone. Although this information sets up a probable chronology and puts Philips in the right place at the right time to have committed the murders, he himself provided the most damning evidence by confessing to the crime. Ironically, however, ultimately this confession was what kept Nelson Philips from spending his life in prison. Three months after he was found guilty, Philips' defense team successfully appealed the inclusion of his confession based on some questionable police tactics.<sup>5</sup> Nelson Philips would forever be a free man.

The similarities between l'Affaire Ascah and the narrative in Hébert's *Les Fous de Bassan* are not only striking, they are undeniable. In fact, it seems that Hébert omits and adds very little to the general framework of the story, and instead focuses on what official historical discourse,

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<sup>5</sup> A retired private detective, rather than an official investigator, elicited the confession after having offered Philips brandy (which he refused) and kicking him in the foot because "il voulait se lever et ce n'était pas le temps" (Proulx 22).

criminal investigations, and newspaper articles cannot provide: the individual (hi)stories, motivations, or futures of those involved. Why then does she deny any connection with the actual “*fait divers*”? Aurélien Boivin assumes that inadvertently, Hébert must have been so impressed by the tragedy in 1933 that despite forgetting its occurrence, she was still able to subconsciously access memories of the 60-year old event in order to create her novel (107). André Brochu hopes that “Anne Hébert ait imaginé de toutes pièces une histoire réellement arrivée, de même manière qu’un héros de Borges s’appliquait à inventer avec une rigoureuse logique des pages *réelles* de Cervantes” (54-55). In fact, many critics disregard the referentiality of the story altogether and discuss the plot, the setting, and the characters as though they are indeed entirely fictional creations.<sup>6</sup> This is not to say that such a reading is without merit, however the fiction’s similarity to the actual event is so striking it seems impossible to make no mention of it.

Hébert’s version of her distant relative, Louis-Pascal-Achille Taché’s murder, just as her reinvention of “*l’Affaire Ascah*,” follows the chain of events relatively closely while injecting her own fictional, creative interpretations. However, unlike in *Les Fous de Bassan*, she never denies *Kamouraska*’s basis in reality or its historical inspiration. As it occurred nearly 80 years before her own birth, we can assume that Hébert learned, at least initially, of the murder through oral accounts told by her mother or her mother’s family.

Born on August 30, 1816, Joséphine-Eléonore d’Estimauville would lose her father at age seven. She grew up in Québec with her aunts and grandmother, while her mother lived in Sorel. At the age of 18, Joséphine-Eléonore married Louis-Pascal-Achille Taché, partial owner of the seigneurie of Kamouraska, where the couple moved immediately after their wedding. Sadly,

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Claudine Fisher’s “Féminité et folie dans *Les Fous de Bassan* d’Anne Hébert,” Marie-Linda Lord’s “*Les Fous de Bassan* d’Anne Hébert,” or Patricia Louette’s “Les voix/voies du désir dans *Les Fous de Bassan* d’Anne Hébert.”

matrimonial bliss did not last long, and Joséphine-Eléonore began to complain about her husband's drinking problem, his long absences, and even threats of bodily harm he had made against her. In December of 1837, she took refuge with her mother in Sorel, but Louis-Pascal-Achille followed her in an attempt to convince her to come home. His pleas were unsuccessful, and he soon returned to Kamouraska alone.

Joséphine-Eléonore most likely declined her husband's offer because she had already begun an extramarital affair with her family doctor, George Holmes. In the autumn of 1838, Holmes made several unsuccessful attempts to send someone to poison Taché with arsenic. Eventually Holmes and d'Estimauville asked Aurélie Prévost, a maid who was aware of the affair, to travel to Kamouraska under an assumed name and get Louis-Pascal-Achille to drink the poison. This time, the lovers were successful in their attempts, but unfortunately for them Louis-Pascal-Achille did not die! Finally Holmes traveled to Kamouraska himself, shooting two bullets into his rival's head and burying the body in the snow where it was discovered only three days later.

Investigations and trials ensued. Joséphine-Eléonore was taken into custody, where she continually expressed her innocence. A jury believed her despite Aurélie's testimony to the contrary, and on September 21, 1841, after only one day of trial, Joséphine-Eléonore was acquitted. On May 18, 1843, she remarried the notary, Léon-Charles Clément, with whom she had six children. George Holmes fled to the United States where he was captured and imprisoned for several months before being released. After this, all traces of him disappear.

As with "*l'Affaire Ascah*" and *Les Fous de Bassan*, Hébert changes few of the fundamental elements of this story drastically. One interesting change has been made in her version of Louis-Pascal-Achille; no longer just a drunk he is also an adulterer. The revisions come in form and style rather than in content, as again Hébert offers the readers what History cannot: a window into the

mind, body, and soul of those involved. In her renditions of both *faits divers*, solving the crime becomes secondary to telling the story—the past and the future—surrounding it. Who better, she seems to ask, to tell the story than those who experienced it, those who survived it?

### **Surviving the “*fait divers*”**

According to Roland Barthes’ seminal essay “Structure du fait divers,”

c’est son immanence qui définit le fait divers [parce qu’au] niveau de la lecture, tout est donné dans un fait divers; ses circonstances, ses causes, son passé, son issue; sans durée et sans contexte, il constitue un être immédiat, total, qui ne renvoie, du moins formellement, à rien d’implicite ; c’est en cela qu’il s’apparente à la nouvelle et au conte, et non plus au roman. (189)

Anne Hébert would certainly disagree on many levels, because in both *Kamouraska* and *Les Fous de Bassan*, the reader finds most important for their comprehension the past and future of the characters, rather than the “present” or the “immediate” moment of the actual crime. In Hébert’s revision of these two *faits divers*, the actual crime and subsequent investigations must relinquish the spotlight to those who “survive” the crime, whatever that survival entails. In other words, the essence of the “*fait divers*” is no longer the immediate, but instead its past and future.

The ability to physically “outlive” forms the primary basis to define being a “survivor,” however continuing to exist corporeally does not necessarily connote mental or emotional survival. In fact, much of Sigmund Freud’s work with “survivors” of war illustrates the opposite: the traumatic event that the survivor “survived” has besieged his/her psyche, forcing the event to be

repeated both in dreams and in reality (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*). Cathy Caruth terms the repetition, the revisiting of the original trauma a “double wound” as it is

not [only] locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on. (3-4, emphasis in original)

“Survivor,” then, is a problematic term, one that does not entirely, sufficiently, or accurately describe the individual it defines. In other words, one can certainly be a “survivor” without fully “surviving” the traumatic event.

Anne Hébert’s survivors fit this description, albeit with some significant adjustments. Hébert’s survivors too pay a high price for that status, constantly confronting the painful, even fatal qualities of their own memories. However, unlike the traditional survivor studied by Freud, in the hébertien world physical survival is not the sole determinant in gaining this status. Technically dead, characters may still face the merciless repetition of their original trauma. Interestingly, only female characters continue to “survive” beyond their physical death. The goal of this seemingly sadistic distortion of the “survivor” is not, however, to punish the character or to prolong her torment. Instead it is a means to empower the female character, to prove that she alone can survive even in death.

Despite only “surviving” while still in the physical realm, *Kamouraska*’s main character must confront both the seen and “unseen” events of her trauma in another *locus communis* of trauma repetition: the dream. Élisabeth Rolland oscillates oneirically between her present self and her past selves, with the memories progressing towards the traumatic event of her lifetime: her

first husband Antoine's murder at the hands of her lover, Georges. Helpless against her own experience and the imagined memories of others, Élisabeth fears

[l]e temps. Ce temps-là. Un certain temps de ma vie, réintégré, comme une coquille vide. S'est refermé à nouveau sur moi. Un petit claquement sec d'huître. [...] Je respire un air raréfié, déjà respiré. Je mets mes pas dans mes pas. Mme Rolland n'existe plus. (98)

Preferring to continue her "role" as Mme Rolland, Élisabeth is terrified of allowing her past to creep into her present, since the consequences are so grave:

Empêcher à tout prix que l'ordre du monde soit perturbé à nouveau. Que je fasse défaut un seul instant et tout redevient possible. La folie renaîtra de ses cendres et je lui serai à nouveau livrée, pieds et poings liés, fagot bon pour le feu éternel. (18)

According to Cathy Caruth, Élisabeth finds herself trapped in the "*crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*," as she attempts to tell both the story of the death and the story of her survival of it (7). Although "*une coquille d'huître*" may not appear strong, this empty shell holds Élisabeth's present captive, forcing her to revisit and relive her past.

*Les Fous de Bassan* features a survivor who maintains this status after her physical death. Even more disconnected with terrestrial reality than Élisabeth's dreams, Olivia's chapter, written "sans date" after her rape and murder, illustrates just as powerfully the difficult task of repeating or revisiting the original trauma, albeit in a fantastical way. Communicating her presence through the sea breeze and ocean tides, spirit Olivia finds herself on the shore of Griffin Creek where her physical existence was extinguished. As Élisabeth's dreams commanded her to grapple with

Antoine's death and Georges' exile, so too must Olivia revisit the life-altering, life-ending events of the summer of 1936.

Transparente et sans épaisseur, ayant franchi la passe de la mort, désormais dépendante des vents et des marées, je reste là sur la grève comme quelqu'un de vivant qui attend un train [...] C'est mon histoire qui m'attend là-haut avec mon père et mes frères, ma maison de planches et sa galerie couverte. Il suffirait de réintégrer mon nom comme une coquille vide. (210)

Another "coquille vide" forcing the character to repeat emotionally and mentally the trauma which, in this case, ended her life. For Élisabeth and Olivia, surviving their traumas means reliving them before they may rewrite them. Focusing on the "survivors," as well as their pasts and futures, the *fait divers* must finally yield to "[ces] voix du passé, [...] les voix des morts qui remontent du fond de l'eau, [...] du fond de la mémoire, [...] qui exigent qu'on leur fasse place au grand jour et dans la langue" (Leclerc 193).

### **Social importance of "*fait divers*"**

According to Dominique Jullien, "'*faits divers*' are stories about little people made big by publicity or the press" (66). The study of *faits divers* has steadily gained popularity and respect since Barthes' 1962 essay, most notably with the critical success of *La Ronde et autres faits divers* by 2008 Nobel Prize winner in Literature, French author J.M.G. Le Clézio. No longer seen as just stories "de peu d'importance, banals ou extraordinaires," scholars recognize the cultural, historical, and sociological implications of "*faits divers* (Lecerf 10). For sociologist Michel Maffesoli, one must be cognizant of the double nature of the "*fait divers*," for it is both an event broadcast by the

media and one that emanates from a specific, recorded time and place (91). Consequently, the “*fait divers*” “devient commentaire d’un petit groupe, occasion de parole commune [...] un des fils qui permettent aux personnes de se rencontrer, de communier” (90-91). According to Maffesoli, the “*fait divers*” accomplishes this admittedly impressive task by favoring the collective over the individual, or even *through* the individual (90).

Anne Hébert would certainly subscribe to some of Maffesoli’s view, specifically “*fait divers*’” ability to tell the story of an entire community despite its historical ambiguity, but she seems to question whether or not the individual need be minimized, if not entirely expunged in order to do so. Must we lock away the individual voice for the collective history to be heard? Are personal histories and communal Histories mutually exclusive in “*fait divers*”?

Upon initial review, it seems so in *Les Fous de Bassan* and *Kamouraska*, as all three main characters’ are unable to speak, to liberate their voices that have been captured by husbands, fathers, brothers, or lovers. Paradoxically, however, Anne Hébert imprisons her main characters in their own past (selves) and (mis)representations of their voices precisely in order to *liberate* their inner “*voix captives*,” which the patriarchal society had previously silenced. In fact, Hébert’s characters reverse the process proposed by Maffesoli: only by listening to, battling against, and finally winning over the collective representation of the “*fait divers*” can the main characters recognize their individual identities. Rather than profiting from an individual’s aberrant personal history to “fond[er] la communauté, assur[er] la ‘reliance’ d’un groupe,” as in Maffesoli’s analysis, the communal voice is employed, even exploited to ultimately allow the individual’s voice to resurface (92).

Initially unable to tell her own story in her own voice—or even in her own language—Élisabeth relies on others rather than the Other (herself). Illustrating Élisabeth’s inability to face



the trauma of Antoine's death and her role in it, the reader first learns of the crime with an announcement "par les maîtres de ce pays":

At her majesty's court of kings' bench the iurors (*sic*) for our Lady the Queen upon their oath present that Élisabeth Eléonore d'Aulnières late of the parish of Kamouraska, in the country of Kamouraska in the district of Quebec, wife of one Antoine Tassey, on the fourth day of january in the second year of reign of our sovereign Lady Victoria, [...] willfully, maliciously and unlawfully, did mix deadly poison, towit one ounce of white arsenic with brandy [...] did administer to and cause the same to be taken by Antoine Tassey [...] with intent in so doing feloniously, willfully and of her malice aforethought to poison, kill and murder the said Antoine Tassey [...]. (32)

Even in her dreams, which she can ostensibly control, Élisabeth's perception of self, her identity, and her narrative are at the mercy of those around her. She can only see herself as others see her, she can only speak of herself in their tongue. Her voice is indeed held captive to the society's collective control over her identity and over her voice.

For most of *Les Fous de Bassan*, Olivia and Nora's voices seem silenced. Like Élisabeth, the cousins are trapped by the roles the patriarchal society has designed for them. Nora seems destined to excite dangerous sexual feelings in any man she meets, whether they be members of her own family or not. Nicolas Jones describes her as "la petite qui se dandine devant nous, ses cheveux brun-rouge ébouriffés, sa robe verte retroussée par le vent, découvrant ses genoux, collant à ses cuisses" (41), while for Stevens she appears to be "une bête lustrée" (73). However, until her own chapter, Nora's voice is rarely heard. Instead the reader learns not what Nora *thinks*, but rather what the male narrators *assume* she thinks. Nicolas imagines that Nora loves his voice, not because

he speaks the word of God, but because the sound of it is “basse et virile, fluide comme de la fumée” (30). Stevens imagines Nora’s desire to kiss him, since she seems to take pleasure in placing her lips upon his harmonica immediately after he uses it. He even goes as far as imagining Nora making explicit sexual advances towards him: “Toi, mon cousin Stevens, je te goûte, ta musique, ta salive et tes lèvres et tu me goûteras aussi, moi, Nora Atkins, ta cousine” (74). Through these imagined desires, Nicolas and Stevens are essentially reducing Nora’s entire identity to her burgeoning sexuality. Disregarding any other explanation for her actions, Nora becomes the archetypal prostitute, a sort of Mary Magdelene to Olivia’s Virgin Mary. Her own voice becomes imprisoned in this perception, thus indicating that “c’est par [elle] que le péché est entré à Griffin Creek” (129).

In Nicolas and Stevens’ chapters, Olivia too undergoes this sort of transformation based on the identity they perceive for her. However, instead of a “bête lustrée,” Olivia adheres to the more traditional role of mother and domestic caretaker. Her perceived purity appears to Nicolas Jones as he delivers a sermon to the residents of Griffin Creek:

Le Cantique des cantiques saisit le cœur sage, silencieux d’Olivia Atkins, y débusque des mots qui n’auraient jamais dû sortir de la nuit sage et silencieuse d’Olivia Atkins. Ses yeux violets. Elle lève la tête vers moi. Son beau visage. *Un seul cheveu de ta nuque*, pense-t-elle, tournée vers moi, sans me voir, tout illuminée de l’intérieur par une lampe claire. (28)

What seems to distinguish Olivia for Stevens is the combination of fear and attraction he senses in her behavior towards him. The fact that Olivia poses more of a challenge, both because of her resistance to him and the “vague bruit de chaînes remuées à chacun de ses gestes” because of her four male guardians, makes Stevens “désire plus que tout au monde épuiser [son] pouvoir d’un

coup et devenir, sans retour, un homme nouveau qui prend ses cliques et ses claques et disparaît à l’horizon” (80). Thus, Olivia’s imprisonment results not only from male perceptions of her identity and a stifling of her voice—as is the case for Nora and Élisabeth in *Kamouraska*—it also stems from her role as homemaker, sole female in a home of four men.

Women unable to choose their own destinies, to make their own decisions, or to even know themselves because of the constraints placed on them by their society: we have seen this many times before in québécois literature. Maria Chapdelaine in the work of the same name, Florentine in Gabrielle Roys’ *Bonheur d’occasion*, Angéline de Montbrun in the first québécois novel written by a woman—Hébert exposes anew the impossible position of québécois women, both in society, in History, and in literature. Abbé Casgrain’s “national text,” specifying that any and all works should be considered important “building blocks to the patriotic edifice” (Robert qtd. in Green *Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebec National Text* 182), causes québécois women in fiction to be “distinguished by the fact that nothing happens to them, or so little, or so badly” that they are essentially imprisoned in their inability to act or to speak. Although initially confined, Hébert’s characters ultimately survive and liberate their “*voix captives*” and use them to rewrite the national text.

### **Bearing witness to the “*fait divers*”**

In both the “*fait divers*” and Anne Hébert’s œuvre, the “witness” plays an invaluable, if not an essential role. Although rarely given proper credit explicitly, without witnesses, there would be no “*fait divers*” for journalists to “fabricate” (Boorstin 14). Scattered throughout “*fait divers*,” witnesses and witness statements appear without much fanfare: neighbors who saw a domestic dispute of a couple living nextdoor, a customer at a café who witnessed a purse being snatched—

witnesses and testimony are central to the “*fait divers*.” In literature, Jacques Derrida points to the importance of testimony, as well as its inextricable link to fiction:

[...] there is no testimony that does not at least structurally imply in itself the possibility of fiction, simulacra, dissimulation, lie, and perjury—that is to say, the possibility of literature [...]. If this possibility that it seems to prohibit were effectively excluded, if testimony thereby became proof, information, certainty, or archive, it would lose its function as testimony. In order to remain testimony, it must therefore allow itself to be haunted. (*Demeure* 29-30)

For Anne Hébert, “*témoigner*” seems both an inherently artistic and québécois activity, as her œuvre aims to both “faire parler les voix captives” and attest to the urgency of the act of speaking for a “pays sans parole” (Préfontaine).<sup>7</sup> In *Kamouraska* and *Les Fous de Bassan*, testimony assumes multiple functions, the more obvious and literal of which comes in the form of witness statements about Antoine’s murder and the night of August 31, 1936 when Nora and Olivia go missing. In and out of consciousness, Élisabeth revisits all of the witness statements that have affected her story. First, the trial testimonies of her aunts, who declare that “cette dame de qualité, élevée par [leurs] soins, dans la pratique des bonnes manières et la fréquentation des sacrements, ne peut en aucune sorte être complice du meurtre de son mari” (45), and who ultimately win her legal pardon. Élisabeth also hears again testimony from the villagers whom her lover met while

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<sup>7</sup> According to Andrea Moorhead, Yves Préfontaine’s 1967 collection of poetry entitled *Pays sans parole* “Pays sans parole is a visionary work divided into nine sections which simultaneously chart the development of a national consciousness and the development of a poetic vision that should lead to spiritual enlightenment” (895). Préfontaine’s work contributed to the work of the québécois poetic community during the Quiet Revolution that was collectively working “to break an oppressive silence, to identify a sense of malaise, to expose the elements in the traditional that allowed political corruption to flourish while, in the name of a world-denying spirituality, the majority were rendered powerless by their alienation from the physical world, the material conditions, the sensual and emotional roots of their lives” (Jones 7).

traveling to Kamouraska to kill Antoine. Surprisingly since their statements ultimately end her affair and any contact with Nelson, Élisabeth welcomes them, even implores the witnesses to share what they experienced:

Bientôt, d'ailleurs, je serai hors de la portée de Jérôme Rolland [...] Sortie de ma maison. Mêlée aux témoins. (Dites ce que vous savez) [...] Aubergistes, hommes et femmes, filles engagées, domestiques et garçons d'écurie, pêcheurs, paysans, tous, tous, me parlent à l'oreille. Jurent de m'entraîner avec eux. De me jeter sur la route glacée. À la poursuite d'un voyageur dont moi seule pourrais révéler l'identité. (204)

Élisabeth laments that she is “non pas témoin, mais voyante et complice” (207), for she fears she will never be able to “possess” this element of her history, that it will remain inescapably foreign to her. Protected, but imprisoned by the “témoignage de ses apparentées de sang,” Élisabeth seeks liberation from her past, from her identity as the “bonne innocente” in these testimonies filled with blood, Antoine’s blood (Bishop 265).

Elements of the novels’ structure also attest to the importance of bearing witness in “*fait divers*” and in Hébert’s œuvre: polyphonic narrative. In music, polyphony refers to the combination of two or more independent melodic voices. These voices stand equally in the work, contrasting with the traditional monophony (one musical voice) or homophony (one dominant voice in conjunction with other, less important musical voices) (“Polyphony” *Merriam-Webster*). Discussing the technique from a literary perspective, Mikhail Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky was the first author to successfully create a polyphonic novel, as he created characters that can disagree with him and rebel against him as the author. In order to achieve this, characters must have their own voice, which is valid and fully realized (6).

Many critics of Anne Hébert's novels have recognized certain polyphonic qualities in some of her texts,<sup>8</sup> primarily in the two novels discussed in this chapter. In both novels, the multiple, homodiegetic and heterodiegetic<sup>9</sup> narrators mimic the testimonies presented within the texts themselves. On *Kamouraska*'s first page, the reader must confront the divided and divisive nature of the narration. The novel opens with: "L'été passa en entier. Mme Rolland, contre son habitude, ne quitta pas sa maison de la rue du Parloir. Il fait très beau et très chaud. Mais ni Mme Rolland, ni les enfants n'allèrent à la campagne, cet été là" (7). One paragraph later, a first-person narrative begins; now Mme Rolland speaks:

Il aurait fallu quitter Québec. Ne pas rester ici. Seule dans le désert du mois de juillet. Il n'y a plus personne que je connaisse en ville. Si je sors, on me regarde comme une bête curieuse [...] Longtemps ils m'ont suivie des yeux. Je ne devrais pas sortir seule. (7)

Who gives the earlier testimony? This phantom account confirms the difficulty, both in regard to actual *faits divers* and in fiction that inherently accompanies testimony, or in other words "in swearing to tell the truth where I have been the only one to see or hear and where I am the only one who can attest to it" (*Demeure* 40). Although Michel Biron et al. admit that *Kamouraska* is not a traditional historical novel, they do argue that it is "sans doute [le roman] le plus réaliste écrit

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<sup>8</sup> In his article "Voix narratives et poétiques de la voix dans les romans d'Anne Hébert," Yvan Leclerc discusses what he feels are the three important periods in Hébert's writing, separating them based on differing narrative structures. The first, between 1950 and 1958, features monologic/monophonic narratives; the second is her polyphonic stage, and includes *Kamouraska*, *Les Fous de Bassan*, and *Les Enfants du Sabbat*. Finally, the final period features "récits," where the author offers "le retour d'un narrateur hétérodiégétique, et [un texte où] les ruptures d'instances narratives se font plus rares, sans être totalement gommées" (188). We will revisit this third period in the fourth chapter of this dissertation.

<sup>9</sup> Gérard Genette contrasts heterodiegetic narrators (coming from a world outside of the fictional world of the novel, the narrator is not a character in the novel) with homodiegetic narrators (existing in the fictional world of the novel, the narrator is a character in the novel) in *Discours du récit*.

par Anne Hébert, construit autour de faits authentiques présentés avec un luxe de détails à la façon des grands romans du XIXe siècle” (315). However, this sort of unexplained deviation in narrative voice takes root more commonly in postmodern fiction, defined by “its ontological instability or indeterminacy, the *loss* of a world that could be accepted, ‘willy-nilly,’ as a given of experience” (McHale *Postmodernist Fiction* 26). In *Kamouraska*, the qualities that make the narration polyphonic are also those that make the fictional world it describes, its heterocosm, unreliable. Fictional and historical testimony, thus, are dubious in Anne Hébert’s œuvre.

Adhering more closely to Bakhtin’s definition<sup>10</sup> of a polyphonic novel, *Les Fous de Bassan* features cleanly divided “testimonies” in the form of separate chapters, while the narrative shifting—or even *shiftiness*—is less well-defined. Commencing and terminating the text with chapters written ostensibly in the present, the reader learns of the persistent guilt experienced by both Pastor Nicolas Jones (who still resides in Griffin Creek) and Stevens Brown, who either because of or despite his current distance from Griffin Creek, feels obliged to recount the details of Nora and Olivia’s murders to his friend, Old Mic. In many ways, this division seems to parody witness testimony more directly than in *Kamouraska*, but Hébert still plays with both the structure and the content. The disappearance and murders of Nora and Olivia certainly constitute the main intrigue of the text; however, no chapter discusses the crime and its aftermath—exactly what constitutes the traditional “*fait divers*”—except for the hodge-podge chapter entitled “Le Livre de Perceval Brown et de quelques autres: été 1936.” In an instance where she seems to more strictly

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<sup>10</sup> “Characters are polemicized with, learned from; attempts are made to develop their views into finished systems [...] A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of [his] novels. What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event.” (Bakhtin 5-6, my emphasis)

adhere to conventions of *faits divers* and criminal investigations, instead Hébert points to their shortcomings through derisive mimicry. A plurality of voices and consciousnesses are certainly present, each one bringing us farther from the supposed goal: finding the murderer. Testimony, thus, does not lead the reader to truth, but instead the reader finds truth *despite* the multiple witness statements.

In *Kamouraska* other elements of the narration also add to the text's ontological instability and bring the reliability of testimony into question. The reader must ask not only "From what world does the current narrator come?", but also "From *when* does she come?" Élisabeth's own narrative constitutes multiple homodiegetic interferences, as she seems to tell her story from different temporal and spatial perspectives: first as Mme Rolland from the chronological present, then as Mademoiselle d'Aulnières before her marriage to Antoine, and finally from her position as Mme Tassey, wife of the Seigneur of Kamouraska and lover of Georges Nelson. These different selves often merge, leaving the reader unsure of from *when* the narrator comes. To enhance this instability, Eva-Marie Kröller argues that the use of infinitives remove the possibility of placing the narrative in a recognizable chronology. "Infinitives, meaning delayed, deferred, suspended, exist only 'for brief moments in the fissures of time'" (quoted in Sturzer 33). As the narration, time period, and location change, so does Élisabeth's self, indicated by the different names she must assume (maiden, married, married again).

Shifting between different past, present, and even future selves is a recurrent theme in Hébert's work. In the case of *Kamouraska*, Kelton W. Knight feels that Élisabeth goes beyond simply trying to cope with her past. He argues that returning to her previous experiences through memory—through her own and others' testimonies—is



[...] but another form of living the lie, of falsifying the past to make the present more palpable. However, it is something more than creating an escape-dream, as we have seen in *Les Chambres de bois*. It involves a concerted effort to reinvent history and to willfully falsify one's identity within the parameters of the invention.

(78)

Along with allowing Élisabeth to reexamine and rediscover the details of her abuse from Antoine, her affair with Nelson, and Antoine's murder, polyphony of testimonies also allows her to simultaneously escape from and reconnect with herself, her *selves*. Struggling to regain control as her past assails her, Élisabeth illustrates to what degree her self has lost meaning, lost identity. "Je pourrais encore m'échapper. Ne pas provoquer la suite [de l'histoire]. Reprendre pied rue du Parloir. Ouvrir les yeux, enfin. Hurler, les mains en porte-voix: je suis Mme Rolland! [...] Je dis 'je' et je suis une autre" (113). She is unable to revisit past events, both those she experienced and those she simply imagined. In order to slowly but surely confront Antoine's murder and Georges' exile, Élisabeth must view her past selves as entirely different people, who express their "fully valid voices and consciousnesses" through their testimonies of the past (Bakhtin 5-6).

As previously discussed, *Kamouraska* features both homo- and heterodiegetic narrators in relatively equal frequency, a combination that contributes significantly to the book's polyphonic qualities. However, *Les Fous de Bassan* distinguishes itself primarily in that the polyphony of characters does *not* include significant interjections of a hetero, extradiegetic narrator. Only the chapter titled "Le Livre de Perceval Brown et de quelques autres: été 1936" features any, albeit brief, examples of a narrator exterior to the text. On the surface, the shift might seem more straightforward than the somewhat disturbing shifts between the third-person and first-person narration in *Kamouraska*. Because of its singularity, the reader immediately recognizes the change

and does not question whether or not the voice is Perceval since he uses “je” throughout the chapter. As with the general structure of the novel, however, what appears to be the most conventionally testimonial chapter is in fact the most literarily unstable. Most anonymous entries into the journal are in fact *unanimous*, since they use “nous,” implying that these represent general remarks from any and/or all villagers of Griffin Creek. However in some cases, the narrator ceases to speak for the entire community, causing some confusion. As in *Kamouraska*, here the narrative shifts become less clearly defined and more ambiguous. Is this testimony interior or exterior to the text? Are they imagined by the simple boy who has supposedly written and attested to this chapter’s contents? The reader begins to question who this unidentified narrator is much as the characters within the text question who the murderer might be. Hébert offers answers for both questions, but not without uncomfortable examination. This unidentified narrator whose testimony may or may not be “true,” primarily discusses information regarding Nora and Olivia’s disappearance/murders, or in other words the actual crime rather than the characters’ pasts or futures. Apparently exterior to the novel’s action, the heterodiegetic narrator makes only brief appearances, and almost seems to take the form of an elaborate, stylized “*fait divers*” or police report:

Les habitants de Griffin Creek sont alertés, les uns après les autres, dans leur premier sommeil. [...] Les mains en porte-voix appeler Nora et Olivia. Les chercheurs partout sur la grande route, le long des fossés, dans les buissons, sur la grève, dans la cabane à bateaux, dans les sentiers, les chemins de traverse. [...] Bob Allen est interrogé et questionné, à cap Sauvagine, dans la maison de ses parents, un peu à l’écart du village. [...] Ils se sont mis à deux pour questionner Maureen qui a toujours refusé de les recevoir, alléguant qu’elle était malade. [...] Depuis la

découverte du corps de Nora, Stevens et Bob Allen sont interrogés plusieurs fois par jour. Il n'y a plus qu'eux qui semblent intéresser les policiers. (144, 148, 167, 175, 189)

Hébert mocks the style from which she finds inspiration, turning the most "*fait divers*"-like testimonies into untrustworthy, possibly apocryphal narrations. Essentially, what is familiar becomes strange; what is conventional becomes foreign. Truth does not lie in these "testimonies," rather it lies in the voices of those who are not traditionally allowed to speak: the "survivors."

### **Regaining control over *faits divers*, over the feminine (hi)story**

Anne Hébert not only allows the "survivors" of *faits divers* to speak, but she also calls to task those who prohibit the "survivor" from speaking, those who create the *faits divers*—journalists. Obviously journalists, and especially the "deskman," influence which *faits divers* make it into the public's hands. Many scholars (Boorstin, Maffesoli, Jullien) and journalists alike (Viatteau) have commented on the process of selection, fabrication, and diffusion that the "*fait divers*" necessitates. Boorstin goes as far as arguing that the public has transferred the task of "rendering the universe interesting" from God's to the journalists' hands, since "news is whatever a good editor chooses to print" (14; 8). They all seem to agree, however, that the journalist has tremendous, if not absolute control over which stories will be consecrated in print, and which will disappear as though they never occurred.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See Michel Viatteau's article "Nouvelles" for a discussion of both the power, and consequently the guilt, he feels as deskman when making the decision to include or discard *faits divers* related to suicides. He admits that "cela ne fait aucun bruit. Une légère pression sur le bouton 'effacement' et les cent soixante-deux mots racontant la fin malheureuse [...] disparaissent de l'écran," but also questions his connection with those about whom he writes (qtd. in Lecerf 75-76).

*Kamouraska* and *Les Fous de Bassan* remove this power from the journalists or historians and restore it to those involved, the “survivors,” despite the emotional difficulty it poses. The process of writing, or more accurately “rewriting” the survivor’s story is a gradual, arduous task for Élisabeth, Nora, and Olivia. Élisabeth proceeds slowly towards auto-representation by making revisions, by “edit[ing] the script, adding a surprise ending,” when her dreams place her in front of an injured Antoine (Struzer 35). Terrified that she will have to confront Antoine’s face after it has been mutilated by bullets, she assumes the control Viatteau describes and puts “une pression légère sur le bouton ‘effacement’” (qtd. in Lecerf 75).

Mon Dieu! Il va ôter son bandeau! Montrer sa blessure ! Antoine arrache mes mains de sur mon visage. Retient solidement mes deux poignets, dans une seule de ses mains larges. Me force à le regarder bien en face [...] Les yeux grands ouverts, je reconnais les jeunes traits, un peu bouffis [...] Plus aucun bandage ne cache les fins cheveux blonds. (81)

In this version, Élisabeth realizes what Cathy Caruth terms the “freedom of forgetting” (32), allowing herself to turn away, to avoid “seeing” in her imagination the horrors of Antoine’s death that she successfully eluded in life.

In this instance, Élisabeth rewrites the course of events, allowing herself continued ignorance of Antoine’s fatal wounds. Credit, however, is paid to Antoine—Élisabeth does not, or cannot, yet acknowledge her own power, her own control over her story. Not until Élisabeth recognizes that her “quatre ou cinq existences secrètes, à l’insu de tous” exemplify her power rather than thwart it, as her ability to keep them secret renders her “irréprochable” (74), can the reader fully appreciate that she is in fact rewriting her own narrative, writing herself *into* an official historical discourse that had previously excluded her. Although she remains within the patriarchal

structure and does not escape the confines of Québécois society, Élisabeth successfully “tricks” them into allowing her narrative to enter the historical record. Just as authors like Laure Conan, Gabrielle Roy, and Anne Hébert herself, Élisabeth subverts the power structure by working within it, surreptitiously making her narrative heard (*Green Women and Narrative Identity: Rewriting the Quebec National Text* 19). Her voice is powerful, seductively so, as evidenced by Nelson, Tassey, Caron, and Rolland’s actions. As her voice begins to more actively tell her story, she starts “[to] answer the question ‘Who?’” and to create her own identity through narrative (Ricoeur 246). Élisabeth may not choose her role in this “societal theater,” but in many ways she directs its action by remaining within convention’s parameters rather than destroying them. By outwardly playing the role of “submissive and irreproachable” wife, Élisabeth can relive her past lives, revisit her past selves, and rue her lot in life while those around her see only her devotion to her dying husband as evidenced by the words that finish the novel: “Voyez donc comme Madame aime Monsieur! Voyez comme elle pleure...” (256).

*Les Fous de Bassan* also illustrates how the “survivor” of a “*fait divers*” can reclaim her story, and inscribe it into history; however, here it must obviously be accomplished from beyond the grave. Both Nicolas Jones and Stevens Brown speak of the summer of 1936 well after the drama has ceased. In 1982, Nicolas Jones is an old man, defeated as he watches the village that he once controlled move completely out of his reach. While Jones may feel powerful when he speaks to the villagers in the name of God, and he may feel in control when he reprimands the twins, Pam and Pat, simply because “[il] aime les voir trembler” (17),<sup>12</sup> ultimately Olivia and Nora govern both his connection with his past and with his memory of that summer in 1936. In fact, the reader

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<sup>12</sup> Male characters who take pleasure in witnessing and/or causing fear in female characters is common in Hébert’s work. We will revisit this concept again in the next chapter when discussing Hébert’s play *La Cage*.

realizes that Nicolas Jones' entire chapter is nothing more than his descent into his own sins, a confrontation which he fiercely tries to avoid. As he becomes engulfed in the smoke from his pipe, the past also envelops him, forcing him back to a time when he was "l'homme de trente-cinq ans, en costume ecclésiastique, barbe de deux jours, fusil sur l'épaule" (41). He wishes he could grab hold of the present, but admits that it is "inutile d'essayer [...] La nuit est sans pitié, propice aux apparitions" (39-40).

Instead of rewriting the scenes from his past that trouble him—as Élisabeth is able to do in *Kamouraska*—Nicolas is at the mercy of his memory. Unlike Élisabeth, he cannot will the figures in his memory to change their behavior; he is simply a spectator, completely helpless against the tides of his own past. This does not mean, however, that *no one* is in control of memory's assault on Jones. In fact, later in the novel Olivia admits she is responsible for the "waves" of memory crashing down on her uncle. In her chapter titled "Olivia de la haute mer," the reader hears from the girl's disembodied soul, as she travels the waves around Griffin Creek. It is Olivia who floats on "l'air immobile des chambres comme un vent contraire et provoqu[e] des tourbillons imperceptibles dans les pièces fermées" (199), and forces Nicolas to confront the Atkins' deaths, controls his relationship with his past. Although she no longer has a physical body, Olivia essentially "writes" Nicolas' chapter, as she controls his contact with the memories that he describes. Her spirit is directly responsible for Jones revisiting that night at the end of the summer in 1936, and for making him admit his feelings towards his nieces. Olivia even physically inscribes her presence into the pastor's personal project, the hall of ancestors. Jones thinks that the twins, Pam and Pat, are responsible for sabotaging his project when he finds "Etéétéétéété 193619361936 [...] à la gouache noire, tout le long de la plinth, dans la galerie des ancêtres" (21). But was it really the twins who did this? Even if they had physically written the words, were they perhaps influenced

by “le soufflé marin” that accompanies everything the villagers of Griffin Creek do (26)? The reader senses that Olivia may be the puppeteer holding Jones’ strings as he writes his perspective on the summer, and beyond.

With her chapter written “sans date,” Olivia is poised to “hante à loisir le village [...] jour après jour, nuit après nuit” (199) in order to symbolically and literally stop time, preventing it from progressing past August 31, 1936, and forcing the remaining members of the four founding families to perpetually confront her and Nora’s murders. However, she admits that “[il] y a certainement quelqu’un qui m’a tuée. Puis s’en est allé. Sur la pointe des pieds, celui que je cherche n’est plus ici” (199-200). The one she seeks, the one who murdered her, Stevens finds himself geographically far from Griffin Creek, but still cannot escape the sins he committed there. Despite his claims that his experience in the war caused him to have “blessures [qui] ne sont pas visible à l’œil nu,” the memory of his actions on the shore that night continue to assault him:

La raison qui persiste alors qu’elle aurait dû crever depuis longtemps, sous le choc répété des images, des odeurs et des sons aux becs acérés. Lâcher d’oiseaux de mer contre mon crâne. Leurs cris assourdissants. Je lève le bras, ils s’envolent et ils crient. Je laisse tomber mon bras sur le drap d’hôpital, et ils reviennent en masse et ils crient à nouveau, s’aiguisent le bec contre mon crâne. Crier avec eux pour couvrir leur vacarme n’est pas une solution, m’épuise et me déchire. (230)

Recalling both *les fous de bassan*, or northern gannets,<sup>13</sup> that populate Griffin Creek and the anguished screams of his imbecile brother, Perceval, Stevens illustrates to what extent his sins

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<sup>13</sup> The northern gannet is a seabird, and its name means “strong” or “masculine” and “foolish.” Although the robust bird can survive in harsh maritime conditions, its breeding habits leave it very vulnerable to attack and it is easily killed by predators during mating season.

haunt him. Although he seems to credit his time at war for his “secret fever,” Stevens’ flight and refusal to ever return to Griffin Creek betray the true cause of his trouble. Her spirit may be too far, floating on the waves of an ocean too distant to reach him, but Stevens’ second chapter is still dominated, even permeated by Olivia. Certainly not as obvious as in Nicolas’ chapter, traces of Olivia and her haunting of Stevens’ memory may still be felt, allowing her to subtly inject her own voice into the writing of his final letter to Old Mic.

Nora and Olivia’s chapters are shorter than those of Nicolas Jones, Stevens, and Perceval et al. We only hear from Olivia in her own words after her physical death. The murderer seems to be rewarded for his actions with two chapters. On the surface, it is hard to view Hébert’s text as one that *liberates* rather than *imprisons* the Others’ voices; however, this is exactly what she does. It is essential to include the stories of the predatory men to expose them for what they truly are, as well as to show how Olivia and Nora ultimately triumph over them in spirit form if not in life. One narrative in life and one from beyond the grave implicates the girls in a lineage far more powerful than the one described by Nicolas Jones at the beginning of the book. While he terminates his family line, reversing the natural order and “engendrer” his ancestors instead of his sons (15), Olivia and Nora now continue the line of

grandes femmes [...] depuis longtemps [qui] ont l’âme légère, partie sur la mer, changée en souffle et buée. [...] Mes grand-mères d’équinoxe, mes hautes mères, mes basses mères, mes embellies et mes bonaces, mes mers d’étiage et de sel. (217-218)

Along with these women who preside over the ocean, Olivia and Nora can now control their narrative. Although the ability to live amongst this group of powerful female spirits comes at the price of their physical existence, Nora and Olivia are now as “irreproachable,” as untouchable as



Élisabeth. “Ayant acquis le droit d’habiter le plus creux de l’océan, son obscurité absolue, ayant payé [leur] poids de chair et d’os aux féroces poissons lumineux, goutte de nuit dans la nuit, ni lune ni soleil ne peuvent plus [les] atteindre” (225).

Hébert’s texts show the pen passing from the hand of the journalist or historian to that of the “survivor,” and consequently a much different story is told. No longer able to fabricate, embellish, or play the role of God (Boorstin) by selecting who is erased and who receives “six lignes pour la presse européenne et canadienne” (Viatteau 75), the journalist must step aside so that the Others may tell their story in their newly acquired—or perhaps bestowed—voice. Hébert also refuses to let the voices of those “survivors” . Instead Élisabeth, Nora, and Olivia enter into the history books of another kind, the literary and cultural history books of Québec. Although Joséphine Eléonore Taché and Maud and Marguerite Ascah may not have endured in the collective consciousness or official historical discourse, Élisabeth d’Aulnières and Nora and Olivia Atkins most certainly do.

### **Conclusion: Rebuilding forgotten (hi)stories**

When asked in May of 1992 to discuss the importance of “double temporalité, [le] retour à une situation passé” that appears in all of her works, Anne Hébert responded: “Le passé s’actualise constamment” (Gauvin 227). Not only the past, but History also seems to constantly “actualize,” to constantly be revived in Anne Hébert’s work. In *Kamouraska* and *Les Fous de Bassan*, Hébert breathes new life into two extraordinary stories, which have been long buried in the collective memory of History and society. Bringing Joséphine-Eléonore and Maud and

Marguerite's stories back to life requires, of course, relying on what History has left, what remains of the crumbling foundation of the stories in order to rebuild. She recognizes, though, that the remnants at her disposal are not ideal; they have cracks, flaws, and the hands that originally fabricated them did not consider the integrity of their product. The original newspaper articles, witness statements, tales passed down orally: these are the "building blocks" once used to write Abbé Casgrain's "national text" that Anne Hébert must repurpose and reshape in order to tell another, the Other's story. This work is not simple, for it requires a significant shift in focus. No longer can the *faits divers* be considered emerging and dying in "l'histoire immédiate," as Hébert emphasizes above all to what extent history engenders and explains the events surrounding these two stories as well as the implications of this past on the future. Although Hébert's texts still offer some narrative space to the perpetrators, she does this only to expose their true nature as violent aggressors. Instead she privileges the voices of the survivors, empowering them to finally take control not only of their own stories, but even of the stories told by their attackers, those who successfully silenced them in the past. Hébert condemns too the machine that allowed for such injustices: the patriarchy and the journalists, the collective memory and History, all working in concert to restrict the individual feminine voice from making any noise, from being heard amidst the cacophony—or polyphony—of the official historical discourse or the community's adopted recollection. With her combination of actual, historical *faits divers* and fictional revisions, Anne Hébert accepts the "shackles of reference" (Riffaterre 5), but not in their current restricting form. She refashions them, makes them more comfortable to bear, by "sonder une réalité plus authentique, plus profond et plus réelle" than those left to her by History (Lord 80).



## Chapter Two

### Alternative Biographies to Rewrite the Legendary Feminine (Hi)story

*“You know, the Greek word for truth—aletheia—doesn’t mean the opposite of falsehood. It means the opposite of lethe, oblivion. Truth is what is remembered.” (Marilyn French, The Woman’s Room)*

#### Introduction

Productions of normal historical practice are not the only type of historical writing to have unjustly (re)told the feminine story, according to several contemporary québécois women writers. Along with *“fait divers”* and literary history, legends and mythologies in the barthesian sense<sup>1</sup> appear to be the target of several theatrical (re)tellings published just before the end of the 20th century. As a form of narrative that relies on historical details for its production, multiple “authors,” and an extended period of time to germinate, legends inherently reflect the accepted beliefs about a given figure rather than factual information about her/him. Confronting what they consider to be problematic mixtures of fact and fiction, Marie Laberge, Jovette Marchessault, and Anne Hébert (re)tell the legendary and/or mythical (hi)stories of several (in)famous women who come from Québec and beyond. In this chapter, we will examine the theatrical (re)tellings of

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “legend” and “myth” have divergent or similar definitions, depending on which scholars one relies. While Barthes uses the terms “myth” or “mythology” instead of “legend,” his assertion that anything can become myth and that human action, cultural norms, and historical events play a role in the fabrication of myth also apply to the fabrication of “legend,” especially for the three historical figures discussed here. Both terms “legend” and “myth” will be employed in order to differentiate between the historical subjects, who are admittedly “legendary” and/or “mythical” to varying degrees.

Héloïse, la Corriveau, and Madame Blavatsky, three infamous women from very different time periods, social backgrounds, and cultures.

Héloïse lived in 12th-century France, and was the well-educated niece of a prominent cleric. Her legacy, however, does not stem from her own intellectual prowess, but rather her forbidden love affair with her tutor, another prominent cleric who would eventually be physically mutilated for their relationship. The pair were separated for decades because of their affair, and a series of letters they wrote to one another has provided the material for legendary, and eventually mythical adaptations to emerge. Marie-Jospehte Corriveau lived across the Atlantic in Québec over 600 years later, but her story is still well-known in contemporary times. She was accused of killing her husband and was found guilty by the British government that had recently assumed control over the province after France's defeat at the battle of the Plains d'Abraham. Her punishment—public display of her corpse in a cage hanging over the town square—was considered excessive and used to scare the newly colonized French Canadians into submission to their new rulers. Eventually her story would transform in a variety of ways, most of which were defamatory to the real historical person who served as their inspiration. Finally there is Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, an aristocrat of Russian-German decent who gained fame in the mid-1800s as the founder of the Theosophical Society and for her ability to produce spiritualist phenomena. Blavatsky's reputation was controversial, which resulted in a sort of dichotomous identity and an abundance of contradictory stories about her life while she was alive that have continued in contemporary times.

Before continuing to discuss the process of (re)telling their respective (hi)stories, it is essential to evaluate Héloïse, la Corriveau, and Blavatsky's statuses as legendary or mythical figures since they may not appear to be at first glance. Of the three women, la Corriveau most

closely aligns with standard definitions of “legend” in Québec culture. Although today her story might not be widely known in English Canada, the tale of la Corriveau remains a *lieu commun* for French Canadians living in Québec. Héloïse has surpassed legend, and one could argue that due to her longstanding, international renown her story has become mythical rather than legendary. However, before it was a myth, Héloïse and Abélard’s tale was a legend in its own time, and was retold in order to either inspire or forewarn depending on the speaker and the audience. Given the historical and legendary beginnings of her subject, Laberge’s Héloïse gains multi-dimensionality through the process, much in the same way as would strictly legendary figures like la Corriveau. Finally, Madame Blavatsky might appear to be simply a controversial historical figure who is only “legendary” in the informal use of the term.<sup>2</sup> However, Marchessault’s (re)telling suggests that categorizing Blavatsky as “unlegendary” or “ordinary” instead of “legendary” or “mythical” in the more literary sense diminishes her contribution—just as is the case with other women (and women writers) in particular throughout time. Reducing the controversy about Madame Blavatsky’s abilities to little more than rumors is unjust, and thus Marchessault’s (re)telling attempts to promote a mythical/legendary interpretation of her history. While Blavatsky’s story may not have transformed into a fully matured legend while she was alive, Marchessault’s (re)telling endeavors to demonstrate the legendary qualities of its historical subject and provide additional fictional “truths” that strengthen her legendary/mythical legacy.<sup>3</sup>

In 1990, modern folklorist Timothy R. Tangherlini defined legend as:

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<sup>2</sup> The Oxford Dictionary defines “legendary” as both “Described in or based on legends” and “Remarkable enough to be famous; very well known.”

<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to note that a film entitled *The Old Lady. Madame Blavatsky Legend* by Spanish director Ignacio Oliva is currently in production. The film is a fictional examination of Blavatsky’s controversial history, and claims to be neither a film “for or against” Blavatsky.

[...] typically [...] a short (mono-) episodic, traditional, highly ecotypified historicized narrative performed in a conversational mode, reflecting on a psychological level a symbolic representation of folk belief and collective experiences and serving as a reaffirmation of commonly held values of the group to whose tradition it belongs. (385)

While the three historical figures treated here are “legendary” to varying degrees, their stories have all been processed and transformed by the same forces at work in the creation of a legend. Generally grouped with folklore and fairy tales because of their “fanciful” narratives, legends purportedly find inspiration in History, or, in other words, in referentially verifiable information. However the “real” inspiration often cannot be substantiated, or is incomplete, allowing for authors to create their legendary tales over time. This proves true for all three of the historical figures discussed here, as we will see in the next section “Becoming legendary.”

The works provided by Marchessault, Hébert, and Laberge attempt to remind readers of this basis in reality, since through the process of becoming legendary or mythical, the women featured in their plays have been stripped of their multi-dimensionality and thus their humanity. Relying on the definition described by Tangherlini and the standards it reflects allows these authors to expose and subvert the injustices that “*métarécits*” of legends have perpetrated against the historical subjects on which they are based. As is the case with proponents of postmodern historical biography or “life writing,”<sup>4</sup> Marchessault, Laberge, and Hébert assert that “history is not an aseptic science but rather a humanist study about mankind, about *real* people and their actions,

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<sup>4</sup> *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature* defines “life writing” as “A broad term for all forms of writing about lives, including autobiography, biography, memoirs, diaries.” It would seem acceptable to add “legend” to this list, the etymological origin of which is “*legenda*,” a story about the lives of saints that was read at matins in the refectories of religious houses. Literally meaning “things to be read,” “*legenda*” would later assume its extended sense of life writing with mythical or non historical meaning.

about all their diversity, freedom, richness and unpredictable accidents,” qualities that the process of becoming legendary or mythical has removed (Sardica 385). Their (re)tellings aim to return to some of the elements that the creation of legend removes, and to imagine additional possibilities that neither traditional historical discourse nor legend or myth considered, such as the feminine historical experience, emotion, or agency.

Written after a period of intense political and social change in Québec, these alternative biographies of legendary women attest to the québécois literary trend towards “[faire] éclater les discours dominants et l’ordre des certitudes” at the time (Paterson *Moments postmodernes* 17). Since “la mythologie ne p[e]ut avoir qu’un fondement historique” (Barthes *Mythologies* 182) (re)telling these legends serves not only to correct injustices against the actual historical women, but it also challenges the entire cultural-historical framework supporting the “grand narratives” of normal historical practice. In order to figuratively and literally reverse the “flattening” of these feminine historical figures and to subvert the values that have oppressed them, the authors discussed here rely on the most fundamental elements of the standard legends, on what makes these figures legendary. This includes examining the original historical event, the uniqueness of which elicited legendary status; how the authors rely on these standard elements of the legend to subvert it; the ways in which each of the women challenged standard notions of power in their historical, legendary, and fictional representations; how the authors allow the legendary women to regain control of their (hi)stories within the fictional work; and conclude with a consideration of the “truthfulness” of these works.



## Becoming legendary

In order to examine the alternative versions of the legends provided by Marchessault, Laberge, and Hébert, we must first understand how the characters became legendary. The process of becoming legendary or mythical is a common target of these three authors. In fact, much of their work attempts to remind readers that

[...] le mythe est constitué par la déperdition de la qualité historique des choses: les choses perdent en lui le souvenir de leur fabrication. Le monde entre dans le langage comme un rapport dialectique d'activités, d'actes humains: il sort du mythe comme un tableau harmonieux d'essences. (Barthes *Mythologies* 216)

For Héloïse, la Corriveau, and Madame Blavatsky, it appears that the lack of readily available referential materials relating to their personal histories rendered them well-suited to be transformed into legends. This is particularly true for la Corriveau, whose real historical name was Marie-Josephte. Novels, short stories, plays, songs, ballets, and even full-length movies: the legend of la Corriveau has permeated the literary and cultural landscape of Québec for centuries. Until recently, little historical or factual information was available regarding the 18th-century murder case involving Marie-Josephte Corriveau. Documents from her trial remained in British archives until as late as the 1930s and were not made public until 1947.<sup>5</sup> This scarcity of reliable information did not hinder fictional adaptations of her story, and in fact may have assisted their abundance and creativity. These texts, along with tales from the oral tradition, have transformed a rather banal instance of domestic violence into a legend of great proportions, which in turn has elicited

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<sup>5</sup> Holding author Philippe Aubert de Gaspé (*Les Anciens Canadiens*) responsible for the unfounded and unfavorable reputation of his homonym, in 1947, J.-Eugène Corriveau began a search for authentic court documents related to the investigation and trial of Marie-Josephte Corriveau (Lacourcière “La Présence de la Corriveau” 233).

reinterpretations of Marie-Josephte's (f)actual history as well as of her legacy in works of fiction. Many contemporary authors have offered their "translations" of this familiar legend,<sup>6</sup> and one such creation is Anne Hébert's play *La Cage*, first performed in 1989.

In his exhaustive three-part study on Marie-Josephte Corriveau, historian Luc Lacourcière offers readers an historically accurate vision of the woman who he claims has "la plus mauvaise réputation [de] toute l'histoire canadienne" ("Le triple destin" 213). The process through which la Corriveau became legendary reinforces Barthes' assertion that "[le] rapport qui unit le concept du mythe au sens est essentiellement un rapport de *déformation*. [...] [Dans] le mythe, le concept déforme le sens" (*Mythologies* 195, emphasis in original). A simple "*habitante*" from Saint-Vallier, Québec, Marie-Josephte Corriveau married her first husband in 1749 at the age of 16. Eleven years of marriage and three children later, her husband died. After a 15-month mourning period, she remarried another local farmer named Louis-Étienne Dodier, with whom she had no children. On 27 January 1763, Dodier's lifeless body was found in his barn, apparently trampled to death by his horses. Upon initial examination, the officials determined the death had been accidental, but fueled by neighbors' comments and the ever-present rumor mill, authorities quickly began to suspect foul play on the part of Marie-Josephte and her father. Two trials would be held in order for "justice" to be served. The first charged both Marie-Josephte and her father with the crime, and took place between 29 March and 9 April 1763. Found guilty of murder after the first trial, Marie-Josphte's father later recanted his story and ultimately denounced his daughter as the

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Victor-Lévy Beaulieu's *Ma Corriveau, suivi de La sorcellerie en finale sexuée : théâtre* or Andrée Lebel's historical novel *La Corriveau*.

lone criminal. She would consequently be tried and found guilty in an unusually expedited trial, which took place in its entirety on 15 April 1763.<sup>7</sup>

Using a combination of historical and imagined elements, 19th-century authors created their own versions of the legend of la Corriveau. La Corriveau's crimes differ marginally in each adaptation; however, whether or not she was guilty for said crimes never comes into question. In la Corriveau's literary premiere, Philippe Aubert de Gaspé claims she "s'était défait de son mari, en lui versant, tandis qu'il était endormi, du plomb fondu dans l'oreille" (155). James MacPherson Le Moine's *Maple Leaves* (1863) alleges that la Corriveau killed her first husband in just such a manner, but the events surrounding her second husband's untimely death are truly entertaining. In his version, Le Moine imagines that Marie-Josephte attempts unsuccessfully to strangle her sleeping spouse, since the former has "inserted his pillow where his neck had been, gently shaking it occasionally, and uttering now and then a stifled groan" (68). Favoring a more guaranteed approach, Marie-Josephte subsequently "batters his brains with a pitch-fork," blaming the murder on the family horse (68). Possibly the most inventive, William Kirby explains la Corriveau's evil ways as a hereditary flaw, since her grandparents are infamous 17th-century Italian alchemist Antonio Exili and French sorceress La Voisin.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately she too murders her husband—with molten lead like in de Gaspé's version—and is found guilty before an English court. Louis Fréchette's Corriveau also murders both of her husbands, the first with molten lead, the second

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<sup>7</sup> "Élisabeth also had a fast trial, however, this worked to her advantage, in contrast to the one regarding Marie-Josephte's crimes.

<sup>8</sup> According to John Harris Trestail's book *Criminal Poisoning*, Antonio Exili was a professional poisoner who at one point worked for Queen Christina of Sweden. It was through Exili's teachings that Jean-Baptiste de Gaudin de Sainte-Croix assisted la Marquise de Brinvilliers with her crimes. Catherine Deshayes Monvoisin, *dite* La Voisin, allegedly helped Madame de Montespan to poison one of her rivals and was even rumored to have unsuccessfully attempted to poison Louis XIV. She was found guilty and burned at the stake in 1680 (7-8).

ostensibly with a blunt object to the head. So pervasive were these fictional interpretations of la Corriveau's story, they quickly became more trusted than actual historical facts from the episode. In fact, some Québec historians even accepted and incorporated them into their historical texts.<sup>9</sup> Regardless of their diversions from fact, the adaptations, which would form the basis for her legend, all consider Marie-Joséphite to be guilty of various crimes against various people.

The historical figure featured in Marie Laberge's ninth published play, *Pierre ou la Consolation*, has been legendary for far longer than la Corriveau and in a much more global context. In fact, some might argue that her story has reached mythical status, given that it has been frequently employed as a literary reference or allusion in other works.<sup>10</sup> Many of Laberge's plays examine personal histories set against a Québécois historical backdrop, like *C'était avant la guerre à l'anse à Gilles* and *Ils étaient venus pour...* *Pierre ou la Consolation* too relies heavily on historical accounts, but departs from the author's usual style. In this dramatic poem written in an invented form of French, first performed in 1992 at the Théâtre du Café de la place in Montreal, Laberge uses a striking combination of fact and fiction to expose another side of Héloïse d'Argenteuil, of "Abélard-and-Héloïse" fame, that is often ignored by both historians and other fiction writers. Here, Laberge imagines Héloïse's life not only post-romance, but after Abélard's death.

Twelfth-century abbess, Héloïse d'Argenteuil, and her philosopher husband, Pierre Abélard, are one of History's most celebrated and controversial couples. From satire by Mark Twain to a philosophical novel by Jean-Jacques Rousseau to a Broadway play and countless biographies, Héloïse and Abélard's tragic story has inspired many varied works. Several key

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<sup>9</sup> For an excellent discussion of fictional contaminations in "historical" treatments of la Corriveau, see Lacourcière "Le destin posthume de la Corriveau."

<sup>10</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Reference and Allusion* (3 ed.): Oxford University Press, 2010.

historical elements form the basis of all Héloïse and Abélard variations. First, the pair met in Paris in 1115 at the home of Fulbert, Heloïse's uncle and canon of Paris. Abélard, one of the most popular teachers in Paris at the time, served as Heloïse's tutor and educated her in medicine, philosophy, and other contemporary topics of higher education in vogue during that epoch. Even prior to their educational and personal relationship, Héloïse was known throughout Europe as having incredible intellectual capacity, and had mastered Greek, Hebrew, and other scholarly pursuits. Abélard moved in with Fulbert and his niece, and he eventually initiated a romantic affair with the latter. The affair continued until Héloïse became pregnant, and they were forced to make the relationship public. Furious, Fulbert demanded the pair marry, which they eventually did in secret to protect Abélard's reputation and future career prospects. This arrangement did not fully appease Fulbert, however, and he began pressuring his allies to punish Abélard. To keep Héloïse safe from the increasingly violent sentiments about their relationship, Abélard sequestered her in the abbey of Argenteuil where he visited her furtively. Still not satisfied, Fulbert and his advocates broke into Abélard's room in the middle of the night and forcibly castrated him as a form of vengeance. It was at this point that Héloïse acquiesced to Abélard's request and became a nun against her own inclinations. Despite being permanently separated, the pair then exchanged letters, which added to the romantic nature of their tale and inspired many future adaptations.<sup>11</sup> Unlike Laberge's (re)telling, most adaptations of the star-crossed lovers' tale focus on the origins of their

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<sup>11</sup> It is likely that much of the correspondence between Héloïse and Abélard is of dubious authenticity, and that letters attributed to Héloïse were either rewritten by Abélard or written by someone else entirely. These potentially apocryphal letters, which form the basis of Héloïse's legendary/mythical identity, were also translated into Old French by Jean de Meun, the second, misogynistic author of *Roman de la Rose* in the 13th century. While Laberge doesn't specifically mention any of this background, it is indicative of how far Héloïse's "true" historical story has been removed from the legendary/mythical one we know today, and further justifies Laberge's decision to (re)tell this feminine (hi)story.

relationship, their developing love affair, and end with their forced separation and Abélard's gruesome attack.

While Héloïse is known for her devotion to and self-sacrifice for a man, one of the most controversial elements of Madame Blavatsky's story stemmed from her choice to secretly leave her husband and venture off on her own to travel the world. In fact, one could argue that her decision to flee from her traditional domestic existence in Russia instigated additional rejections of patriarchal institutions and their control, and was also the foundation for the contradictory visions of Blavatsky as heroine or con artist. Generally, the legendary figure differs greatly from the historical figure on which she is based. While the legendary figure's renown grows, her legendary identity begins to take shape, eventually eclipsing her historical, authentic identity. In Madame Blavatsky's case, multiple legendary identities—one laudatory and the other hateful, relying solely on rumors of her alleged spiritual talents—eventually overshadowed most historically verifiable information about her. Like la Corriveau, there is a lack of critical historical information about some moments in Blavatsky's life that make her particularly suitable for legendary creation. During the 25-year period between Blavatsky's departure from Russia and arrival in America, there exist no records of her activities or whereabouts. According to author Peter Washington, "Blavatsky's life (as narrated to friends and would-be biographers) makes a series of anecdotes which are tall enough to provoke disbelief without being entirely incredible" (*Madame Blavatsky's Baboon* 30). The very nature of this missing information opened the door for divergent interpretations based on rumors and speculation to shape Blavatsky's historical identity.

According to one of her self-admittedly laudatory biographers,

on the life and character of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky two conflicting legends exist. According to one, from the pens dipped in the garbage cans of Victorian gossip, she was either the mistress or the bigamous wife of Agardi Metrovich [...] but also had many other lovers and at least one illegitimate child. (Murphet XIX)

She was also a charlatan, an imposter, and a generally degenerate woman. For many, Blavatsky remains one of the most despicable scam artists that ever lived. For others though she is a highly revered spiritual figure, as Murphet tells readers:

The second legend began in the last years of her life, and gathered strength after her death. It was born of the human desire to deify, to place someone of extraordinary knowledge on a pedestal of infallibility [...] She, who spoke and wrote against the concept of a personal God, was to become almost one herself in the eyes of devout disciples (XXV).

Indeed, Blavatsky's legends have become the basis for her legacy, relying on both positive and negative rumors more than her actual history; however, she is also well-known as a writer. Her literary activity was another aspect upon which critics and followers diverged. Some considered her works like *Isis dévoilée* to be masterful, revolutionary philosophical texts, while her critics believed that much of her writing was plagiarized from older esoteric texts (Guénon 82-89). This element of her (hi)story is clearly of particular interest to Marchessault, whose works often focus on (re)telling the historical feminine experience of women writers who she feels have been undervalued by patriarchal society, and which we will discuss at length in the next chapter.

## Subverting established legends with new legends

In response to the standard legends about these historical feminine figures, Marchessault, Laberge, and Hébert not only make reference to the rumors and defamatory adaptations, they utilize them subversively to provide alternative versions. In order to accomplish this, they also rely on the same processes as legend and myth creation, which according to Barthes constitutes “parole volée et rendue” (*Mythologies* 198, emphasis in original). Through the (re)telling process that does not ignore the legendary and historical foundations, Marchessault, Laberge, and Hébert also create “[...] parole qui [n’est] plus tout à fait celle que l’on a dérobée: en la rapportant, on ne l’a pas exactement remise à sa place” (*Mythologies* 198). The major difference in this case is that the (re)tellings these authors provide openly announce their larceny, unlike legend and myth that do so behind the cover of innocence.

One quality typical to legendary writings that seems supremely important to the alternative biographies discussed here is the collective nature of the origins and maintenance of legends and legendary figures. One “fanciful” tale inspired by a historically referential figure does not necessarily create a legendary or mythical identity. Instead the process is slow and requires multiple versions, additions, and recreations. The legendary or mythical figure, then, is less of a character created unilaterally by one author, but is actually an amalgam character, one created collectively rather than individually. Through subversion of the standard legends, the (re)tellings treated here offer alternative versions of these amalgams that support Lyotard’s definition of “postmodernism” as “un savoir hétérogène, un savoir lié non plus à une autorité antérieure, mais à une nouvelle légitimation qui serait fondée sur la reconnaissance de l’hétéromorphie des jeux de langage” (Paterson *Moments postmodernes* 15). The incorporation of several voices to create narrative also, ironically, reinforces the importance of plurivocality that is present in many



postmodern works of literature and history.<sup>12</sup> The authors discussed in this chapter add their own interpretations to this effort; however, in their versions the most fundamental elements of the standard legends are used as the primary means to subvert the “*métarécit*” they have engendered.

In aligning her version with the standard legend, Marchessault makes repeated references to both the negative and positive rumors by various friends and foes, which all worked in concert to form the mystery around Blavatsky. From the very first page of the published text, Marchessault alerts readers to this diametrically opposed view of Blavatsky:

À sa mort, elle était déjà considérée par ses admirateurs et admiratrices comme la plus grande magicienne que le monde ait connue et tous lui attribuaient des pouvoirs surnaturels. Par contre, ses détracteurs estiment qu’elle est le plus bel exemple de charlatanisme et de mystification du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. (7)

Blavatsky’s various detractors appear regularly, and they openly voice their suspicion. In fact, even Madame Blavatsky herself helps her critics list the bad things people are saying about her.

ALBERT QUINET. Les rumeurs les plus étranges circulent à votre sujet madame. On murmure que vous êtes l’égérie des cosaques de la mort...

MADAME BLAVATSKY. En général on ajoute que je suis vénale, que je me prostitue... (23)

Marchessault juxtaposes the overly cruel and suspicious rumors with a counterbalance in the form of overly complimentary sentiments from her supporters. Her friend and co-founder of the

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<sup>12</sup> According to Paterson, “Dans une certaine mesure seulement car, dans le roman postmoderne, l’acte d’énonciation ne se caractérise pas uniquement par la mise en place d’un ‘je’ narratif mais par une *pluralité* de voix narratives. Ces voix sont soit scindées, dédoublées, fragmentées, [...] soit carrément multiples [...]” (*Moments postmodernes* 18).

Theosophical Society, Henry Steel Olcott, describes the moment when they met at a barn in Vermont:

OLCOTT. Mais personne n'avait un visage comme le sien, annonçant la force, la culture, et des yeux inoubliables... C'était le 17 septembre 1874...

MADAME BLAVATSKY, *entrant dans sa tunique d'un rouge garibaldien, cheveux courts frisés comme la toison d'un agneau*. Olcott, vous m'embellissez. Il a vu une femme sans âge, dont les traits kalmouko-bouddho-tartares n'ont jamais été séduisants, même dans sa jeunesse. Une femme dont la tournure, les manières d'ours et les habitudes masculines sont faites pour effaroucher les belles dames parfumées et les messieurs portant corset. (62)

Finally, we also hear from spiritual guides and magicians with whom Blavatsky learns to better access the Astral plane.<sup>13</sup> In the third tableau, a Mahatma named Kout Houmi Lal Sing explains to Blavatsky what she must do to achieve her life's purpose and form “un noyau de fraternité universelle qui sera sans distinction de sexe, de race, de classe [où] tous pourront bénéficier du puissant secours donné par la sympathie mutuelle” (37), a task of which she and she alone is capable. In the sixth scene, described as the most “luminous” in the play, the “sage des solitudes du Tibet” offers additional insight into how Blavatsky's legend was formed:

LA RIMPOCHÉ. On dit que les femmes—bien qu'il doive y avoir beaucoup d'exceptions—ont une aisance naturelle pour trouver en elles un centre d'harmonie

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<sup>13</sup> The Astral plane is a non-physical dimension of existence believed to be made of a translucent, radiant matter. Classical (particularly neo-Platonic), medieval, oriental, and esoteric philosophies and mystery religions first postulated the notion of the Astral plane. For Blavatsky, the Astral plane is directly above the physical world, and can be accessed by humans during sleep (*Collected Writings* 324). She believed that mediums, sentients, and clairvoyants can access the Astral plane in sleep as well as when awake.

et d'amour qui les porte, centre que beaucoup d'hommes cherchent dans les cieux.<sup>14</sup>

(58)

While Marchessault makes it clear that her feelings towards Blavatsky,<sup>15</sup> whom she occasionally calls H.P.B. as did the historical Blavatsky's close friends (*Madame Blavatsky* 7), align with the laudatory rumors surrounding her legend, her juxtaposition of the positive/negative rumors with the sentiments of spiritual beings such as la Rimpoché allows her to fill a void and provide a fullness of narrative that Blavatsky's history and legend could not. It also exposes the importance of considering the author's personal perspective in the "creation" of the biographical text. According to Munslow, postmodernist scholars reject the idea that "the narrative of the historian (form) reflects the narrative of the past (content)," (11) and consider the writing of traditional historical biographies to be akin to literary performance whose outcome is "truth-making" rather than "truth-finding" (Sardica 387). While Marchessault does not reject these rumors as true or false (although it is clear she wishes to discredit the negative rumors to a larger extent than the positive ones), she shows how they all were created based on the authors' own personal sentiments towards Blavatsky and worked in concert to create her legendary character. Readers/spectators now see the full spectrum of "rumors" about the controversial mystic to arrive at a fuller, more truthful understanding of her (hi)story.

Despite her subject's "mythical" status, Marie Laberge seems to suggest that telling a fuller, more truthful version is also possible in Héloïse's case. In *Pierre ou la Consolation*, the

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<sup>14</sup> In the published version of the play, Marchessault includes a footnote after this line: Anne Bancroft. *Femmes en quête d'absolu*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1986.

<sup>15</sup> Also in the "À propos de Madame Blavatsky" section that opens the published text, Marchessault terminates by asserting that "Par ses écrits, qui ne furent jamais sectaires ni fanatiques, par ses activités sur la grande scène du monde, par son anticonformisme, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky déchaîna des controverses et fit s'affronter les passions. Pour moi, dramaturge, c'est un merveilleux personnage de théâtre que dévore un feu intérieur, et c'est une leçon de planète" (7-8).

action opens at the Oratory of Paraclete on November 16, 1142 during a period of extreme grief, as Héloïse must cope with Abélard's death and also confront his corpse before its interment. In the abundant paratextual materials accompanying the printed version of the play, Laberge explains that the idea to write a play about Héloïse and Abélard first came to her through a fellow actress, but since the initial scenario was not historically verifiable, Laberge deemed it inappropriate. She instead began researching the well-known couple, and discovered a rarely mentioned element of their legend: Pierre le Vénérable, Abbot of Cluny, may have assured that Abélard's body be delivered to the Paraclet convent for clandestine burial. Laberge explains that this encounter was the "*fil conducteur*" of her story. She found herself wondering "et si le corps avait été livré de nuit? Et si la première nuit de vigile avait été tenue secrète pour préserver l'intimité d'Héloïse? Et si Pierre le Vénérable avait discuté avec elle?" (*Pierre* 119). The author's own questions elicit others. She claims that she was drawn to Héloïse because of the duality, the opposition between her faith in God and her faith in Abélard, but why discuss these qualities of this legendary character after her lover's death instead of during their extended separation in life, as do most of the other variations? What consequences or effects does exposing an aged, isolated, grief-stricken Héloïse have on Laberge's unique rendering?

First, the choice to explore a later moment than the standard legend lets Laberge illustrate Héloïse's vivacity and control in the face of death and helplessness displayed in more traditional versions. Where the standard legend/myth ends is precisely where Laberge's (re)telling begins the story of Héloïse and Abélard. This shift in timing is reflected even prior to the first spoken line of the play. As Pierre le Vénérable deposits Abélard's corpse on the stage, compline is being sung in the background. At the precise moment that the final daily prayer ends, Héloïse begins a lengthy monologue directed at Abélard's lifeless body that she "chuchote au début, comme si elle laissait

couler un long secret et non pas parce qu'elle craint d'être écoutée" (23). Rather than end when separated from Abélard in life, Laberge shows that Héloïse's story continues without him, with Héloïse in control of the narrative.

Réjean Bergeron explains that in selecting this moment, Laberge adds humanity to Héloïse's story, and underscores the importance of not losing sight of the person behind the legendary/mythical figure:

[Marie Laberge] a imaginé les émotions qu'a pu ressentir une femme séparée de l'homme qu'elle aimait à cause de l'intolérance d'une société fermée. Cette femme s'est retrouvée au couvent, tentant désespérément de se donner à Dieu et d'oublier (ou de faire oublier) son amour jugé coupable. (146)

In other words, Héloïse was more than her legend or myth suggest. Laberge's decision to position her (re)telling after the standard story ends fills a void that had been ignored by other authors, many of whom were male. However, through the combination of history and fiction, fact and invention, Laberge's alternative biography attempts to arrive at "a modest, contingent, tentative, incremental, proximate truth" through a consideration of the past—exactly the mission of traditional historians (Himmelfarb 21). Albeit in an admittedly non-historical context, Laberge unearths possible truths about Héloïse as the actual woman with human emotions behind the legend/myth.

The human emotions Héloïse experiences are caused by the isolation that has long been the focus of standard versions of the story. Thus Laberge is also able to offer a fuller version of the legendary tale, one that (re)tells the couple's separation in life *and* in death. Héloïse is able to do this on her own terms, without the masculine patriarchal influence as seen in standard versions of the legend and the actual historical events of her life:

Fallait-il que tu sois si absent pour que mes bras, las de se tendre, épuisés, reçoivent enfin le prix de leur ardent attendement? Fallait-il mourir, Pierre, pour que, mille fois morte de ton absence, mes doigts courent sur cette peau raide à jamais et s'esveille enfin mon âme à resurrection? (24)

Resurrection comes in the form of Héloïse's own story, not just the story of her ill-fated relationship with Abélard. Pierre may have had to die, but his death ultimately serves to enhance Héloïse's contrasting aliveness and resilience. While Pierre is actually more present than in other versions of the legend—since his body (albeit lifeless) remains on stage throughout the entire performance—he is no longer able to respond to his wife, even through epistolary communications. In stark contrast with Laberge's earlier works that focused on absent father figures<sup>16</sup> in *Pierre, ou la Consolation*, it is the feminine protagonist who holds center stage and controls the narrative. In fact, "the onstage presence of Pierre [Abélard's] dead body in a sack is more liberating than the absence of the previous fathers, since his lifelessness is such a contrast to Héloïse's and Pierre le Venerable's passion and vivacity" (Gargano 155). The masculine hero of the standard tale plays an inactive, passive role while Héloïse, the heroine, controls the (re)telling of both her individual story *and* the story of her love affair with Abélard.

Telling the post-story of the standard legend also allows Laberge to more fully explore means by which the historical Héloïse rejected social conformity. In standard versions of the legend and historical accounts, Héloïse is described as having begrudgingly acquiesced to Abélard's demands to separate after the birth of their child, Astrolabe. Héloïse's decision to

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<sup>16</sup> While father figures are absent in many of Laberge's plays, she provides this explanation of the role this perceived absence serves: "L'homme n'est pas absent. Il est présent, je vais vous dire pourquoi il vous paraît absent, c'est parce qu'il n'est jamais un héros, comme les femmes. Il y a une impossibilité entre les femmes et les hommes. Je crois que les hommes en sont responsables, mais les femmes aussi" ("Écrire pour Vivre" 131).

become a nun stems from an adherence to social norms and to her husband's wishes. In letters written between the couple, Héloïse confirms that "car ce n'est pas la vocation, c'est votre volonté, oui, votre volonté seule qui, jeune, m'a jetée dans les austérités de la profession monastique" ("Lettre deuxième" 81). As a result of prioritizing Abélard's desires above her own, modern reactions to the legend tend to criticize Héloïse as a decidedly unfeminist heroine. According to popular writer Cristina Nehring "[n]obody who takes the veil on the command of her husband and swears 'complete obedience' to him can hope to sneak into the bastion of feminism" ("Heloise & Abelard: Love Hurts").

Yet choosing this moment later in Héloïse's life that results from the unfeminist decision to listen to her husband allows Laberge to challenge two opposing elements of the human experience that are fundamental for her: emotions ("*Bien*") as represented by Héloïse and social conformism ("*Mal*") reflected in Abélard's control over his wife (Demmons 2). In the period (re)told by Laberge, Héloïse is at the pinnacle of her historical isolation, since she can no longer even exchange letters with her former lover. Only through this extreme solitude, which is a harbinger of emotion/"*Bien*," can Héloïse access the source of "*connaissance ultime*" and share her own feminine historical experience, independent of Abélard. This is juxtaposed with Abélard's lifeless body that is decidedly silent and thus unable to offer any framework to reach the "*connaissance ultime*" of human experience. Instead of a suppressed woman who sacrificed herself for her husband, Laberge shows a woman who had an understanding of human emotions and existence that went far beyond the constraints of social conformity and could be relied upon to provide answers in a way that patriarchal institutions like religion could not. Through the emotions elicited from the separation, isolation, and solitude she endured, Laberge's Héloïse understands

that it is human love that matters and human emotions that endure despite going against certain social conformities of patriarchal society.

In her (re)telling of la Corriveau, Anne Hébert also exerts significant energy into a project that humanizes an historical figure whom history and legendary adaptations had completed vilified. This project of humanization is centered around a reimagining of the crime that formed the standard version of the Corriveau legend. Considering the image of la Corriveau that previous authors offer in their versions—“une femme de mauvaise vie, une méchante femme, une sorcière qui parlait au diable, qui dansait avec le diable, une femme vendue au diable” (“La Présence de la Corriveau” 254)—, the lack of interest in a possibly justifiable motive for murder is not surprising. Examining the possible dynamic between the historical figures, Dodier and Corriveau, a discussion of no interest to the 19th-century authors, alerts Hébert’s readers to an important change in focus and tone.

Clearly entering a marriage of necessity, Hébert’s version of la Corriveau is named Ludivine, which in and of itself serves as a clue to Hébert’s “playful” alternative legend. Ludivine’s parents present her to her future husband, Elzéar, much as they might a mare or an ewe for sale at market: “Ma fille Ludivine n’a jamais été malade de sa vie, ni coqueluche, ni rougeole, rien de cassé, ni rien qui cloche, toujours vaillante et travailleuse, une créature dépareillée” (48). With the assistance of the town “*marieuse*,” Ludivine and Elzéar marry for obviously practical reasons. As a result of Elzéar’s personal desire to travel by himself deep into the forest each fall,<sup>17</sup> he and Ludivine live together for only a short time. However during this brief cohabitation, Elzéar

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<sup>17</sup> Elzéar’s annual trips into the woods are interesting, as they further link him with notions of evil and guilt. In Western medieval literature, traveling alone into the forest demonstrates a connection with the devil, since the wilderness is where one meets Satan and his demons (Le Goff 51). The connection between the wilderness and evil has been established as early as the New Testament when Jesus was “led up of the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil” (Matthew 4:1, quoted in Le Goff 48).



quickly reveals himself to be a cruel and violent man. He terrorizes his wife, throwing a grass snake in her face, laughing “à s’en tordre les côtes” as she cries (49), he forces her to work long hours in the fields despite her fragile frame, and when autumn arrives, he leaves her indefinitely with orders to either think of him or simply watch the snow fall (50).

The reader immediately recognizes that despite some similarities, Anne Hébert’s Corriveau resembles little the murderer, witch, or ghost presented by the standard versions of the legend. For starters, in this adaptation la Corriveau is the protagonist’s married name, rather than her maiden name. By doing so Anne Hébert maintains a connection between the name “Corriveau” and cruelty, but transfers it from wife to husband. In this “interpretation,” Anne Hébert portrays the union between Ludivine and Elzéar as *her* first marriage and *his* second, inverting widow and widower, a shift that largely negates much of the traditional legend’s foundation. As a result of la Corriveau’s multiple marriages featured in the 19th-century adaptations, the number of murders she committed starts conservatively at one and can balloon to as many as eight. Hébert reverses and dismisses the suspicions used to create the traditional legend by eliminating any previous marriages, and in fact redirects suspicions to Elzéar. Unclear as to the cause of his first wife’s death, and aware that he is capable of violent behavior towards Ludivine, the reader questions what Elzéar’s role may have been in his first wife’s demise. The abusive relationship that Anne Hébert imagines for her Corriveau recalls the standard legend, allowing the reader to place it within the accepted, 19th-century tradition, however, by inverting their roles—former aggressor becomes current victim and vice versa—the author forces the reader to arrive at new, completely altered conclusions in regard to la Corriveau’s (hi)story and legacy.

Anne Hébert’s treatment of the murder committed by la Corriveau continues in this same vein, maintaining fundamental elements of historical fact and traditional legend, while remarkably

changing their focus and tone. As previously discussed, Marie-Josephte committed, or at least plead guilty to committing the murder of her second husband. Hébert's Corriveau too admits to having killed her husband, in this case with a rifle. Despite this similarity, Hébert's protagonist's defense is decidedly more acceptable, if not undeniably justified. In shooting her husband, she simply followed advice that he himself had offered before his departure. "Tu as vu le fusil au-dessus de la porte? Faut s'en servir si jamais un homme vient par ici rôder autour de toi" (50). Elzéar, described upon his return as the quintessential prowler, justifies his wife's actions against him, rendering Ludivine completely innocent in the eyes of the reader, if not in the eyes of the law. This shift markedly alters the expected message stemming from the traditional legend created in the 19th century. Surpassing even the actual historical claims of abuse that Marie-Josephte used to justify her crime,<sup>18</sup> Anne Hébert's Corriveau acts out of self-defense *and* according to her husband's own mandate. The way in which the author subversively represents the crime mockingly contradicts, and ultimately eliminates, both the legendary and historical assumption of la Corriveau's guilt.

The title of Anne Hébert's 1989 play, *La Cage*, would seem to signal its adoption of this fundamental element of the Corriveau legend; however it is precisely through the transformation of this, the most "stable" ingredient that Hébert will subvert the standard versions. According to Luc Lacourcière, "de tous les éléments de cette légende, c'est la cage de fer qui est le plus stable et probablement celui qui a le plus frappé l'imagination populaire" ("La Présence de la Corriveau"

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<sup>18</sup> In the second trial, Marie-Josephte offered an explanation for her actions, as her deposition illustrates: "Marie Josephte Corriveaux, veuve Dodier, déclare qu'elle a assassiné son mari Louis Hélène Dodier pendant la nuit alors qu'il dormait dans son lit; qu'elle l'a fait avec une petite hache; qu'elle n'a été incitée ni aidée par aucune personne à le faire; que personne n'était au courant. Elle est consciente de mériter la mort. Elle demande seulement à la Cour de lui accorder un peu de temps pour se confesser et faire sa paix avec le ciel. Elle ajoute que c'est vraiment dû en grande partie aux mauvais traitements de son mari si elle est coupable de ce crime." (Translation by Lacourcière "Le triple destin" 230; my emphasis)

257). In many ways, this bizarre means of punishment can be credited with transforming a relatively pedestrian “*fait divers*” into a proper legend. The presence of the cage allows the author to make a not-so-subtle critique of the Québécois woman’s status, since the gibbet is used to punish Ludivine not for the crime of murder, but for having been born a woman. In fact, Hébert’s Corriveau and her counterpart from the upper class, Rosalinde, are both provided with cages from birth. Ludivine’s iron cage, which awaits her after her trial, is a simple structure, devoid of ornament. Rosalinde will occupy her cage much sooner than Ludivine, at the age of 15 when she marries Judge Crebessa. This cage, described as a simple, golden structure commonly occupied by the woman after her marriage, is later hidden behind the façade of home and family that Rosalinde’s husband forces upon her.

Allez! Camouflez-moi tout ceci! Dissimulez bien le fer et les barreaux. Que surgisse sous vos mains, habiles en déguisement, un joli manoir de pierres roses, avec fenêtres et portes fermées et marteau de cuivre sur la porte. Que seule la clef de fer demeure intacte, reconnaissable entre toutes, dans ma main. (37)

Simultaneously opposed and identical, these cages illustrate the Québécois woman’s destiny to be contained and guarded. Whether as a criminal or as a wife, the road ultimately leads to confinement at the hands of a man, presumably her husband, but also the patriarchal order as a whole.

Ludivine, however, is able to escape this fate, never entering the cage prepared for her. In stark contrast to the traditional legend and historical scenario, the murderer’s cage remains empty, because the perceived criminal is in fact the innocent victim. Instead of offering an image of the cage as an anomaly for a violent woman, Hébert seems to announce to her public that *every* woman has and occupies her own cage, because she is “pour ainsi dire coupable par le simple fait d’être femme” (Slott 153). Although the cage along with the use of the name “Corriveau” allows the

reader to relate Hébert's adaption to the historical and legendary personage, she uses these most fundamental elements to obliterate her predecessors' and History's mistreatment of Marie-Josephte Dodier, as well as to show that they can signal liberation rather than imprisonment. Because she is confronted with this "milieu sombre et clos ... la femme [hébertienne] peut reformer son caractère et enfin arriver à renaître et refaire sa vie selon ses propres désirs" (McKay 25). Hébert's Corriveau has a cage, of course, but she refuses it, rejects and metaphorically buries it instead of being literally buried *in* it.

### **Challenging representations of power**

La Corriveau's cage also represents the British domination over the region won at the epic battle of the Plaines d'Abraham only four years before. The cage itself deviates from the typical response to murder under the French regime, which usually called for hanging the criminal, occasionally burning his or her body, and even more infrequently displaying the corpse for a limited period as a means of deterring future criminal activity. Abiding by their English methods of capital punishment, the officials who tried Marie-Josephte ordered that she be "hanged in chains wherever the Governor shall think proper" ("Le triple destin" 234). Although in England iron cages known as gibbets may have been "presque aussi fréquents que [les] croix de chemins" in Québec, and considered "comme un des éléments les plus pittoresques de la campagne anglaise," their use in Québec instilled fear and inspired creation, albeit to the detriment of Marie-Josephte's reputation ("Le triple destin" 236).

According to Maureen O'Meara, the traditional version of la Corriveau's legend is actually a sort of defense mechanism employed by the colonized in Québec to disassociate themselves from the "possibility of being subjected to such a horrid punishment, from the terror of the consequences

of nonsubmission to the order desired by their new British masters” (162). In other words, if the Québécois could blame la Corriveau, they themselves were not at risk of experiencing the same fate. In Anne Hébert’s alternative version, la Corriveau still serves as an example of rejecting the new colonial power structure, however, she is no longer a cautionary tale, but is instead a model of heroic rebellion. Judge Crebessa—a sort of universal, intertextual representation of Anglophone, male domination who also appears in *Kamouraska*—serves as the enemy against whom Ludivine will battle. At the beginning of the play, “*les Fées Noires et Blanches*” bestow gifts and curses on Ludivine and Rosalinde. For both women, it is Crebessa who holds the key to their destinies—literally, since he holds the key to the respective cages. In one of curses bestowed by “*les Fées Noires*,” Ludivine is discouraged from hoping that she can do anything to change her future:

LES FÉES NOIRES. Grands corbeaux, jolies corneilles d’Amérique, venez tous, bels oiseaux noirs, nécrophages chéris. Le juge John Crebessa vous prépare un festin des dieux dans cette cage de fer. Il n’est que d’attendre le jour et l’heure choisis. Soyez patientes, funèbres volatiles, nul ne peut arrêter le destin en marche et le banquet qui s’apprête sera de vous et de nous, les noires instigatrices de la mort. (26)

Just as he did in *Kamouraska*, Crebessa exemplifies the societal norms that have dominated Québec throughout history: conflict between the British and French, as well as overarching patriarchal control over women and their freedom. As opposed to the standard versions of the legend, Hébert’s Corriveau triumphs over Crebessa and over the “evil that comes from accepting without question established authority that uses its power either to kill or subjugate others” (O’Meara 169).

In order to showcase the transformation of this legendary figure, Hébert still relies on many of the same elements as the historical record and traditional versions from the 19th century. Despite a re-direction of guilt related to la Corriveau's crime from the wife to the husband, Hébert's text does not admonish Ludivine in the eyes of the law, controlled by the British colonizers, and corrupt as it may be. Ludivine too goes to trial as did Marie-Josephte and as do many of the Corriveau's of the 19th-century legend. However, Hébert again alters the readers' experience through playful, albeit biting parody of an actual court trial. Still furious that Ludivine has rejected his sexual advances, Judge Crebessa presides over what could be defined as a sort of fantastical kangaroo court. The reappearance of Crebessa also underscores the importance of intertextual references in postmodern works, which often produce a parodical discourse. This is reasonable, according to Paterson, since "si le texte postmoderne parle de soi, s'il met en place l'appareil du scriptible, il est naturel qu'il fasse éclater les frontières du sérieux, du légitime et du conventionnel" (*Moments postmodernes* 21). Testifying to Ludivine's Pride (*orgueil*), Envy, Greed, Extravagance, Gluttony, and Wrath are the personifications of the seven deadly sins themselves. Only Sloth cannot claim to have ever lived in her heart (100), while the other deadly sins proceed to make obviously ridiculous allegations. Although the inclusion of such marvelous witnesses makes a mockery of the judicial process, Crebessa continues to degrade any semblance of justice when he quickly disregards the witnesses wishing to testify to Ludivine's innocence. He even admits that:

Je règne sur la vie et sur la mort, tel est mon pouvoir et j'entends l'exercer sans faiblesse et dans la délectation la plus entière. Un jour Ludivine Corriveau a osé me braver, elle sera punie comme elle le mérite. Préparez la potence et la cage de fer.  
(107)

Such fantasies and outbursts signal the absolute impossibility of a fair trial for Ludivine, echoing questionable practices used during Marie-Josephte's historical trial in 1763, as well as the "guilty until proven innocent" approach favored by the authors in the 19th century.<sup>19</sup> Including Crebessa, who is an example of "réduplication" in Hébert's work also serves to "attirer l'attention sur la littérarité du texte" (*Moments postmodernes* 29), as well as of the standard legends on which it is based. In other words, parody and Crebessa together demonstrate the extraordinary quality of the historical event itself, the legends that formed because of the extraordinary nature of the event, and the extraordinary interpretations present in Hébert's alternative biography.

If the reader had not already fully appreciated the extreme shift in focus at work in Hébert's adaptation, this absurd and exceedingly critical representation of Ludivine's trial certainly makes the message clear. In fact Melissa McKay argues that "avec l'aide du monde imaginaire et fantastique, les personnages féminins [hébertiens] arrivent à récrire l'histoire, la remodelant selon leurs propres interprétations de la justice" (26), allowing Anne Hébert too to rewrite and *right* History's wrongs. At the end of her trial, Ludivine has triumphed over Crebessa, representative of British and patriarchal rule who had been so sure of his "pouvoir [et] puissance d'homme" (36). Through Hébert's subversion of the Corriveau legend, Ludivine is able to reclaim her innocence and declare:

Je suis faite pour être vivante et non point morte et pendue par le cou. Qu'importe les maléfices originels, j'échapperai à mon destin, comme un petit poisson qui sort du filet par une seule envie de vivre. (107)

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<sup>19</sup> Contemporary historians and interested citizens have begun challenging Marie-Josephte's extremely expedited one-day trial, as well as the fact that she, her supporting witnesses, and even her lawyer were all monolingual Francophones despite the proceedings being conducted exclusively in English ("Le triple destin" 215-216).

Even in the face of an impossible situation stemming from her fate as a woman and Crebessa's perpetual attempts to destroy her simply because he has "ce pouvoir et nul n'échappe à [sa] justice" (97), it is Ludivine, her family, and her story that survive.

Demonstrating an ability of the feminine experience to survive is also fundamental to Laberge's (re)telling of Héloïse's story, a story that also challenges established notions of authority, through a discussion of passionate versus religious love. In Laberge's alternative version, Pierre le Vénérable represents both the masculine passionate love that Héloïse experienced with Abélard, and also the institution that condemned their relationship and left them physically and emotionally crippled. Pierre le Vénérable's physical, living presence allows Héloïse to at least attempt to resolve the inner struggle she feels between her love and her faith. There can now be immediate rather than delayed debate about her "sins" and her "faith" with the two Pierres (one living and one dead) before her. But, instead of providing Héloïse with answers, the two Pierres expose the inability of religion to respond to her questions. Abélard can obviously not answer her, and when asked why the physical expression of their love causes Héloïse and Abélard to offend God, Pierre le Vénérable responds that he knows little of such things. When Héloïse presses him, remarking that as an educated man of God, he should be able to answer, he admits:

ne sais parler en nom de Dieu que pour les choses sacrées. Et le sacré se tait sur  
appétit qu'entraîne amour [...] Comment disjoindre appétit et amour? Destruire  
désirance sans destourner amour? (60)

Why, Héloïse and Marie Laberge ask, must love be separate from desire in order to remain sacred? Ultimately this is the question that continues to resurface in both Héloïse's monologues and her conversations with Pierre le Vénérable, a question that the church's sacred texts and authority cannot answer. Thanks to this lengthy dialogue, Héloïse discovers that coupling platonic love with



sexual desire is not only naturally human, it is preferable to separating the two regardless of the consequences. In fact, to stifle the human desire for physical love is to incite violence, not faith or purity, just as Laberge explained in a 1997 interview with Robert Viau (“Écrire pour Vivre” 133). As violence is an essential element of this legend, and probably one of the reasons it has endured, Laberge makes clear the bond between religious faith and authority with both detrimental restriction and harm to the body. At one point, Héloïse asks:

Si tant est que convoitise devait d'esteindre, une fois notre chasteté assurée par la main desloialée des chasteux de porcs, pourquoi m'avoir délaissée pour jamais ? pourquoi une fois la *punition divine* achevée par l'escouilleur, mon oncle, pourquoi m'avoir abandonnée ? (37, my emphasis)

In other words, after carrying out the extremely violent “divine” punishment of castration, why must Héloïse still be without either religious or passionate love? Unfortunately neither the presence of Abélard's corpse nor the conversation with Pierre le Vénérable afford any answers. The dialogue actually has the opposite effect. By the end of the play, it is not Pierre le Vénérable, representative of religious authority, who can provide Héloïse with answers, it is Héloïse who helps Pierre le Vénérable arrive at a new understanding of human and religious love. Speaking with the abbess has convinced the abbot that love and desire should not be divided, and that in fact when God grants life, He also grants desire.

Toute salvation est dans amour pour l'humaine personne. Dieu crée un començail de toute chose en amour. Amour est nécessité. Et si d'appétit terrestre et païenne elle s'acointe, c'est pour Le mieux glorier par exaltation des sens. (97)

Throughout the play, Laberge's Héloïse also struggles to regain control of the love, both passionate and compassionate, that has made her story so celebrated. The historical Abélard and

Héloïse's correspondence indicates the two lovers may have differed in their understanding of certain terminology, most notably in regard to *amor*. In his book, *Abelard and Heloise*, Constant J. Mews notes that while Abélard seemed to view *amor* in the Ovidian sense, and consequently discussed his love for Héloïse as a passion he experienced subjectively, Héloïse perceived love as both passionate and compassionate, and attempted to marry Ovidian, Ciceronian, and religious references in her discussion of the term. Although the love Laberge's Héloïse feels for Abélard is based on respect and friendship, passion and desire constitute its most enduring, and consequently tormenting, elements.

Constantly linking love with desire, the body, not the mind, becomes the main vehicle by which Héloïse expresses that love for Abélard. In death, her lover's corpse recalls the memory of past encounters, and even reawakens her sexual appetite:

Ainsi donc voici ce corps qui tant a brûlé ma souvenance  
qui tant a hanté le repos de mes nuits  
qui tant a brisé l'abandonement de mes jours  
ce corps tant aimé, tant enchéri  
que pas un seul de mes doigts, jamais, n'a renié  
ni oublié. Tu es là, mon unique. Tu es là. (23)

The appropriation of Abélard's dead body coincides, even elicits the possibility for Héloïse's appropriation of her own body, and of her passionate love for Abélard without guilt and without apology. Héloïse is thus now the authority of love, in all its forms. By the play's end, she refuses to blame herself for the violence subsequent to her relationship with Abélard. For the first time in 25 years, she says, she can finally conceive of her love as a blessing instead of an abandonment by

her husband and her faith. Laberge even goes so far as to claim that the female body and its specificity distance the woman from both God and man, making her more adept and susceptible to life's physical and spiritual abandonments, again underscoring the feminine as authority over this concept:

Mon ventre est profond et profonde en lui la trace de l'homme. Seules ventrilles de femme connaît empreignement d'amour. Seule femme enfante. Homme ne sait ce qu'il est de s'ouvrir dans le corps sien à l'autre. Rien ne fouille chair d'homme dans fornications. Cet abandon qui quière femelle nature semble mettre distance entre femme et Dieu... et peut-être entre femme et homme à la fin. (107-108)

Instead of tempering desire with spirituality, Marie Laberge's Héloïse fully embraces her sexual feelings towards Abélard. She appropriates her desire, her love, and her feminine body, which she ultimately realizes distinguishes her love from Abélard's. While throughout the play, "the dogmatic 'presence' of the Church is attested to by the services and the cloister that encloses the characters," the conversations that take place between Pierre le Vénérable and Héloïse indicate an equally present refusal of these laws' authority (Gargona 160-161). In Laberge's alternative version, Héloïse and the human love, reason, and openness she represents ultimately can answer questions that the religious "authorities" cannot.

The same can be said for the Helena Blavatsky presented by Jovette Marchessault, who is able to provide both followers and critics with answers that "criminal" institutions of the patriarchy cannot. Marchessault's Blavatsky constantly confronts accusations of fraud from representatives of these criminal institutions, yet ultimately these very institutions and their agents are proven to be the real imposters and swindlers. In this way, both her existence and her popularity threatened the established power these institutions held over their believers. It seems that her ideas gained

popularity, at least in part, because of the specific philosophical conditions that existed in the time period in which she lived. In the description of the play's epoch that precedes the published version of *Madame Blavatsky, spirite*, Jovette Marchessault explains that during the second half of the 19th century, artists and authors found themselves

[fatigués] de l'aura d'un univers de plus en plus matériel [et] se tournent vers les occultistes, les magnétiseurs, les magiciens et les astrologues, vers ceux et celles qui scrutent autant le ciel des étoiles et des comètes que la poussière des tombeaux, à la recherche de ce courant de lumière splendide et étoilée qui peut, disent les alchimistes, révéler la clef des trésors célestes et terrestres. (9)

In her version of Blavatsky's story, Marchessault shows that she was an agent of this movement, that she helped artists, authors, and private citizens to access that space in between the earth and the sky. However, Marchessault also points out that in facilitating this connection, Blavatsky challenged the alleged power of certain patriarchal institutions and their monopolies on earthly and celestial dominance. Marchessault utilizes several key characters to explain how Blavatsky's mission to found a progressive, universal fraternity resulted in undermining the Catholic church and political practices like colonialism.

Two characters seem to best exemplify and personify the perceived threat that Blavatsky posed to the established patriarchal order and its power. The first is Albert Quinet, historian and ecclesiastic whom Madame Blavatsky meets at the home of the comtesse de Ségur. As a personification of both traditional historical discourse and the Catholic church, Quinet reflects the prejudice of institutions towards the notions of spiritualism and occultism represented by Madame Blavatsky in comparison to the adherence to materialism reflected in Quinet's lines. He and

Blavatsky display their opposing views as Quinet encourages her to provide tangible, visible proof of her abilities:

COMTESSE DE SÉGUR. Monsieur l'abbé, les esprits existent, ils répondent à notre appel.

MADAME BLAVATSKY. Les esprits sont aussi dissemblables dans leurs variétés que toutes les espèces d'oiseaux qui peuplent l'air. Il y a parmi eux des colombes et des faucons, des corbeaux et des vampires. Mais la lumière de la connaissance se répand de plus en plus, comme jadis elle s'est répandue dans les cavernes obscures quand l'homme s'est avancé, une torche à la main, faisant reculer les charognards! (19)

Marchessault shows that Blavatsky and her beliefs regarding spirituality serve as the light that scared away “charognards” like Quinet and the patriarchal institutions, like the Catholic church, that they represent. Understandably, Quinet and those institutions are threatened by a figure like Blavatsky, since her beliefs and alleged powers inherently challenge them as the unique means of connecting the earth and the beyond. In order to diminish the authority of her movement and undermine the devotion of her followers, Quinet and others like him engaged in constant attacks on Blavatsky's credibility, promoting materialism and demanding “proof” that she could call upon spirits as she claimed:

ALBERT QUINET. Mesdames, j'aime les faits, ce qui est concret, visible et palpable. Si les esprits peuvent prendre forme, montrez-les-moi!

MADAME BLAVATSKY. Plus une âme est matérielle, plus sa conception des esprits est matérielle. (19)

While Marchessault's Blavatsky is able to produce a spirit in the form of the comtesse de Ségur's grandmother and a talking donkey from her fables, the episode (which is one of many in the play) demonstrates the inherent hypocrisy of patriarchal institutions to demand proof of Blavatsky's power when they cannot provide similar proof of their own. During the encounter, which interestingly and intentionally took place on Christmas Eve, it is ultimately Quinet who is exposed to be a fraud rather than Madame Blavatsky. As the scene begins, the comtesse asks Quinet whether "la fête de Noël est-elle vraiment en communion avec toute la misère de notre époque?" (17), to which the priest responds clumsily that he will have to check his handbook (17). Instead, it is Blavatsky who has the answers, who can prove her connection between the earth and the sky on the holiest of nights for the Catholic faith. She appears suddenly and explains that "[cette] magnifique fête existe pour nous préparer à voir les lueurs d'une nouvelle vie" (17).

Marchessault continues to redirect the critical legend's view of Blavatsky as a charlatan onto Quinet and the Catholic church, whose goal is more financial than spiritual:

MADAME BLAVATSKY. [...] J'aime me promener dans le ciel, la nuit de Noël, entendre la mélodie des esprits célestes. Il y a peu de chance que je vous retrouve à ce concert, on dirait...

ALCIDE REBAUD. Pas la moindre chance, madame Blavatsky. N'oublions pas que, pour le clergé, c'est la nuit la plus payante de l'année. Dans toutes les églises, on bat la monnaie.

ALBERT QUINET. Nous aidons les pauvres...

MADAME BLAVATSKY. Faire la charité une nuit par année ce n'est pas suffisant si le reste du temps vous laissez vos enfants mourrir de faim et de calomnie.

ALBERT QUINET. Vous m'insultez! Vous insultez Dieu... (18)

While Blavatsky's story centers around the diametrically opposed views of her detractors and believers, in Marchessault's (re)telling there is never a question of the mystic's powers, but rather the power of those around her whose authority she challenges. It is not Blavatsky who seeks to swindle innocent people, it is the Catholic church.

Utilizing and subverting the critical version of Blavatsky's legend allows Marchessault to expose other pillars of patriarchal Western hegemony as well, such as colonialism. Blavatsky's story offers an interesting opportunity to denounce the racist colonialist agenda since her understanding of spiritualism so heavily relied on hindu concepts, and since she lived during the height of "Britain's imperial century."<sup>20</sup> The character Marchessault uses to personify European colonial beliefs is Joseph Cook, a British missionary whom Blavatsky meets after arriving in India with Henry Steel Olcott. Cook serves as a representative of organized religion and the colonial regime, both of which were patriarchal institutions that relied on Saïd's concept of "Orientalism,"—"a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (11)<sup>21</sup>—to maintain their hold on power. As was the case in the exchange between Blavatsky and Quinet, Cook's disdain for the pair and what they represent is apparent when Olcott and Blavatsky arrive on the docks in India:

*Un homme les observe attentivement. Vêtu sobrement, il fait très british et porte un collet de pasteur ou de ministre protestant.*

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<sup>20</sup> Many historians assert that 1815-1914 marked the height of the British Empire. *Britain's Imperial Century, 1815–1914: A Study of Empire and Expansion* by Ronald Hyem and *British Imperialism 1750–1970* by Simon Smith are two examples.

<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that many of Saïd's views on the West's treatment of the Orient and Orientals applies to historical representations of other marginalized groups, like women: "What these widely diffused notions of the Orient depended on was the almost total absence in contemporary Western culture of the Orient as a genuinely felt and experience force. For a number of evident reasons the Orient was always in the position both of outside and of incorporated weak partner for the West" (208), for instance.

JOSEPH COOK. *s'efforçant d'être aimable*. Madame Blavatsky, je suppose... Permettez-moi, au nom du gouvernement des Indes dont je suis aujourd'hui le porte-parole, de vous souhaiter la bienvenue. Je suis Joseph Cook, prédicateur et missionnaire. Les journaux disent des choses extraordinaire à votre sujet, Madame... Que vous avez, entre autre choses, joué un rôle majeur dans le développement de la magie moderne!

MADAME BLAVATSKY. Je ne voyage jamais sans mes lutins. Il y en a un de dissimulé dans chacune de mes valises. (*Lui présentant Olcott.*) Le colonel Olcott, cofondateur de la Société Théosophique.

OLCOTT, *pour détendre l'atmosphère*. Les journaux écrivent parfois des fantaisies. Nous sommes ici pour implanter une fraternité où tous les homme et les femmes...

JOSEPH COOK, *l'interrompant, presque grossier*. Je vois... Le domaine nuageux de l'utopie. Les Indes vous ramèneront brutalement sur terre! (77-78)

What Cook really seems to mean is that the forces in charge of India, the British government, will bring them back to earth. Cook describes how he and his forces will employ any means necessary to thwart Blavatsky's attempts to establish a utopian society in India, which would obviously be antithetical to the entire colonial mission that purports to save natives but actually only exploits them and their resources. In an exchange about their differing views on the Ganges, Cook all but openly admits his intentions to exploit the Indian people and brutally attack Blavatsky to serve his own selfish, economically motivated ends:

MADAME BLAVATSKY. J'aime me baigner dans cet extraordinaire courant de magnétisme.



JOSEPH COOK. C'est une eau sale, qui pue...

EMMA CUMMINGS. On dirait un flot de bile noire, Helena...

JOSEPH COOK. C'est la crasse des indigènes qui le rend boueux.

MADAME BLAVATSKY. Le Gange que je vois est pur et transparent, mais ses flots sont "noirs des chagrins, des douleurs et des humiliations qu'ont subis ses enfants pendant bien des siècles passés."<sup>22</sup>

JOSEPH COOK. Et c'est à ces gens-là que vous faites croire qu'ils pourront un jour secouer le joug anglais! (*Lui et Coulomb rient très fort.*)

MADAME BLAVATSKY. Un jour, la spiritualité hindoue sauvera le monde moderne du matérialisme.

JOSEPH COOK. Mais en attendant, nos prières à nous, petits missionnaires anglais, ont exercé sur vous une pression insupportable qui vous a rendue malade! Je danse une gigue de mort sur le corps prostré de la fondatrice de la défunte Société Théosophique. (86)

Marchessault exposes Cook and the colonialist philosophies and policies he represents as the dangerous, fraudulent elements, rather than the spiritualism promoted by Blavatsky. In shining a light on colonial injustices, Marchessault's alternative biography reinforces the role of literature in the project of cultural reproduction. Her reproduction will not ignore the imperial injustices, as do other works, and thus she refuses to participate in the "continuing success of the imperial project, displaced and dispersed into more modern forms" of writing (Spivak "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" 306).

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<sup>22</sup> Pierre Gaspar-Huit, *L'Illuminatrice*, Paris, Sand, 1989.

By challenging the forces of authority behind the traditional historical discourse and standard legendary/mythical interpretations, Marchessault, Laberge, and Hébert simultaneously expose and undermine them. In all of these (re)tellings, the feminine historical figure threatened established order and power relationships, whether that be through the rejection of societal conformities or providing alternatives to traditional institutions and cultural dogma. While their legends transformed these women into witches, whores, and frauds, the (re)tellings provided by Marchessault, Laberge, and Hébert uncover the machinery at work in the process of fabricating their legends, and ultimately disrupt its ability to continue to produce them.

### **Returning control to women, not their legends**

In place of this machinery, the three authors discussed in this dissertation return control over the process of (re)telling the other's feminine (hi)story to the legendary women themselves. Their works challenge, as do all postmodern biographies, traditional modernist "grand narratives" and reinforce "the coming of a general attitude, or mindset, that pluralizes and particularizes knowledge in a fragmented micro-narrative way, redefining life itself as a multicultural experience with hybrid patterns and relativist values in a 'liquid'<sup>23</sup> and 'fluid' approach" (Sardica 386). Through different means, la Corriveau, Héloïse, and Madame Blavatsky are all shown to be able to not only challenge the established order, but to disrupt it to such an extent that they harness its power for their own purposes. Whether through a literal "*prise de parole*," success and widespread popularity of their ideals through legacy agents, or re-envisioned notions of motherhood and

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<sup>23</sup> Sardica refers to Zygmunt Bauman's 2007 work *Liquid Times. Living in the Age of Uncertainty* in which the author describes the "endemic uncertainty" that individuals must endure in the "liquid" modernity.

family, all three legendary women take control of their (hi)stories and provide a framework for its continued use in perpetuity.

As in many of Marchessault's alternative versions of famous women, her Blavatsky can be seen frequently writing, which is a metaphor for the activity of writing one's own (hi)story. In the case of Blavatsky, Marchessault also showcases the historical figure's control over her adversaries, e.g. Albert Quinet, Joseph Cook, and the institutions they represent. Marchessault's alternative version of Madame Blavatsky's biography implies that her movement did successfully disrupt the notions of Western materialism, organized religion, and colonialism, although with another leader at the helm. Just before the play ends, Blavatsky's good friend Emma Cummings betrays her at the urging of Joseph Cook by sharing letters that seem to prove Blavatsky is a fraud. While it seems as though the representative of Western patriarchal institutions has triumphed, Blavatsky has the following exchange with Mohandas Gandhi:

MADAME BLAVATSKY. C'est vous Mohandas? Si votre mère vous voyait, déguisé en étudiant d'Oxford! Cette admiration sans borne pour la famille royale, le cricket et les maîtres tailleurs de Savile Row a perdu les fils des Indes!

MOHANDAS. J'ai étudié vos écrits. Si je peux conserver ma liberté d'action, je veux devenir théosophe.

MADAME BLAVATSKY. Nous n'avons qu'un seul dogme: celui de la fidélité à la vérité. Il n'y a pas de religion plus élevée que la vérité.

MOHANDAS, *étonné et ravi*. Mais c'est l'antique devise des Maharajas de Bénarès! Je l'ai appris sur les genoux de ma mère.

MADAME BLAVATSKY. La religion de votre mère n'est peut-être pas un ramassis de superstitions...

MOHANDAS. Et la pénétration spirituelle des Occidentaux n'est peut-être pas impeccable. Dans les journaux de Londres, même vos ennemis reconnaissent que vous avez influencé la pensée occidentale en vulgarisant certaines idées de l'Orient. Dès que j'aurai terminé mes études, je retournerai aux Indes. (*Il sort et croise Olcott*)

OLCOTT. Qui est ce jeune homme?

MADAME BLAVATSKY. C'est Gandhi. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Il veut devenir théosophe. Un jour, l'essentielle fraternité de tous les êtres humains se réalisera. (95)

As Elise Cotton points out,

[the] implicit conclusion is that yes, the co-founders' efforts were worthwhile, through Mme Blavatsky's mediation Gandhi led a spiritual and cultural renewal movement which culminated in the independence of India, and he became an inspirational international icon of pacific resistance against oppression. (166)

While the historical record contradicts Marchessault's vision of Gandhi as a devoted theosophist,<sup>24</sup> her alternative biography underscores the degree to which Blavatsky's ideals and the movement she founded had tangible effects on modern Western colonialist materialism. The play terminates with an excerpt from Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* that is illuminated in the astral zone and reads, "Qui sommes-nous? Une flamme allumée à la source inépuisable..." (96). This ending

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<sup>24</sup> Gandhi was never a member of the Theosophical Society, although he did sympathize with many of their tenets, such as universal fraternity. "I owe much to the Theosophical friends among whom I have many. Whatever critics may say against Madame Blavatsky, or Col. Olcott or Dr. Besant, their contribution to humanity will always rank high. What has been a bar to my joining the society is its secret side—its occultism. It has never appealed to me" (*This Was Bapu: One Hundred and Fifty Anecdotes Relating to Mahatma Gandhi*. Navajivan Publishing House, 1954, 13).

suggests that Blavatsky's teachings and writings, which reconcile opposing cultures and religions within an egalitarian framework (Cotton 167), allowed Gandhi and others like him to reject the established power structures and forge ahead to liberate themselves mentally, culturally, and politically from the chains of hegemonic western patriarchal forces. It is Blavatsky and her subversive legendary identity, not "l'Europe éclairée" that Marchessault mentions facetiously and associates with the agents of patriarchal institutions, that is responsible for any modern enlightenment—"lumière de la connaissance [qui] se répand de plus en plus [...]" (19).

Héloïse too is shown to be the driving force of enlightenment in Laberge's (re)telling, differentiating this version from the standard tale in which the male/teacher elucidates the young girl/pupil. Héloïse exhibits a renewed control over her own historical and legendary experience in that she and she alone will be responsible for telling her love story. Unlike the correspondence between Héloïse and Abélard, or other fictional interpretations, in *Pierre où la Consolation*, Héloïse controls the narrative and ultimately controls her history. The distribution of lines confirms the hold that Laberge's main character has over speech: her voice and her words dominate the action. Pat Donnelly of the *Montreal Gazette* criticized Laberge for the long monologues she wrote for herself (Marie Laberge played the role of Héloïse<sup>25</sup> in the stage production of the play), and argued that the rest of the play's action seemed "incidental" as a result. What Donnelly fails to recognize is that these sometimes exhausting addresses are imperative for the process of re-appropriation of History that Laberge attempts through and on behalf of Héloïse. Héloïse's voice must be omnipresent, must overwhelm any others. Just as she has done in other plays with a more specifically québécois flavor like *C'était avant la guerre à l'Anse à Gilles* or *Ils étaient venus*

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<sup>25</sup> Laberge reinforces postmodernist historian beliefs that the author of life writing is inherently a "participant," even if she is not the subject of the work. Jaime Aurell argues that biography is a "highly performative" mode and that it is "a natural arena for the unification of subject and object" (433–449).

*pour...*, Laberge uses monologue within a historical context to expose the personal tragedies that engender the collective History, albeit without strictly adhering to historically accurate information.

Laberge also relies on conversations between characters with opposing beliefs and identities to rewrite Héloïse's (hi)story. In "Écrire pour le théâtre," she explains what an important role dialogue plays in her works, and *Pierre ou la Consolation* is no exception. For her, characters first define themselves by what they say and what they do not, revealing themselves in their utterances and silences. Actions can deepen or emphasize, but not define in Laberge's œuvre. This formula proves true for Héloïse, as after 16 pages of monologue, she continues to challenge her lover and her faith through conversation with Pierre le Vénérable, who in this version is in love with her. Nowhere in this play can Héloïse be described as silent, as it is her voice and her emotions that pervade the dialogue.

The language spoken by the play's three characters—Héloïse, Pierre le Vénérable, and Guillemette, a novice who has not yet pronounced her vows—signals an immediate, and audible, shift from contemporary speech as well as from medieval French, and also points to Héloïse's newfound control. Again, Pat Donnelly of the *Montreal Gazette* admits that the "simulated archaic French [was] not easy to follow," and Anne Berthelot agrees since "le spectateur, même québécois, ne peut manquer de perdre pied dans un certain mesure face à cette pièce dont le langage, comme le cloître, est clos d'une clôture qui le laisse *ad aeternitatem* en dehors" (44). Despite the difficulty that viewers and readers alike might encounter, Marie Laberge explains and justifies the "musique poétique" that she creates for *Pierre ou la Consolation* in the Dossier in the written version.

Comment une auteure de la fin du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle pourrait-elle rendre intelligible la musique d'un "parler" disparu depuis huit siècles? Comment rendre une sonorité,

une structure grammaticale qui n'ont plus cours sans perdre l'intelligence du discours? [...] Ce n'est pas un nonchalance qui a conduit mes choix, mais bien une double volonté : d'abord que le texte soit libre, qu'il soit porté par la force des mots [...] mais aussi que le public y ait accès directement, sans avoir à recourir à un glossaire. Je désirais parler dans une langue devenue presque étrangère mais communiquer tout de même. (122-123)

In the written version of the play, readers find “translations” of the more confounding terms, which seems to indicate a failure on Laberge’s part to communicate without a glossary. However, examining these “translations” exposes the connection between this invented lingual hybrid and the appropriation of Héloïse’s (hi)story. Proportionately, Héloïse employs the translated words more than the other characters, and by and large these words relate to the fundamental elements of the traditional Héloïse and Abélard legend, such as desire, abandon, and sadness. Here is just a sampling of some of the terms “Désirance,” “abéance,” “degetance,” “désavouerie,” “doliance,” “assopli”—all spoken by Héloïse, while she confronts *her* emotions, *her* sexual desire, and *her* identity. Anne Berthelot signals the “demiurgic” (43) position this appropriation of language affords the playwright, yet it is important to note the power it instills in the main character as well. Here Héloïse now controls the language with which she will tell her story, one which is clearly unlike those told by Abélard in his autobiography, *Historia calamitatum* and in other fictional works since *Le Roman de la Rose*. As is common in postmodern works, Laberge plays with words, invents new ones, and inserts existing ones into unexpected contexts (Paterson *Moments postmoderns* 22). Isn’t this, asks Janet Paterson, “subvertir de manière fondamentale l’ordre du langage et de ses pouvoirs de totalisation?” (*Moments postmodernes* 21). Laberge seems to agree and offers spectators and readers “Héloïse uncensored,” “Héloïse in her own words,” words that

belong to no one but herself. Although it certainly creates the intended “*musique poétique*,” Laberge’s invented language also imparts a new sense of ownership over History and identity for both the author and the character.

Anne Hébert’s *Corriveau* too takes control over her own (hi)story, but through an alternative version of motherhood rather than language. On the surface, Hébert continues to adhere to the status quo while concurrently annihilating the legends of her predecessors by affording this woman, who according to 19th-century adaptations viewed “human love [only] as a degraded menial, to make men the slaves of her mercenary schemes,” (Kirby 366) a sort of composite adoptive family. Although historically, Marie-Josephte Corriveau had three children with her first husband, her legend generally eliminates them, and even denies her the ability to reproduce, citing her sterility as motive for her villainous behavior. Louis Fréchette claims in his short story that despite eleven years of relative happiness, one ominous cloud darkened the union between Dodier and his wife: “Contrairement à ce qui se passe d’ordinaire dans les ménages canadiens en général si féconds, le jeune couple vécut seul et les petites têtes roses et blondes manquèrent à son foyer.” In Kirby’s adaptation, “it was a barren union. No child followed [...] to create a mother’s feelings and soften the callous heart of La Corriveau” (365). In the 19th-century texts, the fault for this inability to reproduce the “*petites têtes*” so important to a Roman Catholic society that would later attempt to avenge themselves against the English majority through “*la revanche des berceaux*,”<sup>26</sup> always landed squarely on *la Corriveau* because of her unchristian, even evil behavior. The couple’s lack of children also renders the link between *la Corriveau* and possible witchcraft or

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<sup>26</sup> “*La Revanche des berceaux*” was a policy promoted by the Catholic church in an attempt to shore up the French Canadians’ numbers against their new English colonizers. For an interesting discussion of “*la revanche*,” see Susan Kevra’s article “The Mechanization of Motherhood: Images of Maternity in Quebec Women Writers of the Quiet Revolution.”



supernatural powers more understandable and plausible, as traditionally witches tend to threaten both children and fertility.<sup>27</sup> In fact, her infertility distances la Corriveau from any nurturing qualities not only common to, but expected in the exemplary Québécois wife and mother, as described by Jean Le Moyne.<sup>28</sup> Stripping la Corriveau of her children as well as of the ability to reproduce undeniably propels and restrains her in a realm where the woman can, will, and even must commit murder and other diabolical treacheries.

Hébert's Ludivine is also barren, as decreed by the "*les Fées Noires*" who greet her at birth. As a consequence of their "curse" of sterility, Ludivine is unable, as the wife and virtual slave of her husband, to fulfill Elzéar's wish to follow familial traditions set forth by his father and grandfather:

J'ai l'intention de fonder une famille. Je veux faire comme mon père et comme mon grand-père qui ont peuplé tout le pays, à dix lieues à la ronde, sans jamais perdre une bouffée d'odeur dans les bois, ni un poisson frétilant dans la rivière, ni la

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<sup>27</sup> *The Malleus Maleficarum*, the seminal text on witchcraft first published in 1486, explains to what extent the witch poses a threat to families, and to children in particular. Authors Kramer and Sprenger explain that as part of their pact with the Devil, witches are required to "offer up unbaptized children to Satan" (Part I, Question II). In some cases involving the most dangerous kind of witch—those who have the ability to injure—a more serious attack on the family takes place. Such witches will not only "cause sterility in men and animals," they might also, "against every instinct of human or animal nature, [be] in the habit of eating and devouring the children of their own species" (Part II, Question I).

<sup>28</sup> According to Jean Le Moyne, "[C]'est une apothéose: la mère canadienne-française se dresse en calicot, sur son 'prélart,' devant une poêle et une marmite, un petit sur la hanche gauche, une grande cuiller à la main droite, une grappe de petits aux jambes et un autre petit dans le ber de la revanche, là, à côté de la boîte à bois" (70). Indeed the mythical Québec mother pertains so uniquely to her native land, and is so pervasive in the region's folklore "[elle] est quelque chose de spécial et dont on chercherait vainement, je crois, l'équivalent chez les peuples civilisés de notre temps. [...] Existe-t-il une mère brésilienne, y a-t-il une mère finlandaise?" (Le Moyne 70). Despite the myth's clearly antiquated image and lack of contemporary examples, Le Moyne argues that its status as a myth as well as its continued importance in Québec are undeniable: "L'époque est vague, mais nous sommes nettement orientés vers le passé ou vers des attardements de plus en plus rares. Notre image a beau ne correspondre à rien d'actuel ou à peu près, elle s'impose avec insistance, elle est familière à tous et constitue une référence valable pour tous. Nous avons affaire à un mythe" (71).

moindre bestiole éclatant dans son pelage fauve, comme une fleur rouge au bout du fusil fumant. (48)

As in the 19th-century adaptations, no children will be borne to the couple. However, Hébert places blame more on the part of the man and “destiny” than on la Corriveau for this barren existence. Indeed Ludivine’s barrenness appears predestined since from birth it was determined that her “ventre ne produira pas de fruit ni [son] sein de lait” (22), but she also claims that it is her husband’s use of force in the marital bed that causes her inability to reproduce. For Elzéar experiences a sort of cruel pleasure in controlling and terrorizing his wife. He even admits that “[il] aime [l]’entendre hurler de terreur, le soir, dans la maison fermée” (49). Finding herself in both an emotionally and geographically inhospitable, even barren landscape, Ludivine recognizes and welcomes the fact that she cannot fulfill Elzéar’s ultimate wish of continuing his lineage.

Although she too strays from historical fact as did the 19th-century writers before her, Hébert alters the reader’s perception of la Corriveau by showing her character’s control in creating an adoptive form of motherhood, one that shows her ability to reset her fated sterility. Not giving birth to biological children will not preclude maternal bonds from forming, as “*les Fées Blanches*” also bestow on Ludivine the desire to “cueill[ir] l’enfant sauvage dans les fermes abandonnées” (26). In fact Babette, Ludivine’s first “*enfant sauvage*” narrates her story to the audience, exposing a “filiation féminine ... non seulement de famille mais aussi de récit [qui] se met en contraste avec la plupart des versions de la Corriveau où il y a un homme narrateur” (Slott 157).

Adoptive motherhood proves extremely detrimental to the previous adaptations’ vision of la Corriveau as antithetical to kindness or love, as it reinstates and amplifies any maternal, nurturing qualities that the traditional legend had expunged. Considering that the French-Canadian mother “is the only female archetype in Québec literature” (Le Moyne 79, my translation), Hébert

reestablishes Ludivine's bonds with her historical inspiration, while also scoffing at the societal and literary pigeonhole that reduces women to their reproductive capacities. Does the fact that Ludivine bears no biological children make her less of an exemplary "French-Canadian mother?" No, says Hébert, in fact her Corriveau becomes the French-Canadian mother *par excellence*. Ludivine *decides* to be a mother despite her biological inability, rather than simply reproducing because her body is physically capable and her husband forces her, as is clearly the case with the women who ask la Corriveau to take their unwanted children. A distressed woman, immediately after giving birth, tells Ludivine:

Vous voulez savoir ce que je vas (*sic*) faire à cette heure? Reprendre mon respire, pis prendre une bêche et creuser un trou derrière la grange là où sont déjà ses frères et sœurs. J'en peux plus d'élever des enfants. J'en ai déjà dix de vivants. J'aimerais mieux mourir que d'en élever un autre. (56)

Ludivine takes control of the motherhood she will experience, despite her fated biological defect. She elects to adopt the "*enfants sauvages*" who seek her help, creating a more fulfilled, functional family unit than those formed through conventional, biological means. Because of this combination of destined sterility and choice to become an adoptive mother, Ludivine actually transforms into a more, almost super-maternal figure as compared to those whose families are created out of duty and fear.

### **Conclusion: *La vérité est la seule religion***

Although the end results may vary, just as traditional modernist historians, the authors discussed here believe that historical biography has the ability to

[generate] a kind of long, truth-anchored and human-lively narrative, able to foster the reader's awareness of the social and political life, debating his/her *Polis*, choosing, acting, discerning between right and wrong, exercising freedom and civic action just as others, in the past, did in their own lives. (Sardica 395)

Luckily, legendary or mythical concepts are not fixed and can be fabricated, altered, undone, and disappear completely (Barthes *Mythologies* 193), leaving room for new alternative versions that might arrive more closely at a human and humane understanding of the women behind the legends. These alternative biographies indicate that “[with] regard to the people of past time we are in the same position as with dreams to which we have been given no association,” (Freud, qtd. in Sardica 388), and thus the use of a “scientific” approach or strict adherence to historical “fact” does not lead to more truthful versions. Instead of history, legend, or myth alone, Marchessault, Laberge, and Hébert use the combination of these discourses with additional fictional elements to reverse the flattening that has occurred to their (hi)stories over time.

As is the case with all postmodern works, the authors discussed here break with the “grand narratives” related to these legendary figures, and offer more ample representations of their (hi)story. In returning multidimensionality to the legendary stories, the authors simultaneously rely on the narratives they aim to subvert, which results in the creation of a clear rupture between history and the standard legends, which had previously become confounded. To this end, rupture serves not only to illustrate the mistreatment of legend and history that these women encountered, but also to “instaure[r] un nouvel ordre du discours; [la rupture] instaure l’ordre de la pluralité, de la fragmentation, de l’ouverture; elle instaure, en bref, l’ordre de l’hétérogène” (Paterson *Moments postmodernes* 20).

## Chapter Three

### Staging Alternative Biographies of Women Writers in Works by Jovette Marchessault

#### Introduction

According to Jovette Marchessault, one of the priorities for her existence is to retrace and retrieve the history of women that has, in her opinion, been continually hidden, distorted, and censored by patriarchal institutions, which she calls the “syndicat du crime” Gaudet 126; Smith 54). Termed the “culture des femmes,” this hidden history includes all aspects of feminine invention, visions, emotions, aspirations, and memory (“Il m’est encore impossible” 208). In her attempts to unearth and honor the “culture des femmes,” Marchessault relies on her weapon of choice—historicization—and like all postmodern writers and many feminist québécois authors in the 1980s, her works challenge the establishment, reject its rules, and expose the injustices they engender. Given that her aims are as political as they are literary, her attempts to destabilize the established order being targeted at patriarchal institutions, Marchessault’s works center almost entirely around the suppression of feminine individuality that has existed throughout history.

Marchessault’s project seeks to use a combination of history and fiction, along with a strong dose of the mythical, to free her (re)tellings from the preestablished structure of patriarchal historical discourse in a postmodern dramaturgical work and establish an alternative format for telling feminine (hi)stories. Since myths are historical—and thus can be suppressed by history (Barthes *Mythologies* 193)—Marchessault’s alternative biographies will not rely on the history or fiction alone, but rather employ elements from a variety of literary forms which allows a more “true” history to emerge. In her alternative versions, quotidian activities typically associated with women such as childbirth, sewing, writing, and cooking are as important as the pillars of modernist

metanarratives like capitalism, christianity, and technoscience (Lyotard *Enfants* 31), and Marchessault endeavors to create a space in which they can be honored accordingly.

To arrive at a truer version of the feminine historical experience, Marchessault exposes and attempts to correct the literal and figurative isolation endured by women throughout history. Unsurprisingly, Marchessault's own militant feminist agenda strongly informs this chapter's theoretical framework. Although the notion of a "collectivité des femmes" was particularly popular in Québec in the 1970s and 1980s, Marchessault's alternative biographies discussed here ultimately show that women have always supported one another, despite attempts to separate them by the agents of patriarchal institutions. As did many of her contemporaries, Marchessault and her close collaborators like Gloria Orenstein and Michelle Rossignol worked in concert to create a history and a culture "spécifiquement féminines et [pour] faire revivre par l'écriture toutes celles qui ont été éliminées par les historiens" (Savona 116). In her œuvre and in her own experience as a writer, Marchessault demonstrates how communities of women correct the separation and isolation that "nous rend à jamais absente. Isolement qui dévore l'imaginaire. Isolement qui a tué tant de femmes écrivains. Aussi isolement qui nous conduit ou à la folie, ou au suicide, ou au silence" (18).

Marchessault's alternative biographies focus on one group of women in particular: writers who, in her opinion, have been historically under appreciated. The "artist-as-protagonist" motif was a common trend in Québec's drama between the mid-1970s and late 1980s. During this time, many works of biography, autobiography, and poetic plays "presented the act of writing as a traumatic *prise de parole* that challenged patriarchal order and the literary canon" (Moss "Staging Writing" 940). These texts are often considered unstageable and disconcerting, since they follow unfamiliar dramatic models and

[...] develop a new theatrical writing involving numerous *mises en abîme*, the mixing of genres and styles, the special use of monologue and narrative, the upsetting and telescoping of time, the fragmentation of space, discontinuity of the story-line, modification of the notion of suspense, and the questioning of the notions of character. (Hébert “The Theater: Sounding Board for the Appeals and Dreams of the Québécois Collectivity” 40-41)

Marchessault’s alternative biographies of historical women writers serve to show the need for multiple voices with uniquely feminine perspectives in order to make sense of the unstable world her new theatrical writing produces.

The women writers Marchessault historicizes hail from around the world and from multiple time periods. Although her subjects are not all from Québec, they are all either francophone by birth or by choice. It is important to have at least a basic understanding of the contexts in which these women wrote in order to then make sense of Marchessault’s (re)tellings. *La Saga des poules mouillées*—arguably Marchessault’s most famous work—features several famous Québécois writers. Laure Conan, Germaine Guèvremont, Gabrielle Roy, and Anne Hébert are all well-known authors from different time periods who struggled to be accepted (to varying degrees) in male dominated, catholic québécois society in order to publish their works.<sup>1</sup> In *Alice & Gertrude*,

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<sup>1</sup> **Marie-Louise-Félicité Angers (pen name, Laure Conan):** January 9, 1845-June 6, 1924. Conan is considered to be the first true French-Canadian female novelist for her psychological novel *Angéline de Montbrun* (1884). She was born in Murray Bay, Canada East, never married, and died of ovarian cancer. **Germaine Guèvremont:** April 16, 1893-August 2, 1968. Known as a preeminent author of a popular French-Canadian literary genre of the time, “*romans du terroir*,” Guèvremont was a journalist, novelist, and house wife. Her most famous work, *Le Survenant* (1945) is considered the final and most complete “*roman du terroir*,” the goal of which was to celebrate rural life at a time of rapid global industrialization. **Gabrielle Roy:** March 22, 1909-July 13, 1983. Born in rural Manitoba, Roy is best known for her first novel *Bonheur d’occasion* (1945) that marked a shift in québécois literature. Published the same year as the last “*roman du terroir*” by Guèvremont, *Bonheur d’occasion* offered a realist view of the lives of

*Natalie & Renée, et ce cher Ernest*, Marchessault offers a historical/fictional version of the relationship between several lesbian writers from the “lost generation.”<sup>2</sup> Finally, Marchessault’s non-traditional biography of Anaïs Nin<sup>3</sup> in *Anaïs, dans la queue de la comète* explores several decades of the controversial writer’s life in 12 acts.

In addition to featuring women writers convening in historicized fictions, Marchessault also relies on her chosen literary form to end feminine isolation and strengthen the female voice. All of the works discussed in this chapter were written for the theater and were performed live, and thus provide Marchessault and the “avatars”<sup>4</sup> of the women writers she creates (Forsyth “Powerful Narratives” 166) with the possibility to “se faire entendre” in a way that is impossible

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working-class, urban French Canadian families at the dawn of World War II. She won the Prix Fémina in 1947 for the work.

**Anne Hébert:** August 1, 1916–January 22, 2000. Arguably the most internationally recognized québécois woman writer, Anne Hébert was born in Sainte-Catherine-de-Fossambault to a wealthy literary family. Her father was a poet and literary critic, and her cousin and childhood friend was modernist poet, Hector de Saint-Denys Garneau. She received awards and honors for many of her works of poetry and her novels, two of which were turned into films (*Kamouraska* and *Les Fous de Bassan*). She spent over 30 years living in France, but returned to Canada in the 1990s and passed away in Montreal in 2000.

<sup>2</sup> At the end of the published version of this play, Marchessault provides readers with a dozen pages of standard biographical information about Alice Toklas, Gertrude Stein, Natalie Barney, Renée Vivien, and Ernest Hemingway. **Alice Toklas:** (April 30, 1877–March 7, 1967) was the partner of famous American authors **Gertrude Stein** (February 3, 1874–July 27, 1946), both expatriates from wealthy families of Jewish descent. The pair met in Paris in 1907 and remained in France until their deaths in 1946 (Stein) and 1967 (Toklas). Toklas devoted her life to supporting Stein’s writing career.

**Natalie Clifford Barney:** (October 31, 1876–February 2, 1972) was another wealthy American expat who hosted a well-known literary salon at her home at 20 rue Jacob in Paris. She was herself a playwright, poet, and novelist whose works focused on feminism, lesbian relationships, and pacifism. One of her longstanding romances was with **Renée Vivien** (11 June 1877–18 November 1909), British poet and playwright who wrote in French. While Marchessault certainly offers biographical information about **Ernest Hemingway** (July 21, 1899–July 2, 1961), his presence functions largely as a means to fully (re)tell the women authors’ (hi)stories. The fact that his name appears at the end of the title, seemingly almost as an afterthought, supports this.

<sup>3</sup> **Anaïs Nin** (February 21, 1903–January 14, 1977) was born and raised in France to Spanish and Cuban parents. She was an essayist and memoirist best known for her journals, which she began writing at the age of 11 and continued until just before her death from cancer. She spent much of her later life in California and New York.

<sup>4</sup> Chantal Hébert also uses the term “avatar” in her analysis of québécois theater; however, her definition of the term is more in line with “archetype,” describing the transformation of the “French-Canadian” into the “p’tit Québécois” (“The Theater: Sounding Board for the Appeals and Dreams of the Québécois Collectivity” 27).



in novels, poetry, and other forms of visual arts (“Répercuter les premiers mots” 18). Theatrical representations give literal body and voice to her (re)tellings. They also provide Marchessault the opportunity to address several aspects of traditional patriarchal control that have historically been dangerous or debilitating for women. Marchessault’s alternative biographies depict women who control the fundamental existential elements of their artistic creation, bodies, and history, which serves to convert a subordination into an affirmation. To this end, Marchessault’s biographical combinations of history, fiction, and myth do not endeavor to elaborate “a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal” (Irigaray *This Sex Which is Not One* 78). Jamming the patriarchal machinery through an alternative historical/fictional/mythical representation lets Marchessault create a new literary theatrical world based on and determined by the feminine experience. The combination of historical fact and fictional/mythical invention that is unrestrained from limiting elements of traditional historical discourse allows the “culture des femmes” to escape enclosure, form a collective feminine voice, and “se faire entendre” in history and the present.

### **Writing/righting the public space**

Both in Québec and elsewhere, women have historically been prohibited from occupying public spaces, and instead were relegated to the “safety” of various forms of cloture, such as the home or the convent. Male-dominated public spaces were considered too dangerous for the delicate feminine composition, and as such, women in Québec remained tethered to their homes, housework, and husbands or priests until even after the Quiet Revolution. Complementing her other qualities discussed in the previous chapter, the mythical québécois mother’s value as a

woman was largely determined by the degree to which she fully committed to self-sacrifice in an interior, insular life in the home or convent. Lori Saint-Martin notes that historically the québécois woman was the “reine du foyer, elle se tient loin du bruit et de la fureur de la vie collective; son influence, sa pureté même sont à ce prix” (*Essais de critique au féminin* 289). If one accepts the male-female relationship to be a sexual economy that benefits the head of household, the role of the public-private space is of particular importance as a limiting factor for women. Because throughout history men have ventured out into the world and have been responsible for effectively participating in various types of public exchanges, their value has been determined by more than their reproductive functions. In contrast, the woman, “owing to her seclusion in the ‘home,’ the place of private property,” women’s unique contribution to society was their ability to birth children and maintain their husbands’ lineage (Irigaray *This Sex Which Is Not One* 83). Thus, considering the private space of the home or convent to be uniquely feminine has served to silence women, hide their contributions, and effectively erase the “culture des femmes” from the historical record.

Marchessault’s œuvre and comments in interviews underscore various forms of danger women faced when entering the public sphere, in addition to hiding their experiences and contributions. Violence and aggression in public settings at women’s expense were often considered a form of theatrical performance, provided for the “syndicat du crime’s” entertainment. She explains her views about the “place publique” in an essay written for a 1980 issue of the theater publication *Jeu*:

[...] la place publique, cette place où nous avons été si souvent convoquées, quelquefois seules, avec nos enfants. Pas pour y être entendues, encore moins écoutées. Entre le XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle et la fin du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, dix millions de femmes

furent brûlées sur les places publiques. Les pieds broyés des chinoises, les mutilations génitales faites aux africaines, les veuves de l'Inde sur les bûchers, les femmes pauvres, cobayes des compagnies pharmaceutiques, ça aussi c'est sur la place publique... *The Show must go on*; ça fait partie du spectacle! ("Il m'est encore impossible de chanter, mais j'écris" 208).

Thus reclaiming the public sphere is critical to Marchessault's mission to retrace and retrieve the untold feminine historical experience, for women in general and women writers in particular. This desire to liberate women onto the public stage also reflects a postmodern refusal of "concepts d'unités et de clôture, un refus de leur puissance impérialiste" (Paterson *Moments postmodernes* 24) and affirms its incredulity regarding metanarratives. Through her alternative combinations of the historical and the fictional, Marchessault uses the public stage to write/right the feminine history rather than mutilate, bind, or burn those who have experienced it.

In writing her (re)tellings for the stage, she summons not only the historical subjects whose (hi)stories she (re)tells, she also summons her contemporaries in the form of writers, feminist scholars, actresses, and spectators. As such, Marchessault's plays address injustices in the present too, in particular an imbalance in the quality of roles available to men and women noted by renowned theater scholar, Richard Schehner: "The majority of roles in the Western classic and modern classic repertoires are male roles. [ . . . ] The imbalance on the live stage can be redressed only by reconceiving what performing on the stage is" (4). Including more multi-dimensional roles for the actresses in her productions was one of Marchessault's goals in creating her (re)tellings: "Que les comédiennes, les actrices aient autre chose à jouer que des rôles dénigrants, mystifiants, débiles. Les femmes dramaturges créeront de nouvelles images de femmes de tous les âges, ni bouffonnes, ni matrones" ("Il m'est encore impossible de chanter, mais j'écris" 208-210). In this

way, the public space of the theatrical performance serves to recognize the talents, uniqueness, and complexities of all women—Marchessault herself, her contemporaries, and under appreciated figures from the past.

Theatrical performance also has an elusive, ephemeral, and unique nature<sup>5</sup> that provides Marchessault with other valuable tools necessary for the (re)telling process. She explains her motivations in her “Lettre à Michelle Rossignol”:

[...] pour moi, écrire pour le théâtre c’est contribuer à détourner le réalisme, ce réalisme qui ne sert qu’à nous évacuer en nous empêchant de paroles et d’imaginaire. En écrivant ce texte, j’ai tenté de retrouver une langue oubliée pour célébrer la culture, la production des femmes. (35)

The “realism” that Marchessault is compelled to redirect is one that has historically shown women through the perspective of patriarchal culture, has rejected or ignored feminine contributions to society, and has searched for an unattainable unity<sup>6</sup> in representation that stifled individuality throughout history. It is also one that dismisses the realities of women while upholding the fictions of men.<sup>7</sup> In addition to addressing limitations of “realist” historical representations, her alternative biographies also respond to a problem with mythical representations, which are “un *accord au monde, non tel qu’il est, mais tel qu’il veut se faire*” (Barthes *Mythologies* 230). Marchessault relies on theatrical performance to publicly expose and undermine “realistic” representations of

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<sup>5</sup> In *Essays of Modern Québec Theater*, Jonathan M. Weiss explains the fleeting nature of theatrical performances, which “unlike print literature or cinema, [...] differ from themselves, to a greater or less degree, according to the circumstances (audience, stage, actors) that attend them” (1).

<sup>6</sup> Leading up to his explanation of the postmodern, Lyotard explains that the desire for reality, i.e. unity, simplicity, and communicability, served as a remedy against depression and anguish that the public feels (*Enfants* 16). This desire for realism came at the cost of individuality for marginalized groups, like women, whose unique personal experiences and identities were ignored.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, “les fictions des hommes, tel le système monétaire, sont des signes pris pour la réalité tandis que les réalités des femmes, telles que l’abus sexuel ou l’inceste, sont prises pour la fiction” (Godard 104).

the feminine experience that are quite the opposite: unrealistic depictions of the feminine past as seen through the eyes of agents of patriarchal institutions. As such, her works expose “la tension entre deux visions de la réalité, celle que les idéologies dominantes ont mises en place il y a des millénaires et que leurs traditions et leurs institutions perpétuent et celle qui reflète et reconnaît l’expérience des femmes” (Forsyth “Jouer aux éclats” 233). Given the countless examples of public representations—whether it be in theater or film—in which women are transformed into monsters, gagged, or completely prohibited from being active, autonomous subjects (Forsyth “Jouer aux éclats” 230), Marchessault’s texts offer readers and spectators an alternative feminine reality that corrects traditional patriarchal representations of both fictional and historical female figures. Just as in other postmodern works, in Marchessault’s œuvre,

[ce] ne sont pas seulement les modes d’échange et de production qui se transforment, ni les seuls rapports sociaux, c’est l’homme même, c’est-à-dire la conscience qu’il a de lui-même et de sa connaissance de l’univers où il vit. Le temps n’est plus le même, ni la vie, ni la mort, ni le savoir, ni rien de ce qui compose la théorie de l’existence” (Ricard 133-134).

One must, of course, substitute man with woman in the citation above for it to be applicable, as Marchessault is concerned only with changing feminine consciousness. Her theatrical representations are not “staged” exclusively according to masculine parameters (Irigaray 68), and thus allow the author to disrupt and modify traditional historical discourse in favor of her new alternative version that illustrates the feminine historical experience above all else.

## Reclaiming the literary public space

Marchessault pays particular attention to the dangers women writers faced in the public sphere throughout time. For their work, women writers have also been sequestered historically, and faced unique hurdles that their male counterparts did not. In addition to being physically restricted as were all women, women writers were also limited in the styles and genres open to them,<sup>8</sup> and were at the mercy of the men who controlled publishing, as well as their fathers and husbands. According to several of Marchessault's avatars, in order to be well received in the public space, women writers could only publish recipe books (*La Saga* 108; *Alice & Gertrude* 26). In short, since women were prohibited from entering the public literary sphere in an open, meaningful way, their influence and contributions were simultaneously hidden and ignored. The lack of women writers compounded this problem, as the male-dominated literary scene further occluded women from (re)presenting themselves, their experiences, and their identities through art.

Marchessault focuses her discussion of the feminine experience in the literary public sphere on a threat that women have encountered there universally throughout history: fire. For centuries, both books and women have been burned on public display by the "syndicat du crime" as a means to control and silence marginalized figures and alternative ideas. *La Saga des poules mouillées* most directly and repeatedly addresses the woman writer's fear of both her texts and her body going up in flames. Once they have convened for their mythical nocturnal meeting "une nuit, sur la Terre promise de l'Amérique vers le nord, au cœur d'un vortex fabuleux" (23), the four avatars of famous québécois authors—Conan, Guèvremont, Roy, and Hébert—discuss some global difficulties and ecotypical hardships they encountered as women writers. Presented as the quartet's

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<sup>8</sup> While this applies to women writers in general, it was particularly true for women writers in Québec whose writings came largely in the form of letters, according to Patricia Smart (*Writing in the Father's House*). Even the first true novel written by a woman, Laure Conan's *Angéline de Montbrun* (1884) begins as an epistolary novel.

“première vieille fille historique” (*La Saga* 28) with “la force de résister à tout” (Smith 57), Laure Conan’s avatar is known as “l’ancienne” in *La Saga des poules mouillées* and her story is the central focus of the play’s first tableau. Throughout the drama, “l’ancienne” and the other “poules mouillées” return to Laure’s experience as a baseline for their own individual historical realities. The women are surprised to learn that Laure is plagued by four fundamental fears, one of which is fire (88-90). She explains that she does not fear physical injury or damage to her property, but is actually terrified by the threat that fire poses to the survival of her literary works.

LAURE: Après la parution de mon premier roman, je me suis bercée toute la nuit. Je le tenais dans ma main, je le regardais pis je pleurais avec la sensation de tomber dans un gouffre. Je gémissais en me baladant de plus en plus vite sur ma chaise, un poing dans la bouche pour étouffer cette peur maudite, l’empêcher de sortir en épouvante. Alors...

ANNE: Laure, Laure, continue.

LAURE: J’ai entendu dans les fonds de la nuit... Ah! Je n’oublierai jamais, jamais.

ANNE: (*la pressant*) Laure, Laure, je t’en prie!

LAURE: J’ai entendu de pas feutrés... *Les brûleurs de livres rôdaient dans la nuit avec du feutre autour de leurs bottes! Affamés! Enveloppés dans une vapeur fugitive! Je les ai entendus! Je les ai entendus! D’énormes pas feutrés parcourant l’immensité de la nuit... Quelque chose me scindait de ma vie... de l’écriture... j’ai compris que j’allais toujours trembler en écrivant.* (94-95, my emphasis)

*La Saga*’s Anne Hébert, known as “la Tête nuagueuse” whose works are the most recent chronologically, reinforces the connection between women writers, fire, and the public sphere:

ANNE: Quand tu écris, que ton livre est publié, tu te retrouves immédiatement sur la place publique, cette place où nous avons été si souvent convoquées pour y être jugées et effacées en même temps que notre propre version de l'Histoire. Tu te tiens là avec ton petit livre, que tu crois anodin. Il sera retenu contre toi comme preuve déterminant ta culpabilité. Sur cette terre promise, on a brûlé deux choses: des femmes et des livres. C'est le matériel de base des bûchers avec des chattes, des vaches, des juments et des truies. (102)

This description uses almost identical imagery to Marchessault in the interview cited above to describe the universal historical threats posed to women upon entry into the public sphere in order to reiterate the experience specific to québécois women writers. In another interview, Marchessault confirms that despite having lived in different epochs, all women writers—including herself—fear being “burned” in the public sphere:

C'est une course aux obstacles, des trous, des précipices. C'est, en tout cas, dans mon cas, la peur de la censure, *la terreur du bûcher*. Et pour écrire, dans *la Saga des poules mouillées*, ce tableau sur le feu, sur les brûleurs de livres, il fallait assumer et comprendre cette terreur primordiale, car sur cette belle terre promise on a surtout brûlé deux choses: des femmes et des livres. (Gaudet 125, my emphasis)

Once a woman writer publishes a creative piece, both she and her production pose a threat to the stability of the established order. In releasing a work of literature—and by extension herself—onto the public stage, both she and her creation could go up in flames.



### Critics: literary “syndicat du crime”

In continually comparing the burning of books and the burning of women on the public stage, Marchessault reminds spectators and readers alike that in both cases, these burnings were perpetrated by pillars of patriarchal culture such as politicians, leaders of the Catholic church, and one other group particular to the world of literature: critics. In interviews, Marchessault has openly expressed an intense disdain for literary criticism, as well as a perceived sadistic tendency inherent to literary critics. In her opinion, this group has historically been dominated by men and has been particularly unjust towards women authors. Despite some exceptions, Marchessault believes that

[tout] l'appareil critique est mis en place pour empoisonner les vivantes et les vivants et ensuite honorer les mortes et les morts. Car la critique, telle que pratiquée, est mortelle, et pour les femmes et pour les hommes. *Quand il s'agit des femmes, elle est, me semble-t-il particulièrement haineuse [...] Les critiques ne boivent pas du café, de la bière ou du vin, ils boivent du sang.* (Smith 57, my emphasis)

All of Marchessault's alternative biographies focus on the often unjust, even cruel reception most women writers received from the male literary critics of their time. In fact, I would argue that the need to juxtapose the masculine and feminine experiences of publicly publishing literary works is one of Marchessault's main motivations for including male authors at all, e.g. in *Anaïs*, *Alice & Gertrude*, and *La Terre est trop courte, Violette Leduc*.<sup>9</sup> In the alternative biography she pens about Anaïs Nin, Marchessault's avatar has countless discussions with important figures in her life, many of whom were also writers. As one could imagine, many of the discussions center around the experiences these historical figures had as they entered the public literary sphere with

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<sup>9</sup> Marchessault's alternative version of Leduc's biography features Gérard Genet extensively. Their relationship and his abusive treatment towards Leduc are central to Marchessault's (re)telling, just as Ernest Hemingway's or Henry Miller's roles are critical to the (re)tellings about Stein and Nin.

varying levels of success and difficulty. Continuing to employ the metaphor of fire, Marchessault's avatar of Anaïs Nin describes the inherent sexism of American critics in a conversation with a contemporary male author and her lover, Henry Miller. "J'étais en première ligne avec mon écriture cosmopolite, onirique et surréaliste et j'ai essayé *le feu meurtrier des critiques...*" (117, my emphasis). While her friends and contemporary male writers like Lawrence Durrell and Henry Miller enjoyed warm receptions from American critics (who were also men), Nin could not even attract publishers. Marchessault imagines a conversation between Nin and Miller in which the former suggests that her sex is to blame for both the difficulty she had publishing her work, as well as her lack of critical success once her writing finally appeared in the public sphere:

HENRY, *incomfortable et se voulant optimiste*: Vous aurez votre revanche. Vous êtes jeune et vos livres circulent de plus en plus! Tous mes amis me parlent...

ANAIS, *sidérée*: Mais j'ai plus de cinquante ans! Et si mes livres circulent, comme vous dites, c'est parce que je les imprime moi-même. En travaillant dix heures par jours, il m'a fallu huit mois pour composer et imprimer *Winter of Artifice*... Ça fait vingt-cinq ans que j'écris dans le vide! Ils m'excluent de leurs anthologies... Il y a, bien sûr, d'autres facteurs qui...

HENRY, *sarcastique*: Vous allez sortir de l'artillerie lourde?

ANAIS: Je suis une femme et tous les directeurs littéraires, tous les critiques sont des hommes...(117-118)

In leaving the private, domestic feminine space to which they had been relegated throughout history, women writers like Nin found themselves ignored or open to attack, both for their sex and for their literary works.

Not only do Marchessault's (re)tellings expose the explicit sexism that women writers faced throughout history, they also underscore the exceptional effort and determination it took these women to persevere when confronted with excessively slanderous criticism. Marchessault's avatar of Gertrude Stein explains the contentious relationship she had with literary critics:

GERTRUDE: [...] Qu'y-a-t-il de plus redoutable pour Gertrude Stein? Les critiques ou la silence des critiques? Mourir de rage ou mourir de chagrin. Ceci dit, un demi-siècle plus tard, ces mêmes gens, complètement et entièrement voués au culte des morts, me consacreront des thèses épaisses, des biographies émouvantes. Non, je ne les convoquerai pas [...] Pas moi, il ne m'auront pas [...] Chacun de mes textes est un casse-tête. Je code! Je les embrouille! Je les rends nerveux! Verbeux! Je code la vulve de Lovey, je code notre vérité, notre chicken à la Queen, et tout ce qui nous rend gay. (94-95)

On several diegetic levels, Marchessault's (re)tellings demonstrate the methods with which women writers persevered in the face of such criticism—both historically and in the alternative reality she herself is creating. While Marchessault created a world that gave historical women a voice and contemporary women more control of their artistic creation, the avatars in her plays and the historical women on which they are based do/did the same. Marchessault's choice of setting is an important mechanism for accomplishing this. In *Anaïs*, despite changes in time, the action largely takes place in Nin's own studio. While not a fully public space, this is where Nin worked tirelessly to produce her literature and subsequently to make it public through independent printing. The setting for *La Saga* is also indicative of the need for a feminine controlled public space. In this example, however, the reader encounters an entirely unworldly environment that is beyond any realistic setting, and thus escapes masculine control.

Marchessault's 1984 play *Alice & Gertrude, Natalie & Renée et ce cher Ernest*, illustrates a real/historical example of a microcosm created by women for women and which reverses many of the "syndicat du crime's" established order. Her chosen setting is Natalie Barney's Parisian salon, the site of innumerable literary and political receptions for over 60 years. As have male controlled salons, Barney's salon served as a sort of in-between space where small groups of individuals could convene to discuss literary or political topics in a semi-public setting.<sup>10</sup> The space she created, however, differed in terms of the roles men and women would play within it. Prior to the 20th century, there were distinct gender roles at play within salons. While men discussed topics of importance, women orchestrated the conversations and, "[by] their very presence [...] created the necessity for polite exchange between participants, and were able to create a neutral, socially sanctioned space for intellectuals to discuss current literary works and ideas" (Greenshields 21). Because of the intersection of the public and the private within the domestic (i.e. feminine) space of the salon, women who served as hosts and salonnières were able to "exert their influence in a public way while adhering to the socially prescribed boundaries of domestic 'women's spheres'" (Greenshields 24), yet they still served the purposes of male attendees. Women were not equal, active participants in the salon's conversations, but rather provided vital support to the male dominated discourse to ensure civility amongst participants.

Barney's own literary salon was similar in some ways, and has been described by her biographer Suzanne Rodriguez as "an organized get-together at which people discuss artistic, political, or other intellectual subjects of mutual interest" (177). In contrast to the traditional

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<sup>10</sup> According to Benedetta Craveri, the original salons were a means to create a social sphere distinct from both the court and the church. "The nobility established its own laws based on a code of behavior marked by the strictest veneration of form [...] Soon the term would no longer be used to signify the human sphere opposed to the divine realm—a place of exile and sin in which everything seemed to lead to the soul's damnation—but would describe a carefully circumscribed social reality" (ix).

definition, however, Barney's salon was inclusive of both aristocratic and middle class participants, as well as of men and women. In her salon, women writers received a particularly warm welcome. According to her assistant, Berthe Cleyrergue, the literary works of women were afforded the same respect and were discussed with the same *gravitas* as those of their male counterparts (Orenstein 487). Through the public/private literary world of her own design, Barney "created an important network of artistic contacts, professional affiliations, and, above all, of female friendships" (Orenstein 485) that allowed, even strongly encouraged, active feminine participation beyond serving as a civilizing force during potentially brusque male debates.

Marchessault's version of the Barney salon goes even farther than the actual historical space, in that men seem to be fully excluded. With walls "tendus de soie gris avec ça et là des tableaux de Romaine Brooks représentant des femmes" (A&G 11), women inhabit the room both literally and figuratively. Hosting a "mysterious" late afternoon rendez-vous, Barney welcomes close friends Vivien, Toklas, and Stein. The women converse, and most of the play's dialogue centers on their unique experiences as women writers, who happened to also be lesbians. All four women were openly gay, and they discuss some of the difficulties and traumas they endured as a result of patriarchal culture's rejection of their relationships.<sup>11</sup>

As the play's four historical women interact, Marchessault continually underscores the safety that this feminine dominated space allows them as women, as writers, and as lesbians. In this space that they created and control and from which men are excluded, the four women openly express their joys and their pains, interact with one another freely without fear of retribution for the physical expressions of love and friendship, and share only constructive criticism, as opposed

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<sup>11</sup>Along with issues that applied to all women, such as society's rejection of creative activities that strayed too far from the norm, they also discuss the social status for lesbian couples and the importance of leaving a will to address the lack of societal acceptance or legal recognition as a couple (86).

to the abuse they traditionally received from members of the literary elite. At least temporarily, Barney's salon serves as the safe space for feminine friendship, creativity, and love to flourish.

This does not mean, however that this feminine space is completely safe from insidious attempts by agents of patriarchal culture to force entry and thwart feminine control in both the public and private spheres. While Marchessault's version of Barney's salon is shut off from male participation, the quintessential male author from the "lost generation," Ernest Hemingway, gains access without the women's permission. Lurking in the shadows, Hemingway goes unnoticed by the women as they embrace and dance together around the room. He interrupts them and irrevocably sullies what had previously been a nurturing feminine environment simply by means of his male presence:

ERNEST, *faussement débonnaire*: L'Internationale lesbienne en personne! *Se dépouillant prestement de sa cape, il apparaît travesti en cocotte*. If you can't fight them, join them!

RENÉE: La paranoïa en personne!

NATALIE, *cinglante*: Nous ne recrutons plus de nouveau *membre* Hemingway!

RENÉE: Et voilà comment on transforme un salon littéraire en porcherie! (40-41, emphasis in original)

Willing to do anything—even dress as a woman—Hemingway destroys the positive, loving environment that existed amongst the women when they were free of male intruders. Marchessault shows the violence associated with Hemingway's forced entry into the public/private space of the feminine literary salon, which, according to Natalie Barney is not recruiting any more "members." The play on words using a common term for the male sexual organ accompanied by Hemingway's

self-imposed presence in the feminine space symbolizes the historical violation of women throughout history and in the literary context.

### **Reinventing time**

Marchessault's alternative biographies also play with the traditional notions of historical and mythical time, in that they rely heavily on factual, biographical information about each of her subjects, as well as mythical representations of both time and place that are unfettered by chronology or geography. History and myth perceive of time in opposed ways. In mythical narratives, time is a circular, never-ending continuum in which indeterminate pasts are constantly connected to and acting upon the present and future. This perception of time could be represented visually with a simple circle, indicating the repetitive nature of human experience. In this understanding of time, repetitions, archetypes, models, etc. carry much greater meaning than do ephemeral, "accidental" incidents that traditional historical discourse lauds. Alternatively, traditional historical perceptions of time favor a more linear understanding that places value not on the indeterminate repetitions but on the particular, the unique events and individuals. Symbolized by a straight line rather than a circle, historical time is irreversible and does not repeat. This concept of time recognizes the specificity of individual events that take place in a given moment, location, and that involve specific actors.

Marchessault seems to propose a hybrid as the best means to provide a "true" version of the global and individual feminine historical experience. Her alternative biographies reflect an impressive grasp of the traditional historical discourse regarding her subjects, and her use of theatrical performance lends even greater authenticity, since "[la] matérialité de la scène confère en effet au texte ce poids de chair et de sang qui est l'apanage de la réalité même" (Bourgoyne

114). Both *La Saga des poules mouillées* and *Alice & Gertrude* demonstrate rigorous historical research on the part of the author as evidenced by the inclusion of obscure references about the women writers that only those with an extensive knowledge of their biographies would recognize. From having Ernest Hemingway mention “votre Berthe”<sup>12</sup> to Natalie Barney in *Alice & Gertrude* (44), to a discussion between Laure Conan and Germaine Guèvremont about rumors that Conan’s brother actually penned her novels<sup>13</sup> (32), Marchessault’s (re)tellings are far from pure invention. She also displays an impressive knowledge of her subjects’ own writings, as well as works by their contemporaries. In fact, *Alice & Gertrude* includes 44 quotations in less than 100 pages from the works of the women writers or from texts written about them. In this way, Marchessault’s work moves beyond the “performance text” that had been so popular in Québec theater in the 1970s, and reinforces the fundamental importance of relying on texts rather than rejecting them as suppressive to the act of creation.<sup>14</sup>

Despite this adherence to historical fact, Marchessault’s narratives also rely heavily on fundamental mythical elements, such as a lack of defined historical moment and/or realist setting. The most pronounced example of this appears in *La Saga des poules mouillées* in which Conan, Guèvremont, Roy, and Hébert meet “une nuit, sur la Terre promise de l’Amérique vers le nord, au cœur d’un vortex fabuleux,” as already mentioned (23). Despite having all been alive for a short period between 1916 and 1924, these four québécois authors could not have all met as described

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<sup>12</sup> As mentioned before, Berthe Cleyrergue was Natalie Barney’s salon assistant, who organized and cooked for the weekly parties for several decades.

<sup>13</sup> The fact that Conan’s works were often attributed to her brother, a notary named Eli Angers, was particularly offensive to Marchessault and underscored a double standard for men and women writers. In a 1982 interview with Donald Smith, she asked “Avez-vous la souvenance qu’on ait attribué l’ouvrage d’un homme à sa sœur ou à sa mère?” (57).

<sup>14</sup> “Performance texts” were a staple of experimental theater in Québec in the 1970s. Freed from the notion that the text was all-important, these works were often improvised and relied on tangible resources “made up from *all* elements at the roots of creation (e.g. objects, actors, text, lighting, sound, and space” (Hébert “The Theater: Sounding Board for the Appeals and Dreams of the Québécois Collectivity” 37).



in Marchessault's play. The fact that the gathering takes place in a wholly unworldly location adds to the distancing from patriarchal notions of historical reality against which Marchessault juxtaposes her alternative biography.

The author also more subtly plays with the notion of historical time in *Alice & Gertrude*, since she picks a very specific, significant date for the play's action—October 1, 1939, the eve of the beginning of World War II—and sets the play in a realistic representation of Barney's famous literary salon. However, on this date it would have been impossible for all of the subjects to have been together in one room. While Natalie Barney was in Paris at this time, none of the other historical figures in *Alice & Gertrude* were. In 1939, Ernest Hemingway alternated his time between Cuba, Idaho, and Key West to write his most famous novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Alice Toklas and Gertrude Stein traveled from their country home in Bilignin to Paris to assure the safety of several paintings, but did not return again to the city until December 1944 (Burns). The most chronologically anachronistic element of Marchessault's (re)telling is the inclusion of Renée Vivien, who died in 1909 at the age of 32 from lung congestion. Thus from the onset, Marchessault's readers and spectators recognize in these works the brechtian "verfremdungseffekt," or distancing effect that mitigates any realism implied through her inclusion of verifiable historical elements.

This distancing effect is most pronounced in Marchessault's (re)telling of Anaïs Nin's (hi)story, due to its circular organization that is more in tune with the mythical concept of time than its counterpart—the linear, historical construct. In *Alice & Gertrude*, there is a relaxing of realism and chronology, but the effect is still a relatively structured biography centered around the interplay between the featured writers and their partners. In *La Saga des poules mouillées*, historical fact is the basis for the play, yet neither the setting nor the interactions between the

subjects were historically possible. Because the “rules” are established early on, there is less vacillation between realism and fantasy in these works, in contrast to *Anaïs, dans la queue de la comète*. In this play, Marchessault creates a disconcerting “*mélange*” of fact and fiction, as well as historical and mythical elements, so that the distinctions between them become more and more murky and harder to ascertain as the work progresses. Her alternative biography shows that both traditional history and myth are actually unstable mixes of fabulation and historical experience that attempt to recapture a moment in time, regardless of whether that moment occurred at a given referential point or simply long, long ago (Ricoeur). The result of this approach is that ultimately the historical and chronological notions of time and place diminish in importance as Nin’s “true” (hi)story takes shape.

From the onset, Marchessault alerts readers to the co-mingling of time as understood in patriarchal societies and traditional historical discourse, and a flexible time-like construct imposed by Marchessault’s (re)telling. Both the time and setting of the play’s action demonstrate this co-mingling:

**Époque:**

De la fin des années quarante au 14 janvier 1977, date de la mort d’Anaïs Nin...

Mais le temps de la pièce se ne déroule pas dans un ordre chronologique... Il y a des bonds dans le temps, comme si les protagonistes chevauchaient une comète...

**Lieu:**

En Amérique, dans le studio d’Anaïs Nin, à Los Angeles... Et dans la mémoire de chacune, de chacun...(11).

As in many of Marchessault’s novels, the reader/spectator can expect that this work will “tourne[r] en rond pour terminer là où la lecture a démarré en prolepse” and that the story itself will be

absorbed by its own *true* hermeneutic focus on writing and reading (Godard 109). Notes of this sort that destabilize the theatrical and literary world continue throughout the play, begin to rely less and less on patriarchal, historical time, and instead place greater emphasis on the hybrid historical-mythical time of Marchessault's alternative biography. The first tableau is entirely realistic in its description of time, and places the reader/spectator firmly on traditional biographical ground:

*Dans le studio d'Anaïs à Los Angeles. Elle écrit son journal, elle répond à son courrier. C'est l'hiver 77, l'hiver de sa mort... On entend une sonnerie téléphonique et un répondeur qui s'enclenche...* (15, italics in original)

Unlike later descriptions of setting, this explanation is not destabilizing for the reader/spectator and does not blur boundaries between traditional and mythical notions of time. However, ominously and omnipotently mentioning that this will be the winter of Nin's death does signal to the reader that the author is playing with the notion of time, is at least aware, if not in control, of how time will be employed, and subtly alerts the reader to be prepared for an untraditional biography to come.

Moving from one tableau to another, the reader can assume that the story shifts, as Marchessault promises, from 1977 to the late 1940s. However, there are several instances that destabilize this assumption and make the reader/spectator question both when and where the action of the play really is, which renders the story less "historical." At the beginning of the second tableau, it seems that the action has shifted from the 1970s to the late 1940s, given that Henry Miller visits Nin "vêtu comme un gangster des années quarante" (37). However, the "true" history as described by Nin in *Vol. 1* of her journal placed her love affair with Miller in the early to mid-

1930s. Thus despite this scene's realistic appearance and description, Marchessault's biography does not fully adhere to the chronology of the "true" biographical details.

Uncertain anachronistic conflicts such as these undermine any illusion of traditional, linear chronology throughout the text and within each tableau, and specific historical reference points become harder to discern as the play continues. As indications by the author become increasingly cryptic or absent entirely, the reader/spectator has difficulty orienting herself. Back and forth between Paris and California, back and forth between the many important people in Nin's life, fewer and fewer dates and locations are offered to orient the play's action. It eventually becomes clear that knowing exactly when and where the narrative takes place is inconsequential to the alternative biography Marchessault offers her audience.

In coupling detailed historical facts and non-linear theatrical performances, "Marchessault arrive à problématiser nos connaissances sur ces écrivaines et à mettre en doute des faits aussi élémentaires que leur identité, leur rôle dans l'histoire littéraire et dans la culture" (Forsyth "Jouer au éclats" 236). Through the reappropriation of the notion of time, and the contrasting reverence for mythical time, Marchessault demonstrates that dates, chronological order, and temporal limits as espoused in traditional historical discourse are not necessary to, and in the case of women writers, hinder one from adequately (re)telling the other's feminine (hi)story. Women writers from the past can take refuge in the historical/mythical hybrid Marchessault creates, in which the imaginary is at the service of reality instead of the reverse (Mauguière "Réécriture du mythe" 186). In fact, thanks to what Thérèse Marois calls Marchessault's "bestiaire mythique," which exists outside of time and space, the author is able to approach the source of vital energies that she associates with the feminine world (52). In order to end and correct the isolation caused by the "temps de l'Histoire" invented to "nous séparer les unes des autres," Marchessault's characters

come together in a space unfettered by the constraints of either historical or mythical time—where “le temps se dilate” (*La Saga* 130-131),—to represent an alternative version of history.

### **Reclaiming the feminine body/body of work**

Once free of the constructs of historical time, several fundamental elements of the other’s feminine (hi)story can be reclaimed and rewritten. As both a militant feminist and politically engaged writer, it should come as no surprise that Marchessault targets the female body as well as the writer’s body of work to accomplish her goal of retrieving and retracing the feminine historical experience. Given her choice to stage these alternative biographies with living, breathing actresses, there is no way for Marchessault to avoid considering how the female body has been portrayed in traditional historical discourse. The combination of human bodies and actual historical biographies gives Marchessault the opportunity to expose the “intime vérité,” which subsequently revives forgotten souls and bodies (“Le sang est le plus beau théâtre” 223-224) and demonstrates the importance of bodies in their varied forms.<sup>15</sup>

In interviews and essays, Jovette Marchessault has clearly indicated the connection she perceives between the female body and writing. In an issue of *Femmes et écriture*, Marchessault and several other québécois women writers responded to the subject “pourquoi j’écris”: “Écrire est une entreprise de courage et de conscience. *Écrire est une hémorragie solitaire*” (33, my emphasis). In “Le sang est le plus beau théâtre,” she again underscores the connection:

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<sup>15</sup> While Marchessault has criticized the limits of earthly bodies, they also play a critical role in maintaining the celebratory, joyous quality of her plays. Because ultimately, even in their most tragic moments, “les spectacles de Marchessault sont *la célébration passionnée et le rituel rythmé des corps sexués des femmes*” (Forsyth “Jouer aux éclats” 243, my emphasis). Marchessault believes that bodies open the doors of life and close those of death, so the mother’s body, the mystical tribal body, the earthly physical body, and the cosmic body are all celebrated in her (re)tellings for their regenerative powers (Gaudet 128).

J'ai préparé ma mise en scène: Venez voir le sang! J'ai préparé mon coup de théâtre:  
Venez voir le sang! J'ameute mes personnages avec les premières pages du texte,  
sac de papier qui enveloppe la chose sanglante. (224)

Describing the writer's work in such sanguine terms forges a corporal connection between the body and literary creation.

When speaking with Donald Smith in a 1982 interview, Marchessault further discusses the implications of this connection, and explains that because of women's bodies, which serve as the sole means of bearing offspring, "[p]our les femmes, il s'agit souvent de choisir entre création et procréation" (58). These sentiments address many of the same issues that appear in other feminist works from Québec<sup>16</sup> written in the 1970s and 1980s, which denounced the sexual repression and exploitation forced upon women by patriarchal culture and that had been responsible for connecting sex, procreation, and motherhood for heterosexual women throughout History (Moss "Passionate Postmortems: Couples Plays by Women Dramatists" 108-109). Marchessault's (re)tellings address this injustice perpetrated by the "syndicat du crime" as it relates to women writers from the past, and endeavor to reclaim the female writer's body so that it can be honored for the artistic creations it has produced, not just the children it has reproduced.

The opening scene in *Anaïs* further connects the female writer's body and her literary body of work. As the play begins, Nin is hard at work at her writing table responding to letters and phone messages from her patients. Suddenly the narration shifts in a decidedly unrealistic direction, and Nin begins to summon individuals from her past by simply speaking their names.<sup>17</sup> Otto Rank,

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<sup>16</sup> Many of these topics also appear in other feminist works from the time; however, there seems to be an even stronger rejection of these past injustices in québécois feminist texts, given the province's reliance on women to strengthen and safeguard the cultural identity through perpetual pregnancies.

<sup>17</sup> This is similar to Marchessault's own creative process as described by the author. In "Le sang des autres est le plus beau théâtre," she describes her artistic process: "Ça commence toujours ainsi: je prends le texte,

Antonin Artaud, Henry and June Miller appear dressed as surgeons and a nurse. Suddenly Nin is no longer writing—she is experiencing violent contractions and eventually delivers a stillborn baby girl. This scene reflects an analogy commonly used by Marchessault, other feminist writers, as well as male and female authors in general: the act of writing and producing a literary text is like the pregnancy, labor, and delivery of a child.<sup>18</sup> As Kathryn Holmes points out, “the English vocabularies for creative products of the mind and for those of the body conveniently overlap—‘conceiving an idea,’ ‘a fertile mind,’ ‘a pregnant phrase’—these are all common expressions that evoke either the unification or separation of mind and body” (10). In fact, Nin’s own writing often espouses this belief, especially for women, as she feels that “[the] female writer [...] descends into her own womb space and discovers deeper truths of her being” in order to create literary works (Oropeza 73). Marchessault’s œuvre also echoes this sentiment, and equates the female body’s capacity to create literary works and human offspring in comparing biological sterility with the inability to write (*La Saga* 33). Although Marchessault’s depiction of creative and biological birth in this tableau is admittedly grim, her avatar of Nin continues to write and print her works, thus continuing to “give birth” to her creative offspring on her own terms throughout her life. Through its circular narrative structure reminiscent of myth, the play terminates just as it began, with a recorded message from Nin’s answering machine speaking to her everlasting fans and patients (15; 180). Despite the injustices against women through creation and procreation, the female writer’s

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les premières pages du texte... Souvent, dans ces parages, je me crois seule parce que tout fait silence. Mirage! Tous les personnages sont couchés près de moi, près de l’endroit où je passe. Ils suivent mon pas avec leurs yeux. Invisibles” (224).

<sup>18</sup> Henry Miller’s most famous novel, *Tropic of Cancer*, features such a metaphoric pregnancy. The author explains: “[The] book has begun to grow inside me. I am carrying it around with me everywhere. I walk through the streets big with child and the cops escort me across the street. Women get up to offer me their seats. Nobody pushes me rudely any more. I am pregnant. I waddle awkwardly, my big stomach pressed against the weight of the world” (27).

body remains powerful and persistent in these alternative biographies and is an essential means of preserving feminine identity and history.

While she is critical of coerced motherhood, Marchessault's avatars do create literary offspring in the form of books and mythical bonds with other female writers. Marchessault's subjects demonstrate and discuss their literary lineage as would biological mothers and daughters. In the matriarchal family of writers presented in *La Saga*, Marchessault's Guèvremont and Roy describe the night that the former gave birth to the latter:

GABRIELLE: Je suis inconsolable! La nuit... la nuit, si tu savais comme j'ai mal.  
(*Elle montre sa tête, touche ses tempes.*) Là, là, ça m'écrase.

GERMAINE: Comme une lente torture. Douleur à en devenir folle de chagrin.  
D'une grossesse à l'autre, c'est la soumission qui me centre. Écaille des aciers...  
leurs valises noires... un bruit de métal au commencement d'une longue torture qui  
me soulève de cris en cris.

GABRIELLE: Que disent-ils?

GERMAINE: Aide-moi, Gabrielle? Pardonne-moi, petite fille.

GABRIELLE: Mais tu n'es pas capable? Que disent-ils? Que disent-ils? Aide-moi  
Germaine!

GERMAINE: Ils disent: "priez pour qu'elle meure, madame, parce que c'est un  
monstre."

GABRIELLE: J'ai tout entendu, Germaine... Tout! Tes cris, tes larmes... J'étais  
là!



GERMAINE: Ils disent que j'enfante des monstres... ils t'écrasent la tête... je crie... Tuez-moi! Au centre de mon corps élargi, ma première enfant blessée... J'ai ton sang sur mes cuisses...

GABRIELLE: J'ai ton sang sur ma tête. Mais nos peaux s'embrassent. Tu es la première femme de ma vie. (116-117)

Traditional descriptions of biological labor and delivery serve to demonstrate the “maternal” connections Marchessault perceives between women writers. Although Guèvremont was not Roy's biological mother and did not carry or deliver her with her physical body, the former's literary work “nourished” that of the latter and allowed her to be “born” as a writer. In relying on descriptions of biological childbirth to describe this literary heritage, Marchessault reappropriates the phallocratic assumption by the leaders of the Catholic church who “continuent d'identifier le principe féminin, les femmes, à leurs seins et à leur utérus, niant ainsi le grand principe maternel qui, dans toutes les anciennes religions, est le principe qui nourrit, qui sustente la vie de la réalité divine intérieure, en chacun, chacune de nous” (Potvin “Entrevue avec Jovette Marchessault” 222-223). Instead it is the act of floating in the “beautiful maternal magma” (*La Saga* 71), attached to the literary umbilical cord of their ancestors that allows these women writers—Marchessault included—to be restored to the world “parmi les autres” (*La Saga* 71). Here, the corporal language of reproduction demonstrates the creative power of the female body, as well as the legacies it produces in human, cultural, and literary histories.

Marchessault herself is a product of this maternal line of women writers. The author confesses that her motivation for historicizing women writers largely stems from her own personal (hi)story and the debt she feels she owes to them. In an interview with friend and fellow playwright

France Théoret, Marchessault relates a dream she had at a time when she was having creative difficulties writing *La Saga*. In this dream, Laure Conan appeared and spoke to Marchessault:

J'ai rêvé que je marchais dans le corridor d'un couvent [...] Au bout du corridor, une porte est ouverte et j'ai vu que c'était une femme qui ouvrait cette porte de plus en plus largement à mesure que je m'approchais. Quand je suis arrivée à elle, elle a simplement dit ceci: "Je t'attendais! Je suis Laure Conan." Je suis entrée dans la pièce et là j'ai vu une longue table, longue à l'infini... autour de la table, des centaines de femmes qui me regardaient, muettes. J'ai figé sur place! Je les regardais et il me semblait que je les connaissais toutes [...] Puis l'une d'elle [*sic*] s'est levée... Celle-là, je l'ai reconnue: c'était Germaine Guèvremont! [...] Puis peu à peu *la Saga* est sortie de je ne sais encore quelle mémoire... Je commençais à comprendre que j'aurais, que j'avais une relation avec toutes les femmes qui m'avaient précédée dans le temps de l'Histoire, que pour moi elles étaient ainsi que des mentors, des esprits-guides. (18)

Indeed, she is showing that the feminine body responsible for and the result of artistic creation "brings about a direct confrontation with the issue of the relation of art to the world outside it—the world of those social, cultural, and ultimately ideological systems by which we live" (Hutcheon "Challenging the Conventions of Realism" 34). Marchessault cites passages by Gabrielle Roy in *La Saga* while her avatar of Gabrielle Roy cites passages from Germaine Guèvremont—not only are there several layers of self-representation, but in relying on references from these women writers' bodies of work, Marchessault and her characters reject the patriarchal domination of the literary canon in favor of an almost fully female version. Thus, in Marchessault's version, women serve as the landmarks or points of reference in the project of self-definition and affirmation.

Mothers, who in this case are the literary sort rather than biological, serve as milestones, not the fathers of the traditional literary canon (Mauguière “Réécriture du mythe” 178).

## **Movement**

The connection Marchessault establishes between the body of work and the female body also allows her to criticize and correct the lack of female mobility throughout history on several diegetic levels. As we discussed before, women have been literally stuck on the inside throughout history—be it as a wife or a nun—and stuck in a culture that did not afford them the freedom of figurative mobility to make decisions about their own careers or bodies. As a form of repression by the “syndicat du crime,” immobility in Marchessault’s (re)tellings also prohibits women from assembling and keeps them in total physical, emotional, and artistic isolation from other women. In her essay “When Our Lips Speak Together,” Luce Irigaray facetiously cautions women to keep still because “[when] you stir, you disturb their order. You upset everything. You break the circle of their habits, the circularity of their exchanges, their knowledge, their desire. Their world” (207). Figurative and literal feminine movement destabilizes the patriarchal power structure that has historically isolated women.

Both the historical women writers and their avatars reject this immobility. In breaking free from forced societal inertia and isolation, the women writers presented by Marchessault—as well as Marchessault and the women with whom she created these alternative biographies—assert that “l’avenir de l’humanité est une chose dont le développement et la splendeur n’ont pas de limites. Pour envisager cette possibilité, encore faut-il être capable d’échapper à *l’inertie de nos institutions*, à la peur. Si nous laissons tout cela nous étouffer, nous ne pourrions jamais innover d’une façon consciente” (Potvin “Entrevue avec Jovette Marchessault” 225, my emphasis).

Figurative and literal movement is of importance for the creation of Marchessault's theatrical œuvre and within the works themselves. In *Alice & Gertrude*, Renée Vivien is horrified by the idea of "se fossiliser sur place," and instead believes that in a world dominated by women "[...] chacune prendra son propre vol, le long des mondes anciens!" (18-19). Natalie Barney confirms that women who have a desire to explore or an interest in anything other than remaining within their domestic prison ultimately find themselves excluded from society (80-81). In *La Saga*, Gabrielle Roy and Anne Hébert discuss women's historic place within patriarchal institutions using the imagery of mobility/inertia.

GABRIELLE: Marcher pour marcher, bien sûr, ça ne s'oublie pas. Mais marcher pour avancer, ça c'est une autre paire de manches.

ANNE: Où veux-tu en venir?

GABRIELLE: Te souviens-tu des jeux chéris de notre enfance **heureuse**, ô Tête nuageuse?

ANNE: Lesquels?

GABRIELLE: Prenons le plus exemplaire: la corde à danser. *Elle regarde derrière elle.*

ANNE: Que regardes-tu derrière?

GABRIELLE: Le chemin que j'ai parcouru en dansant à la corde. C'est fou mais je crois bien que je suis restée sur place! Pourtant, je les égarais toutes! Des fois, même, je les enterrais. Rien à faire, le lendemain il y avait une âme pieuse qui en ressuscitait une. Un archéologue zélé pour en déterrer une autre! J'ai reçu au moins deux cents cordes à danser. Et toi? (49-50, emphasis in the original)

Throughout these descriptions of literal, physical female immobility, we can also begin to recognize Marchessault's allusions to the need for political movements and for all women—but writers in particular—to “mobilize.” Marchessault's avatar of Roy particularly focuses her attacks on religious institutions responsible for governing culture and espousing various forms of patriarchal spirituality that keep women immobilized, isolated, and unable to form political movements together:

GABRIELLE: [...] Pendant qu'on est à genoux dans leurs mosquées, leurs ashrams, leurs basiliques à miracles, leurs sanctuaires à lampadaires, leurs chapelles à chapelets et autres bécasses décorées pour leurs saints-sièges, je te ferai remarquer que pendant ce temps-là on ne marche pas sur le parlement, on ne se baigne pas à l'O.N.U., on ne s'infiltré pas à la Maison-Blanche, au Kremlin. On ne prend pas d'assaut l'Elysée, les palais de Pékin ou de Tokyo, ni l'hôtel de ville de Jérusalem, on ne siège pas au conseil municipal. On n'est même pas à Rome, dans le saint des saints. Non. On est ailleurs, dans le noir de la grande noerueur,<sup>19</sup> en train de se pétrir la culpabilité, les deux pieds dans le bénitier en tétant des hosties. Maudit! (68).

Marchessault suggests that as long as women subscribe to the beliefs of institutions like patriarchal religions that systematically immobilize and isolate them, they will remain unable to exert control over their own existence, particularly in the political sphere. Marchessault confirms in the “guise de dédicace” section of *La Saga* that she believes women can use this forced immobility and isolation to their advantage and to fuel the feminist political movement. She uses corporal terms

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<sup>19</sup> Marchessault is playing on the term “Grande Noirceur,” which was a period marked by religious and political conservatism under Maurice Duplessis between 1936-1939 and 1944-1959 before the Quiet Revolution.

to explain her belief, again reinforcing the connection between the female body and body of writing:

Là où le patriarcat nous castre, nous ridiculise, nous interdit d’images et de paroles, *nous empêche de nous mettre en mouvement* dans les espaces de l’imaginaire, une véritable critique féministe, et toutes les formes et les manifestations de solidarité, de reconnaissance nous aident à continuer *notre voyage dans la création*. (14, my emphasis)

To upset the balance of power and successfully gain control over their own bodies and messages, women must come together, move, and mobilize in order to finally offer an alternative version of the feminine experience that they create, rather than one created by their oppressors. In doing this, they can “tout transgresser, sciemment, et [...] en finir avec ce qui [les] paralyse à des profondeurs ou à des hauteurs [qu’elles ignorent] peut-être” (*La Saga* 111).

Ultimately, Marchessault’s alternative biographies offer examples of how women can mobilize in the present, how they have done so in the past, or how they *could have* done to preserve and honor the (hi)stories of forgotten literary women. For instance in *Anaïs*, Marchessault’s Nin protects the (hi)stories of her own life and the lives of other women through her Journal, printing press, and recordings with patients. She serves as both the archive and the producer of feminine experiences. In the case of *Alice & Gertrude*, the women come together to preserve “la culture des femmes” in an enormous “*Arche*” that Natalie Barney has constructed and filled with a variety of literature, science, and political texts. Barney explains that she has created the “*Arche*” to house ignored or forgotten works written by women “pour conserver tout ce qui a fait que vivre est bon; aimer et comprendre toujours possible” (102). Repurposing religious imagery of Noah’s Ark,

Barney's "*Arche*" demonstrates the unique ability of women and their literary productions to serve as the keepers of memory and preservers of culture in another way than through childbirth.

In *La Saga*, the universal feminine experience and individual (hi)stories are unearthed, protected, and deciphered in a "grand livre des femmes [qui] n'aura pas fin" (132-134) that Laure Conan, Germaine Guèvremont, Gabrielle Roy, and Anne Hébert write collectively. Despite some argument, ultimately the women mobilize to accomplish this task. Marchessault's avatars reference many women writers from other cultures who too have been under appreciated throughout history. Not only does this serve to preserve forgotten histories, it also ushers in the experiences of many other women writers on to the public stage. The play's dialogue terminates with clear indication of the need for feminine community and mobilization. The actresses playing the four québécois authors, who were wearing harnesses that allowed them to levitate, "se mettent en marche dans l'espace" and rattle off endless names of women writers from around the world whom they will meet as they write the infinite book on the "culture des femmes," an activity in which Marchessault herself also participates.

Echoing the postmodern tendency to use "*mises en abyme*" of the writing process, Marchessault's avatars begin to (re)tell the other's feminine (hi)story while Marchessault simultaneously tells/stages theirs. On multiple diegetic levels, there exists in Marchessault's works an accumulation of examples of identification "actifs à différents niveaux [qui] permet de dévoiler la présence d'un système d'autoreprésentation" (Paterson *Moments postmodernes* 30). Marchessault, the actresses and scholars with whom she works, and the avatars she creates are thus ultimately able to successfully produce literary works on the public stage that honor the hidden contribution of women to society.

## Conclusion

In allowing for temporal, mythical, historical, and theatrical movement that ends female isolation, Marchessault creates the possibility for communities populated and controlled by women who, in her opinion, “se sont toujours aidées, épaulées, encouragées” (*La Saga* 13). Her postmodern theatrical alternative biographies exemplify the practice of “mentir-vrai” (Bourgoyne), in that they rely on historical fact in order to (re)tell a feminine experience that is released from the limits of traditional historical discourse and patriarchal concepts. In her (re)tellings, heroines are more than just a foil to masculine heroes; they don’t need men to “se faire valoir” (Bourgoyne 117). Marchessault’s alternative biographies go beyond traditional historical fiction and seek a “higher form of truth [and refuse] the restrictions of linearity, temporality, historicity and cloture” that the institutions and agents of the “syndicat du crime” have imposed on women throughout history (Moss “Creation reenacted” 269). In rejecting these notions espoused by traditional historical discourse and patriarchal order, Marchessault and her avatars can “remonter plus loin que la Genèse officielle, [...] retracer la culture des femmes à son premier embryon de bonheur” (*La Saga* 110-111).

As we have seen in other postmodern works, Marchessault’s (re)tellings make room and set the stage for multiple feminine voices as a means to correct the univocality of traditional historical discourse and patriarchal society. These voices offer alternative versions of (hi)stories that “refusent [...] d’admettre une seule vision et une seule autorité et [...] subvertissent toute notion de contrôle, de domination et de vérité” (Paterson *Moments postmodernes* 18). Representative of the feminine communities and an end to the forced isolation women have experienced throughout history, the chorus of feminine voices occurs on several diegetic levels both in the past being represented and in the present of the reading/performance. Focusing her



biographical attention on women writers, Marchessault promotes figurative and literal mobility and mobilization in order to challenge, reject, and reestablish the established order. Since the entire patriarchal structure is subverted with every woman who writes (*Smart Writing in the Father's House* 15-16), (re)telling the (hi)stories of influential and underrated women writers from the past allows Marchessault to pay her respects to her “mothers,” the women who paved the way for her own career as an artist and writer and impact the experiences of her contemporaries.

Concepts like space and time that were limiting and aggressive in the control of the “syndicat du crime” are now nourishing and breed creativity in the communities of women Marchessault creates. The stage is no longer a venue where women and books are burned for the patriarchy’s entertainment, but rather it is the place *par excellence* to honor “la culture des femmes.” Criticism can be shared without mortally wounding the writer, and instead serves to support the woman’s artistic growth, push her to go farther and encourage her to “nourrir le texte avec [sa] propre vie” (*La Saga* 16). In the same room or miles apart, chronologically contemporary or completely anachronistic—Marchessault’s alternative biographies tell the (hi)story of communities of women and how they serve to support each other in their creative endeavors despite patriarchal society’s constant attempts to separate and isolate them. In so doing, she frees the women writers’ (hi)stories, simultaneously employs and undermines fundamental elements of traditional historical discourse, and like other postmodern works “remet en question tant les grands discours philosophiques, historiques et scientifiques que les systèmes de pensée annexés aux notions de consensus ou de vérité logocentrique” (Paterson *Moments postmodernes* 1). Marchessault asserts that although the “syndicat du crime’s” “[...] history, their stories, constitute the locus of [women’s] displacement” and that “[...] their fatherland, family, home, discourse, imprison [women] in enclosed spaces where [they] cannot keep on moving, living as [themselves]”

(Irigaray *This Sex Which Is Not One* 212), the “culture des femmes” can be honored and previously hidden stories can be (re)told in the new limitless feminine world she creates. The author seeks to destabilize the established order and forces her reader/spectator into a position of discomfort. From this position of instability, the reader/spectator must examine her understandings of the world in which she lives, because “what is at stake is no longer the representation of a supposedly objective world, recognizable to all, but rather the reconstruction of the real from another perspective, whose purpose is to offer a new way of looking at the world” (Hébert “The Theater: Sounding Board for the Appeals and Dreams of the Québécois Collectivity” 42). Marchessault’s alternative biographies embrace the postmodern spirit which challenges the notions of intellectual authority “raffine notre sensibilité aux différences et renforce aussi notre capacité de supporter l’incommensurable” (Paterson *Moments postmodernes* 23), as proposed by postmodern thinkers like Lyotard. In this new world that relies on history, fiction, and myth, the more often the female voice speaks, the more quickly the fog of patriarchy and traditional historical discourse will lift and dissipate (“Répercuter les premiers mots” 18) and set the stage for a “true” feminine (hi)story to be (re)told.

## Chapter Four

### New Historical Space in Anne Hébert's *Le Premier Jardin*

#### Introduction

Anne Hébert commonly employs actual historical events and actors in her fiction, as we have seen in previous chapters in this dissertation. However in her sixth novel, *Le Premier Jardin*, the reader senses something different in Hébert's use of history. Published in 1988, *Le Premier Jardin* explores the individual and collective history of several female figures through the optic of the personal histories of Flora Fontanges, an aging actress who was orphaned as a young child and returns to her hometown after many years performing abroad. At the request of both a local director and Maud, her semi-estranged daughter, Flora must confront her own and Québec's past(s). While touring the city with Maud's boyfriend Raphaël, Flora imagines and even inhabits the lives of several obscure female figures from Québec's past, exposing both her own and the province's painful relationship with their heritage. Jumping back and forth from past and present, actual and imagined, the author weaves together history and fiction to such an extent that the distinctions between the two disappear. The distinctions between Flora's own past and the pasts of these fictional(ized) feminine figures are also treated almost identically, which further blurs the lines between fact and fiction in the new historical space Hébert creates. This use of history creates fertile ground for a critical examination of the (hi)stories told about women throughout Québec's past. As do other texts that exhibit postmodern characteristics, *Le Premier Jardin* is "not ahistorical or dehistoricized, though it does question our (perhaps unacknowledged) assumptions about what constitutes historical knowledge" (Hutcheon *A poetics of postmodernism* xii), and "tout en mettant en valeur l'Histoire et l'importance d'une contextualisation historique, il remet en cause la légitimation de ce savoir" (Paterson *Moments*

*postmodernes...* 53-54). *Le Premier Jardin* impugns the accepted practice of writing “normal” histories in the québécois context, and forces a discussion of the truth and fullness of its historical representations. In order to accomplish this critical examination of “normal historical practice” (Berkhofer), Anne Hébert relies on many of its own elements and demonstrates its methods to subvert the traditional historical discourse that it creates.

In this chapter, we will examine how Anne Hébert’s *Le Premier Jardin* systematically showcases and subsequently undermines the strategies accepted by normal historical practice that lead to the creation of “Great Stories” as a means to honor marginalized (hi)stories that had previously been diminished, if not ignored all together. For example, Hébert calls into question the insufficiency of facts; a (perceived) assumption of historical plenitude; the difficulty of historical polyvocality; and an inability to adequately represent multicultural viewpoints, just to name a few. Hébert not only exposes and criticizes these assumptions about the past that serve as guiding principles for normal historical practice, she also proposes new methods for writing the (hi)story of that/those past(s) to address the feminine collective history of the province’s past and the individual story of Flora Fontanges. Through the creation of a new historical space that allows for a coexistence of history and fiction personified by Flora Fontanges, Anne Hébert (re)tells the other(’s) feminine (hi)story, and also writes/rights the wrongs of traditional historical discourse in the québécois context.

### **Insufficiency of normal histories**

Historians’ attempts to distinguish their discipline from other narrative or scientific forms have long led to divisions within the field. Finding itself in a very unique position, History can neither be defined as “pure science,” nor as a means of “free artistic manipulation” (White *The Burden of History* 111). Normal historical practice dictates that the job of the historian is thus to simply and faithfully

present to the public the past “as it was,” to cite the famous phrase by Leopold von Ranke, the father of modern history.<sup>1</sup> The assumption of “as is” history-telling “exige [...] de l’historien de faire parler les sources elles-mêmes [...] et de s’effacer, dans l’écriture historiographique, totalement en tant que subjectivité pourvue d’un *style* et dirigée par des interrogations personnelles” (Lusebrink 109, emphasis in original). The ultimate goal of normal historical practice is to let the facts speak for themselves, with no stylistic or subjective influence from the historian.

Normal historians’ assertion of an entirely accurate, objective vision of the past is ultimately not possible, according to postmodern thinkers. The process of selection, interpretation, and organization of a given history—called “emplotment” by Hayden White and Paul Ricœur and “*les intrigues*” by Paul Veyne—is inherent to normal historical writing and prohibits historians from ever entirely separating their own identity and subjectivity from their texts. White offers a paradigm exposing how the normal historian works to assemble a chaotic mess of disparate facts in a chronological structure which both gives them narrative form (i.e, a beginning, middle, and end) as well as aesthetic, epistemological, and ideological meaning particular to that specific author, a process that shares many qualities with a fiction writer’s methods. This “interference” on the part of the historian forces one to question the distinctions between historical and fictional works. In fact, many historians and literary theorists have argued that “[a]ll accounts of our experience, all versions of ‘reality,’ are of the nature of fiction” (Suknick 113), that “[t]here is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand it: there is only narrative” (E.L. Doctorow qtd. in Cohn *The Distinction of Fiction* 8), that “l’histoire est un roman vrai” (Veyne 10), and that “l’histoire n’existe pas” (Veyne 26).

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<sup>1</sup> According to Leopold von Ranke, who is credited as “the most important historian to shape [the] historical profession as it emerged in Europe and the United States in the late 19th century” (Hoefflerle, *Essential Historiography Reader* (68), “historical evidence was more beautiful and, at any rate, more interesting than romantic fiction. I turned away from it and resolved to avoid all fabrication and invention in my works and stick to the facts” (qtd. in Cassirer [1970] 192).

According to normal historical practice, facts are defined as “something definitely done” (Gilliam 233) or “a claim to knowledge established by the methods of historical inquiry” (Ritter 153), and are the key to distinguishing History from Literature. Of all the characteristics that define normal historical practice and its value, “none seems more vital [...] than the distinction between fictive invention and factuality” (Berkhofer 66). Since the late 19th century, however, the notion of facts has been a contested issue amongst scholars of history and literary theory. Many scholars, especially those adhering to postmodern beliefs like Paul Veyne and Michel de Certeau, fear the “insufficiency of facts” (Berkhofer 53) to represent the plenitude of the past and have questioned the legitimization of History as a totalizing scientific narrative. This stems from the “mutilated” quality of historical knowledge, which does not tell what an historical event *was*, but only what it is still possible to know about that event (Veyne 24-25). Just as with the histories based upon them, facts themselves are also interpretations formed by an agent (the historian) through subjective constructions of the past. Evidence and facts only gain meaning when viewed through an established perspective or framework, “chaque fait n’a de sens que dans son intrigue” (Veyne 58), and facts are not verifiable, only falsifiable (de Certeau 59). Given the importance of interpretation and the use of subjective frameworks, it is difficult to consider any “facts” to be universally true.

In *Le Premier Jardin* and throughout her œuvre, Anne Hébert does not fully reject the notion of “facts” in the normal sense. Nor does she fully reject the notion of “events,” which traditional historical discourse defines as “any segment of past human action or experience defined in the course of historical inquiry” (Ritter 138). *Le Premier Jardin* makes reference to and relies on a considerable number of verifiable events and facts from Québec’s past. From a discussion of the “misunderstanding

that started it all,”<sup>2</sup> to the planting of the first garden by French colonists<sup>3</sup> and the arrival of “*les filles du Roi*,” to the aftermath of the French surrender of New France to the English—Anne Hébert addresses many of the major, early events in Québec’s past that continue to have a lasting effect on the province’s present and future.<sup>4</sup> She even makes reference to the true first settlers: indigenous people, known in Canada as members of the First Nations.<sup>5</sup> In fact, just as in *Kamouraska* and *Les Fous de Bassan*, the novel’s entire plot revolves around an actual *fait divers*, the fire at the Saint-Charles orphanage.<sup>6</sup> However, “facts” are shown to indeed be problematic. In the case of Québec, facts have led to limited (and limiting) generalizations about collective groups of women, and often point to a complete lack of information regarding their individual roles in the province’s past. Anne Hébert’s treatment of individual feminine (hi)stories from Québec’s past exposes the “illusions de reconstitution intégrale [qui] non seulement nous [laissent] ignorer beaucoup de choses, [elles] nous laissent ignorer que nous les ignorons” (Veyne 25). Thus, in Hébert’s novel, we see that facts alone provide insufficient evidence to (re)tell the feminine historical experience in Québec.

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<sup>2</sup> “Raphaël, parfois, en guide scrupuleux, rappelle que la venue au monde de la ville n’a été qu’un malentendu, les fondateurs croyant être sur la voie de l’Orient et de ses richesses d’or et d’épices” (*Le Premier Jardin* 55).

<sup>3</sup> Louis Hébert and his wife, Marie Rollet, moved to Québec in 1616 with their three children. They are credited as the first French colonists to settle in New France, because they were the first to cultivate agricultural land, i.e. plant the first garden, in 1620.

<sup>4</sup> Historian Jocelyn Létourneau has written extensively on the problematic, often painful relationship modern day Québécois have with their history, in particular what is viewed as France’s abandonment of the province to the English “oppressor.” See for instance *Passer à l’avenir: Histoire, mémoire, identité dans le Québec d’aujourd’hui*. Éditions du Boréal, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> “[...] Céleste a pris un air offensé pour déclarer que toute cette histoire inventée par Raphaël et Flora Fontanges au sujet des fondateurs de la ville était fausse et tendancieuse.

— Le premier homme et la première femme de ce pays avaient le teint cuivré et des plumes dans les cheveux [...] Le premier regard humain posé sur le monde, c’était le regard d’un Amérindien et c’est ainsi qu’il a vu venir les Blancs sur le fleuve [...]” (*Le Premier Jardin* 79).

<sup>6</sup> A fire broke out at l’hospice Saint-Charles in Québec City at 10:30 AM on December 14th, 1927. The orphanage was operated by the Sœurs du Bon Pasteur. There were 400 residents: 371 children and 30 nuns. Accounts vary between 33 and 36 victims, most of whom were children. See Lapointe *Patrimoine, Histoire et Multimedia*.

Although Hébert points to lacking representation of the feminine experience in the province's history, *Le Premier Jardin* features Québec and its past more directly than any other texts in her corpus. As we saw in chapter one, the prevalence of Québec in Hébert's writing and her writing process are fundamental (Gauvin 226). While the québécois landscape, with its snow covered hills and cobblestone streets, does serve as a pervasive backdrop in *Kamouraska*, Québec and the accepted facts about its History are never actually the focus of the story as they are in *Le Premier Jardin*. In *Le Premier Jardin*, Flora Fontanges returns to her native Québec in order to play the role of Winnie in *Oh! les beaux jours* by Samuel Beckett, and also at the behest of her daughter, Maud. Working and living in France for decades, Flora has inhabited fictional(ized) women in the roles she has played, but being back in her hometown again forces her to return to her painful past(s) and past self(ves). Flora's (hi)story is integrated in the fabric of the province's past, and is thus treated in much the same way as the (hi)stories she (re)tells about women from the 17th-20th centuries. Although more painful and personal than the (hi)stories she (re)tells, Flora's own past is marked by the same joys and pains, such as lacking factual information, losses of name and identity, maternity, etc. Although her own (hi)story will not be (re)told until later in the novel, it is the first to which the narrator alludes and its (re)telling is clearly the ultimate goal. Her (hi)story will need to be treated as the other feminine stories in order for Flora to fully and finally tell it.

Flora initially wanders the city much as the American tourists do—with perfunctory visits to sites that traditional historical discourse has deemed landmarks. She visits places and reads plaques about people and events that constitute “History,” which is the “histoire des sociétés, histoire de ce qui est important, de ce qui importe pour nous” (Veyne 31). As a result, *Le Premier Jardin* is in many ways a history lesson of Québec, although not in a traditional sense. According to Falardeau, “officialisée et stéréotypée, marquée par les dates, les fêtes nationales et populaires, elle transmet aux



générations la ‘légende d’un peuple,’ ses mythes fondateurs, ses origines héroïques et épiques” (561). Hébert will not present the most salient milestones in the province’s early history in chronological order or from a unified viewpoint, however. This distinct approach immediately distinguishes her text from both normal historical practice and realist historical fiction,<sup>7</sup> and sets the stage for a very different treatment of the province’s origins. Throughout the novel, how Anne Hébert treats Flora Fontange’s personal history also adds to the historical picture she is painting, with allusions to political and cultural domination at the hands of the English that persists to the present (Falardeau 565).<sup>8</sup>

While there is no doubt that the story takes place in and is about the history of the province and city of Québec, Hébert never once mentions the name “Québec,” thus playing with the entire notion of fundamental facts regarding the province’s foundational myths and heroic origins. “Le nom de la ville de son enfance n’est pas affiché au tableau des départs” (10), and in fact it is not mentioned anywhere in the novel. Hébert also plays with the notion of facts by changing the names of many of the “true” events, both major and minor, from Québec’s past to which she alludes in her text. The actual fire that took place at hospice Saint-Charles is said to have happened at hospice Saint-Louis in *Le Premier Jardin*. Also, Renée Chauvieux, a young *filles du Roi* who is found dead in the snow in the novel, is based on an actual King’s girl named Madeleine Fabrecque who received passing mention in the records from that time. The practice of altering names from the province’s major and minor histories is common in Hébert’s œuvre. Any of Hébert’s texts that rely on “true” events and actors maintain many of the “facts” about their history, but change relevant names. In contrast to the ever-

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<sup>7</sup> Two of the most basic guiding principles of the historian’s role in the creation of normal historical narratives are to organize “material into a chronologically sequential order and [focus] the content into a single coherent story, albeit with subplots” (Stone “The Revival of Narrative” 3-4).

<sup>8</sup> “On ne rêve pas d’une robe en satin, couleur *american beauty*, parce que cela fait vulgaire, mais on choisit une jupe écossaise de chez Renfrew, aux authentiques couleurs des clans écossais. Tout ce qui est écossais ou anglais d’ailleurs est très bien” (*Le Premier Jardin* 136).

present refrain of Québec, “Je me souviens,” Hébert underscores the disinterest and disregard in traditional historical discourse for the “facts” relating to the feminine historical experience, particularly the (hi)stories of individual women. In the past, present, and presumably the future, Québec looms large in the identities of all its citizens, whether or not they reside within its bounds,<sup>9</sup> yet Hébert does not “speak its name” in (re)telling its story as she does for other, fictionalized characters. Although Québec and its history are vital to Hébert’s novel, the author does not endeavor to simply honor the story of Québec that has already been told through traditional discourse’s treatment of certain “facts” and “events.” Her version will reverse this trend in that the History of Québec only serves to honor the women whose (hi)stories are being (re)told. In this way, the individual will be able to rise above the collective, regain her independent identity, and be acknowledged for her individual role in forming the province. Neither Flora’s own (hi)story, nor the other feminine (hi)stories she (re)tells will maintain the status quo of traditional historical discourse or normal historical practice.

### **Female archetypes in Québec’s past: a marginalized collective**

While the role of women has appreciated a certain level of attention in traditional historical discourse in the québécois context, the feminine contribution has been predominantly discussed through representative groups, rather than specific recognition for individual women. There are very few individual, named women whom traditional historical discourse has honored for their work in founding the province,<sup>10</sup> a trend that continued in History books until the Quiet Revolution in the 1960s. Thus for three centuries, women in Québec were treated as one-dimensional and representative

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<sup>9</sup> *Le Premier Jardin* is often treated as a sort of fictional autobiography of Anne Hébert herself, given that the protagonist resides in Touraine in France, and returns to the unnamed Québec after a long absence.

<sup>10</sup> As touched on in the introduction, there are essentially three women from Québec’s very earliest days who receive individual attention and praise for their contribution to the province’s establishment: Marie Rollet, Marie de l’Incarnation, and Marguerite Bourgeoys.

of several groupings we will refer to as “archetypes.” Female archetypes shaped the traditional historical discourse’s portrayal of women and their role in Québec’s past, which adheres to Veyne’s postulate that History is interested in distinct individual(ized) events, but not in individuality (72). History “se propose de raconter les civilisations du passé et non de sauver la mémoire des individus; elle n’est pas un immense recueil de biographies” (73). Traditional historical discourse in the québécois context has thus been more interested in retelling the (hi)stories of representative female categories, rather than of individual women.

Just as in traditional historical discourse, Anne Hébert highlights several female archetypes and demonstrates their important role in founding the province and throughout the centuries. However, she does this not to maintain the status quo, but rather to subvert it and to provide the archetypal Québécoise more than just a collective mention. Echoing the poststructuralist and multiculturalist denial of the universality of historical viewpoints and knowledge, Anne Hébert’s unique use of history and fiction also serves to repudiate the “unified and usually omniscient viewpoint of traditional history-telling in favor of diversity of gender [...] and other social distinctions” (Berkhofer 3). Hébert achieves this in *Le Premier Jardin* by resurrecting specific individual women from within the collective feminine groups provided by traditional historical discourse, thus offering a (re)telling of the unique personal *and* universal collective feminine experience in the québécois context. Later in this chapter we will discuss the ways in which Hébert undermines History’s representation of female archetypes from Québec, but first we must understand which archetypes are in question.

According to Jaap Lintvelt, feminism is the dominant ideology in *Le Premier Jardin* because of the text’s treatment of one collective feminine group: “*les filles du Roi*” (158). The women who traveled from France to the new world in the mid-17th century are well known to modern day Québécois. With the sole purpose of populating the colony through expedited marriages to the male

colonists in New France, “the King’s Girls” are often viewed as the original mothers of the province.<sup>11</sup> However, some scholars feel that historians have made a concerted effort to validate the provenance of these women, since it is possible they were predominantly prostitutes or other “undesirables” from the prisons and mental institutions of Paris.<sup>12</sup> In Anne Hébert’s (re)telling, this group of women that traditional historical discourse has often simultaneously credited and debased is not only cast in a more multidimensional light, their individual identities and (hi)stories are also acknowledged.

The role of the Catholic church throughout Québec’s past is well known, and served as a site of constant cultural struggle with significant ramifications on individual and collective identity, thus “*les religieuses*” are another archetype in Hébert’s text. Many of the earliest Catholics who attempted to civilize the “savages” of New France were adventurous women who gained a certain degree of autonomy and power that was impossible in European society at that time. However, most of the nuns who were so instrumental to the early settlement of Québec were never known as individuals, rather they are discussed as groups, differentiated only by their respective religious orders. The archetype of the “*religieuse*” abounds in Québécois literature, given that it was a common path for many women. However in her version, “*la religieuse*” is more than just one in a sea of “*habits noirs*,” and regains her individuality and her personal identity. This group that traditional historical discourse honors for their collective role in shaping Québec’s past is thus appreciated for the sacrifice, work, and contribution of each individual woman.

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<sup>11</sup> For an extensive study on the role of “*les filles du Roi*” and their demographics, see Yves Landry *Les Filles du Roi au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle: Orphelines en France, pionnières au Canada; suivi d’un répertoire biographique des Filles du Roi*. Éditions BQ, 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Despite accounts to the contrary by Marie de l’Incarnation, contemporary historians in Canada insist “avec passion, sur le caractère irréprochable” of “*les filles du Roi*” (Joerger 421). In *Les Filles du Roi au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Landry demonstrates that the representation of “*les filles du Roi*” has been actively and positively “retouched” in order to “organiser en système la défense de nos [les Québécois] origines enveloppées dans un linceul de religiosité” (30).

Another collective group of women whom History often anonymizes are the domestic servants responsible for raising the children and maintaining the households of so many families in Québec. Although this archetype may not receive much in the way of “honor” even as a collective from normal history, domestic servants have often been critical players in literature and are viewed as surrogate mothers because of their role as caretakers.<sup>13</sup> Much the same as “*les religieuses*,” women who become servants also lost their individual identity and are remembered as one in a sea of many “*tabliers blancs*.” Through Flora Fontanges’ resurrections, the domestic servant too regains a voice and a body, not to mention a name.

The last female archetype that Anne Hébert addresses is probably the most important in all of Québec Literature and History: “*la mère canadienne-française*.” As we have seen, French Canadian mothers have long been viewed as the backbone of québécois culture, responsible for both physically reproducing the population and for instilling in their offspring cultural heritage and religious values. As we have already discussed at length, “*la mère canadienne-française*” has taken on mythical proportions in the national psyche of Québec,<sup>14</sup> and thus inherently removes any individuality from the women who have formed this collective group throughout history. In its role as the predominant archetype, the French Canadian mother encompasses all of the other archetypes we have discussed—nuns, “*filles du Roi*,” and domestic servants. All of these women can be considered alternative types of “mothers.” Traditional historical discourse has elevated “*la mère canadienne-française*” to a godlike status, but Anne Hébert’s (re)telling again offers alternative, more complete versions of this story through a combination of fact and fiction in the new historical space created. This more complete vision

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<sup>13</sup> Hébert has previously presented alternative visions of the “bonne à tout faire,” most notably in *Kamouraska*. She juxtaposes Florida, the servant who M. Rolland trusts more than his own wife to administer his medical care, and Aurélie Caron, the maid whom some suspect of witchcraft and who acts as Élisabeth’s accomplice in the murder of Antoine Tassey and Élisabeth’s affair with George Nelson.

<sup>14</sup> Jean Le Moyne. *Convergences*. 1992, p.71

is possible by addressing different types of motherhood, as in *La Cage*, but also in going beyond the myth of the French Canadian mother and emphasizing the individual maternity of a modern mother, Flora Fontanges.

In her quest to (re)tell other feminine (hi)stories, Anne Hébert offers a counter view of all of these archetypes through the resurrection of their unique, individual experiences. Unlike in normal historical practice, these women are part of a collective, but they are also individuals, thus shifting the boundaries of the subject/other dichotomy. In (re)telling the (hi)stories of specific nuns, domestic servants, “*filles du Roi*,” and a modern mother, Anne Hébert emphasizes the singular nature of each woman and bestows on her (hi)story an importance that traditional historical discourse does not.

### **Lack versus plenitude of the past**

Anne Hébert continues to address the insufficiencies of normal historical practice and the discourse it produces with her treatment of the presumed “plenitude of the past.” The paradigm of normal historical practice is founded on the “postulate of plenitude” (Berkhofer 30), which asserts that the past itself is full and complete. As such, the historian’s task is to assemble artifacts and evidence, validate them, and contextualize his findings in order to represent and reveal a minute portion of that plenitude. However, Anne Hébert and postmodern thinkers criticize this tenet of normal historical practice since, despite a plenitude of the past, all historical synthesis is an operation of “filling in” gaps or “*rétrodition*” (Veyne 176). In their view, history is defined by its “nature lacunaire” (Veyne 27), rather than fullness, the assumption of which leads to misleading representations. Normal historical practice assumes that all necessary groups and all worthy voices *can* be unearthed through evidence from the plenitude of the past, while Anne Hébert and postmodern theorists demonstrate why it cannot.

While collective feminine histories have been represented in traditional historical discourse, examples of individual feminine experiences in *Le Premier Jardin* are shown to lack fullness, detail, and personal perspective. As such, this lack has led to misrepresentations and generalizations of the feminine historical experience, which prohibit normal history-telling from contextualizing it in a complete way. Each time that Flora allows a feminine (hi)story from Québec's past to inhabit her body in the present and every time she recalls an episode from her own past, the insufficiency of information about the feminine experience being recounted is of prime importance. Flora specifically calls attention to the lack of information about each individual feminine (hi)story she (re)tells, including her own. For instance, she intends to meet Raphaël on a street named after "Barbe Abbadie," but is unable to find it, and must conjecture not only about the woman herself, but also about the justifications for naming a street in her honor, just to take it away shortly after (49-51). When visiting the Hôpital général, she wonders about the life led by a "petite nonne, sans visage et sans nom," of whom all that remains are tools she forged prior to her death, which the museum label indicates was in 1683 (85). Flora's own story, which is the story of a little girl who has forever been "sans racines" (124), also indicates the continuing lack of information in the feminine historical experience. It becomes abundantly clear that without Flora and the new historical space created by her (re)tellings, the voices of these women from Québec's past would forever remain silent and her own story would not be fully explored.

Just as in normal historical practice, Flora begins the (re)telling process with only a few clues about the individual feminine stories in question, including her own. However, it is Flora and her fictions that give plenitude to the other's feminine (hi)story through resurrection and reclaiming of the individual feminine voice. In other words, it is only through the addition of fiction that the "nature lacunaire de l'histoire" is able to become full. Hébert's use of fiction to fill in the gaps of history challenges the belief of normal historians that because history is "d'emblée un récit, elle ne fait pas

revivre” (Ricœur *Histoire et Vérité* 29; Veyne 14). Instead, Flora’s portrayals of forgotten women from Québec and her own pasts demonstrate that

si, un jour, on arrive à tout rassembler du temps révolu, tout, exactement tout, avec les détails les plus précis—air, heure, lumière, température, couleurs, textures, odeurs, objets, meubles—, on doit parvenir à revivre l’instant passé dans toute sa fraîcheur. (*Le Premier Jardin* 104)

In the new historical space Hébert creates, Flora’s retellings are more than a simple account, they are total recreations.

Continuing to undermine and criticize normal historical practice’s tendency to erase the feminine voice and experience, Flora also notes the disturbing lack of information in the police records relating to crimes against women. As we have already mentioned, Hébert often relies on *fait divers* as the basis for her novels, and they provide ample opportunity to expose the lacking information about the feminine experience in traditional historical discourse. She tells about the murder of the “*fille du Roi*” Renée Chauvieux, about whom “il y a très peu d’indices, trois lignes à peine dans le registre de la ville et l’inventaire de son maigre trousseau” (104) and about Aurore Michaud, a 17-year old maid who was raped and killed by the son of the family for whom she worked. Despite this event being a popular topic of conversation, “aucune enquête policière n’a abouti. Aucun meurtrier n’a été appréhendé” (121). Reminiscent of Nicole Brossard’s description of the minimal witness statements and police investigation in *Le Désert mauve*, Hébert criticizes this disregard for female victims and their (hi)stories. In response to this and the implied tendency to not prosecute the perpetrators of crimes against women, Anne Hébert exposes the aggressors that History has ignored, and makes them face justice for their crimes through the (re)telling of their aggressions. Where historical “evidence” is lacking, even in the form of a *fait divers*, Flora’s (re)tellings are able to fill in the gaps. In fact, without



the fiction Flora provides, such (hi)stories would remain hidden forever and would not expose critical aspects of the feminine historical experience, demonstrating a lack rather than a plenitude of the past.

Flora's own story continues the discussion regarding plenitude versus lack of the past in the québécois context. Lack defines Flora: lack of known origins and a corresponding lack of biological mother, name, and history. Abandoned as an infant, she first becomes Pierrette Paul, the name given to her by her caretakers at the orphanage. The rest of her life can be considered a response to this primary, original traumatic event and the lack of identity it engendered. Flora represents a fundamental motif in Hébert's œuvre: the important role of childhood. For Hébert, "des gens sans enfance sont amputés des trois quarts de leur vie," (Gauvin 227) a condition that certainly applies to Flora. As she (re)tells and revives other individual feminine (hi)stories from Québec's past, Flora's own (hi)story is able to become whole. The lack of facts about her own life parallels gaps in the collective and individual (hi)stories of the québécois feminine experience. By filling in the gaps in others' feminine (hi)stories, she is eventually able to confront and fill in those in her own past. It is only through this process that images from Flora's past come forth, "à la vitesse du vent, plus rapide que la pensée, une promptitude folle [...] et que se déchaînent les souvenirs, en flèches précises, tirées des ténèbres, sans répit" (167). Only then can the "nature lacunaire" of her personal history be filled, with both individual and collective memories, based on fact and fiction, from her own and the province's past.

### **Historical subject versus historical object**

In her efforts to subvert the misogynist discourse of normal historical practice, Hébert underscores and criticizes the omnipotent authority bestowed on the historian to contextualize the "facts" from the past. In history-telling, the normal historian may be obligated to understand how people from the past perceived their own time, but ultimately he is not obligated to adopt their point of

view or use their terminology (Patricia Limerick, qtd. In Berkhofer *Beyond the Great Story* 161), and as such it is impossible to distinguish the unadulterated “facts” from system-making on the part of the historian (Berkhofer 190). In other words, “unlike fiction, history can only have one voice, the historian’s” (Stegner, quoted in Cushing Strout, 156). This then echoes postmodern concerns regarding who is the author, who is the hero, and who is the subject (Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition* 30). In normal historical practice, the author/authority has traditionally been the Western, white, male perspective. The pervasiveness of this perspective in normal historical practice results in the feminine historical experience being viewed and subsequently written through the optic of a common method of subjugation: the male gaze or male look (Mulvey “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”).

According to psychoanalytic theory, the image of the woman as seen through the male gaze is critical in the formation of a phallogentric, patriarchal subconscious. In patriarchal culture and the histories written within a patriarchal framework, the woman represents a signifier for the male other, “bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his phantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the *silent image of woman still tied to her place as a bearer of meaning, not a maker of meaning*” (Mulvey, 804, my emphasis). In works of art and history that rely on patriarchal structure as a frame work, the woman’s role is simply to provide man with a means to understand and define himself in opposition, endowing him with total power over both representation of his own and the feminine identity. Thus in traditional historical discourse, women play no active role in writing their individual or collective feminine (hi)stories.

Echoing the tenets of New Historicism, which assert that it is essential to question “both the relative value of what is examined and the implicit values of the examiner” (Davidson 255-256), Anne Hébert relies on the male gaze common to normal historical practice in order to subvert it and provide an alternative. In *Le Premier Jardin*, there are several examples where the author turns the tables and

employs the male gaze in order to put it on display, exposing its effect on the feminine (hi)story in traditional historical discourse and critically examining its role in silencing the historical feminine voice. As each individual feminine story emerges from the collective, the male gaze serves only to make the women's historical voice louder, rather than to keep it silent.

The dominance of the male gaze over the female subject is personified as Flora and Raphaël tour Québec's landmarks and bring the city's feminine archetypes to life. Together the aging actress and the young man act as accomplices in the project of resurrecting voices from the past, yet they do not play analogous roles. History student, tour guide, and boyfriend of Flora's daughter Maud, Raphaël both complements and contests Flora's approach to historical "study." Ushered around the city as though she had never seen it, Flora is forced to view streets and buildings in her hometown through Raphaël's<sup>15</sup> eyes, in other words through his male gaze. Just as traditional historical discourse forces its view of the feminine archetype's role and identity in History, Raphaël too imposes the knowledge that he has received from a patriarchal, misogynist education on to Flora. Espousing the standard, accepted version of Québec's history, Raphaël's descriptions of the province's contentious past are described as flat, boring, uninspiring, and devoid of life. While Raphaël considers the "facts" of History, Flora is more concerned with the soul of her city's past and present: "Raphaël ne peut qu'énumérer des noms d'églises au passage, comme s'il désignait des vieilles mortes, effacées dans l'aboutissement du soleil. Tandis que Flora Fontanges se demande s'il y a encore quelqu'un, dans chacune de ces églises, qui répond au nom de Dieu?" (41). Where Raphaël and traditional historical discourse fall short, Flora and her focus on the individual within the collective are able to succeed.

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<sup>15</sup> Several scholars of Anne Hébert believe that the choice to name this character Raphaël aligns him to the archangel and renders him Flora's guardian who is responsible for protecting her from her past (see Kellett-Bestsos, Sabodach, and Aresu). Although it seems likely Anne Hébert's choice of name was intentional, the description of this character leads one to question whether or not this was somewhat facetious given Raphaël's alignment with the traditional historical discourse Anne Hébert criticizes through Flora's (re)tellings and personal (hi)story.

Hébert seems to suggest, like Veyne, that in contrast to fiction, normal history “peut se permettre d’être ennuyeuse sans en être dévalorisée” (22), however it is clear that she places significant value on the combination of fact and fiction. Raphaël soon recognizes the merits of Flora’s approach, and voluntarily abandons his training as both a history student and tour guide to join Flora in the new historical space she is creating.

Hébert emphasizes the difficult task of shedding the presumed dominance of the male gaze, even when faced with Flora’s agency and control over the (re)telling process. Despite the fact that Flora is clearly the “maker of meaning,” Raphaël still views himself as the “author” of the story, filling the role of “the active one of forwarding the story, making things happen” (Mulvey 810):

Raphaël désire que Flora Fontanges l’accompagne dans ses recherches.

— Je réveillerai le temps passé. J’en sortirai des personnages encore vivants, enfouis sous les décombres. Je vous les donnerai à voir et à entendre. J’écrirai des pièces historiques pour vous. Vous jouerez tous les rôles de femmes et vous serez passionnante comme jamais. Vous verrez. (75)

Again Hébert employs the male gaze to expose its misguided belief that it controls the “true” representation of the past. Through Raphaël, Anne Hébert takes aim at the phallogentric assumption in traditional historical discourse and in art that “what counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. *In herself the woman has not the slightest importance*” (Boetticher, qtd. in Mulvey 809, my emphasis). Hébert again simultaneously employs the male gaze inherent to all patriarchal constructs and subverts it by exposing its foolishness and insufficiencies. The male gaze is unnecessary for the project of (re)telling (hi)stories, and in fact the process is more productive once left entirely to the female participant. Only after Raphaël departs with

Céleste to go to Île aux Coudres can Flora Fontanges confront her personal history. Raphaël may consider himself the “director,” but in reality the only person truly needed for this theater of History is Flora Fontanges and the combination of fact and fiction to (re)tell the feminine historical experience.

In addition to this perceived omnipotence in the “present” of the novel, Flora also exposes the violence and cruelty associated with the male gaze throughout History in her (re)tellings from the past. The context surrounding the (re)tellings from the male perspective highlight the dominance of male desires and the omnipotence of the patriarchal order, and in turn underscore the dominance of the male gaze in historical discourse. In her (re)telling of the arrival of “*les filles du Roi*,” Hébert lets the readers hear the male colonists’ thoughts on the “bel assemblage de jupons et de toile froissée” they see before them (97). Hébert again underscores the women’s status as anonymous members of the archetypal group, stripped of anything beyond their physical traits and described only by attributes that can be seen from a distance as they approach the shores of New France. These visible, physical traits as expressed by the male colonists also determine their value as potential spouses. The men of New France explain what they are looking for in a wife, as the women are assembled like livestock or slaves at an auction:

Les plus grasses ont été choisies les premières, au cours de brèves fréquentations [...] C’est mieux qu’elles soient bien en chair pour résister aux rigueurs du climat, disent-ils, et puis, quand on a déjà mangé de la misère par tous les pores de sa peau, durant les années, aux armes du Roi, c’est plus réconfortant d’avoir un bon gros morceau à se mettre sous la dent, pour le temps que Dieu voudra bien nous laisser sur cette terre en friche depuis le commencement du monde. (97)

Emboldened by the strength of formal orders from the patriarchy as represented by “M. l’Intendant,” “*tous les soldats licenciés, quelques-uns faisant métier de bandit, seront privés de la traite et de la*

*chasse et des honneurs de l'Eglise et de communautés si, quinze jours après l'arrivée des filles du Roi, ils ne se marient pas*" (97, italics in original). However, just as with Raphaël and Flora's "game," despite using the male colonists' perspective to (re)tell this scene, it is clear that the male gaze is no longer the lens—it is instead the target and its aggressive quality is put on display. The traces of the male gaze's historical dominance are present throughout *Le Premier Jardin*, despite the feminine (hi)story assuming the active role in the (re)telling process. This supports the assertion that in Hébert's œuvre "il s'agit de récits qui sont de véritables palimpsestes de l'Histoire; [et] par cette réécriture, l'Histoire est reconstruite selon une perspective favorable aux héroïnes qui en avaient été les victimes" (Ferraro "Le Rôle de l'Histoire dans *Le Premier Jardin* d'Anne Hébert" 381).

In her work as an actress, Flora constantly experiences the dominance of the male gaze at three distinct levels—between characters within the fictional work, from the spectators who attend the performance, and from the director who has artistic control over the show.<sup>16</sup> Echoing the dominance of the male gaze in normal historical practice exemplified through Raphaël's actions, the director of *Oh! les beaux jours*, Gilles Perrault, again reinforces the prevalence of a dominant male gaze in art:

Il enlève ses petites lunettes rondes et il tente de voir Flora Fontanges à travers le brouillard de ses yeux myopes. Flora Fontanges s'est fait une nouvelle tête sans le consulter, lui, le metteur en scène et le directeur du théâtre [...] Il remet ses lunettes et constate que le sourire de Flora Fontanges est trop charmant pour le rôle de Winnie. Il faudra lui interdire de sourire dès le début des répétitions. (27)

For Perrault, Flora is an object to be molded to his liking, to accomplish his artistic goals. Any assertion of free will on her part is inconsequential and unacceptable given that her sole purpose is to be on

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<sup>16</sup> These levels are reminiscent of the distinct male looks associated with cinema, according to Laura Mulvey: "that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion" (815-816).

display and to be looked upon (Mulvey 809). As a representation of patriarchy's dominance over all aspects of culture, including art and traditional historical discourse, Perrault can control the appearance of the female subject, and he has the power to "forbid" her to behave freely.

Hébert's description of Perrault's male gaze intensifies, to the point that it surpasses any professionally acceptable tone and becomes demeaning, even predatory and violent.<sup>17</sup> Flora admits that the director's gaze makes her uncomfortable, since he dismisses her personal humanity and sees in her only the character he needs her to become. Despite his innocent, unassuming appearance, Flora recognizes in the director

un chasseur féroce à l'affut de tout ce qui griffe, mord, abîme, délabre l'âme et le corps de Flora Fontanges. Depuis le temps qu'il rêve d'une Winnie décharnée, ligotée sur son tas de sable, étouffée lentement, grain à grain, face au public qui se pâme. Petite corrida pour une vieille femme qui n'en finit pas de mourir. (69)

The discursive or cultural realism that Gilles Perrault seeks for the character Winnie, much in the same vein as the realism sought by normal historians,<sup>18</sup> has already been predetermined through the male gaze, and thus inherently excludes the feminine perspective from creating her own identity and history. However, in Hébert's (re)telling, the male gaze does not serve as the omnipresent and omnipotent framework structuring the (hi)story. Instead, the oppression and inadequacy of the male gaze in traditional historical discourse is a central focus and becomes an element in the (hi)story being (re)told. Both Flora's individual (hi)story and the collective feminine experience in Québec will now be shown

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<sup>17</sup> The predatory nature of the male gaze can also be seen in Nicole Brossard's *Le Désert mauve*, which we will discuss in the next chapter. In that novel, Angela Parkins is murdered with only a look from "*l'homme long*."

<sup>18</sup> In a discussion of historical representation and truthfulness, Robert Berkhofer notes that "the realism of what is represented in a text depends upon the generally accepted worldview of (Western) society as to what is real and what is mythical" (59).

through a female lens and will also simultaneously devalue the male gaze that had previously silenced them.

Through her portrayals of fictional(ized) women both on the stage and in the new historical space created upon her return to Québec, Flora turns a mirror onto spectators (and readers) and forces them to view themselves, their societies, and the role they play within them. Despite the apparent dominance of the male gaze in history and art as exemplified by Raphaël and Gilles Perrault, no one can tell Flora who she is or who she can become. Instead of being subjugated and having her story told for her, Flora is able to subjugate the male gaze that looks upon her as an object of oddity.<sup>19</sup> In this reversal, the male gaze promulgated by patriarchal society, traditional historical discourse, and in artistic representations will gaze upon itself and see its deficiencies:

Le soir de la première, la salle est pleine de curieux, plutôt mal à l'aise et vaguement inquiets [...] Le charme de la voix de Flora Fontanges, pourtant brisée, sa conviction profonde agissent sur eux, dans leur dernier retranchement, *là où ils peuvent se voir, dans un miroir, le temps d'un éclair, méconnaissables, soudain découverts, dérisoires et condamnés.* (187, my emphasis)

At least during the course of her performance, Flora is able to exert power and force the patriarchal male gaze to turn in on itself. There will be a “corrida,” but it is now less certain who is carrying the sword.<sup>20</sup> History and art—and the processes that create them—have been responsible for ignoring the

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<sup>19</sup> Flora explains that she is “faite pour être vue de loin” when she describes an encounter with the man seated next to her on the plane: “Un instant capte l’attention de son voisin [...] Il regarde la tête étrange de la femme. Sa chevelure surtout l’étonne, grise à la racine, roussâtre aux points, ne dirait-on pas le plumage chamarré d’une perdrix? Elle a très bien vu le regard moqueur de l’homme posé sur elle [...]” (11).

<sup>20</sup> Anne Hébert uses this same metaphor twice in *Le Premier Jardin* to discuss Flora’s theatrical performances. Once as we have seen in the violent gaze of Gilles Perrault, but also in response to the judgmental, mocking look her male neighbor gives her on the plane. Once on stage, Flora knows she will have the final word and it will be her gaze that dominates: “Le soir de la première, au théâtre de l’Emérillon, son voisin d’avion pourra s’installer au premier rang, s’il le désire. *Le voisin d’avion sera subjugué. La salle friande et silencieuse comme pour une corrida*” (12, my emphasis).



individual feminine (hi)story and providing only flat, one-dimensional visions of the collective feminine (hi)story, as seen through the prevalence of female archetypes, but this is criticized and reversed in Flora's (re)tellings.

## **Polyphony**

As we have seen with other works that (re)tell the other('s) feminine (hi)story, polyphony serves as a means to introduce multiple voices and viewpoints to more fully perform the (re)telling process. Polyphony is a problematic concept for normal historical practice, since its goal is to create a Great Story that unifies and provides order to the "richness of reality," i.e. the plenitude of the past (Thomas Haskell 20). If one assumes, like normal historians, that a given event existed in a real and single past, that event occurred "in only one way, no matter how fragmentary or contradictory the reports, [...] no matter whether there are no historians, one historian, or several contentious historians in its future to record and debate it" (Gay *Style in History* 212). Since normal historical practice always assumes that overarching authorial power resides with the historian interpreting facts from the past, a true polyphony and polyvocality are not possible, despite the best efforts of multiculturalist and pluralist historians (Berkhofer 199).

Texts in Hébert's œuvre like *Kamouraska* and *Les Fous de Bassan* demonstrate constant switching between tenses and modes of narration, as the protagonist(s) discuss their individual (hi)story as well as the internal action of the novel. In the case of *Le Premier Jardin*, changes in tense and narrative voice serve several functions. First, as we have already alluded to in this chapter, switching between perspectives allows Anne Hébert to expose and subsequently criticize the dominance of the male gaze and its predominance in history and art. It also serves to better explain the feminine historical experience despite being told from the male perspective, and reinforces the notion of polyphony

promoted by postmodern thinkers. For instance, when describing the (hi)story of Aurore Michaud, the reader first hears of Aurore's own experience. We are exposed to Aurore's thoughts, as she is moved by the striking appearance of the sky. As Aurore looks to the heavens, the young man of the family for whom she works is watching her, preying on her. His thoughts are about Aurore, more specifically about her body. He questions how she can be both so thin and round, and wonders why they allowed "dans la maison paternelle, une créature étrangère de dix-sept ans de se mouvoir aussi librement devant nous" (118). Unlike the scene on the docks with "*les filles du Roi*" where we only hear the male voice, this instance provides the masculine and feminine perspective of the same event. It is also one of the rare instances where the narrator uses "je" in the narration to express the thoughts of the historical subject.<sup>21</sup> This serves to correct the insufficiencies of traditional historical discourse that result from a lack of polyphony and historical subjects/objects. In order to more fully (re)tell the feminine (hi)story, Hébert employs and subsequently criticizes the dominant male voice that is responsible for silencing her, both literally and figuratively.

This polyphony is reinforced through the narrative structure(s) present in *Le Premier Jardin*. Despite the constant back and forth between Flora's present and past and the pasts of Québec, many scholars have noted *Le Premier Jardin*'s "grande lisibilité, facilité d'accès" (Gauvin 132). However, there actually exists a very complex structure beneath the surface of the seemingly simple narrative. Throughout the text, the narration resembles normal historical practice by which the historian recounts his interpreted version of the protagonist's "history" in the third person and acts as a heterodiegetic narrator. Traditionally, this narrative technique serves to glorify the subject/hero by objectifying his accomplishments. In the case of Flora, however, it instead creates a distance between her and her past

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<sup>21</sup> Other than in dialogue, only accounts of the male historical perspective utilize the first person narration. This occurs when the male colonists await the arrival of "*les filles du Roi*" and in the example discussed here.

selves/histories. Hébert mimics the preferred style of normal historical practice and the discourse it creates, but for entirely different reasons and with a unique outcome. Flora is incapable of using “je” unless it is to become another person and to distance herself from “*soi*” rather than to get closer to it. By (re)telling her (hi)story as though it happened to someone else, Flora demonstrates “d’une façon percutante la difficile unité qui hante la protagoniste, incapable de s’exhiber à la première personne” (Ferraro 373). Unable to inhabit her own history as she does with those of forgotten women from Québec’s past, Flora treats her own memories as if they did not happen to her. Just as she does with the women she resurrects, Flora considers her past as roles that she once played, thus adding her own (hi)story and voice to the voices from the province’s past. During one of their excursions, Flora explains to Raphaël that her first role was as Pierrette Paul, “une petite fille de l’hospice Saint-Louis qui n’est pas encore adoptée et qui montre le bout de son nez en passant. C’est une pauvre créature, trotte menu comme tout, une moucheronne qui apparaît de temps en temps dans ma tête et me dérange énormément” (117). Thus within Flora’s own story, there are several voices that must be heard. Her multiple pasts and past selves contribute to the text’s polyphony and provide different perspectives that are essential to the (re)telling process in the new historical space Hébert creates.

Along with expressing multiple perspectives of the same stories, and multiple perspectives within a single character, Hébert also (potentially) plays with the notion of diegetic levels to reinforce the polyphonic quality in *Le Premier Jardin*. In his study “Un champ narratologique: *Le Premier Jardin* d’Anne Hébert,” Jaap Lintvelt argues that “Flora transgresse la profondeur de la perspective narrative de la narrative homodiégétique en dépassant son savoir limité” (161). However certain instances call into question the unity of the narrative voice, underscoring yet again the importance of polyphony not only in the subject matter but also in regards to the creator of the text. The presumed heterodiegetic narrator laments the current state of the Grande-Allée, which used to be inhabited by

the wealthy families of Québec City. Without the help of the domestic servants who once maintained them, the homes and the way of life they represented had to be abandoned. A list of the servants' names is recited:

Marie-Ange, Alma, Emma, Blanche, Ludivine, Albertine, Prudence, Philomène,  
Marie-Anne, Clémée, Clophée, Rosana, Alexina, Gemma, Véreine, Simone, Lorina,  
Julia, Mathilda, Aurore, Pierrette...

[...] Pierrette Paul échappe à son destin. Elle ne sera jamais bonne à tout faire. N'a-t-elle pas été adoptée en bonne et due forme par M. et Mme Édouard Eventurel ? (116)

This example seems to come from the voice of an omniscient narrator, having been written in the third person and given that Flora and Raphael were searching for Maud, not discussing the demise of the Grande-Allée lifestyle. Yet, the reader cannot be certain since on the following page:

Raphaël regarde le visage fermé de Flora Fontanges, cet air buté qu'elle a tout à coup, perdue dans ses pensées. Il s'étonne à peine encore sous le charme d'une kyrielle de prénoms de femmes, étranges et beaux, qu'il tente de scander comme une comptine.  
Alma, Clémée, Ludivine, Albertine, Aurore... Il dit Aurore et il cherche la suite [...]  
— Pierrette Paul ! Tu oublies Pierrette Paul !

Elle crie en plein milieu de la rêverie de Raphaël ainsi qu'on lance une pierre dans une mare. (117)

As Raphaël recites the same list of names in a slightly different order than the previous recitation, it becomes less clear if Flora herself had been reading the names or if there was in fact a heterodiegetic narrator. The reader questions who is talking and what story is being told with this (potential) shift in narrative voice. Even the possibility of a shift reinforces the polyphonic quality of the novel and

demonstrates the need for multiple voices in the (re)telling process to represent the plenitude of history in a way that normal historical practice and traditional historical discourse do not.

### **Speaking their names**

As we have seen, Hébert's new historical space serves to demonstrate how traditional historical discourse has anonymized and silenced the feminine historical voice. To continue the process of writing and righting that wrong, Hébert must address one of the most basic elements of normal historical practice and the discourse it generates: names. Along with facts and "emplotment" of disparate events, the use of proper names is critical to the normal historian's interpreted final product. Names of places, actors, and actions of the past all serve to anchor the story that the historian tells. According to Lyotard, names are also the means by which one learns about and enters a given culture, since "il faut apprendre les noms par lesquels sont désignés les proches, les héros au sens large, les lieux, les dates et [...] les unités de mesure, d'espace, de temps, de valeur d'échange" (*Enfants* 49). Names and the relevant culture cannot be learned on their own, but are rather embedded into "little" (hi)stories that form the Great Stories of that culture (*Enfants* 49).

The reader is aware of the importance that names play in Flora's historical game early in the novel. Names of the specific women from the archetypal groups provide Flora with the entry point she needs for the process of (re)telling others' and her own stories. With just a name, she can resurrect these forgotten women, "les tirant par leur nom, comme avec une corde du fond d'un puits, pour qu'elles viennent saluer sur la scène et se nommer bien haut, afin qu'on les reconnaisse et leur rende hommage, avant qu'elles ne disparaissent à nouveau" (*Le Premier Jardin* 120). Ironically, in using their names to call upon these women and resurrecting them from the shadows, Flora highlights the universal loss of one's name that most women experienced in Québec, either through marriage, joining

the church, or employment. Almost all women must at some point in their lives change their names depending on their social status/situation, and thus are forced to abandon their own true identities to become whomever the patriarchal society demands. In the case of the female archetypes presented in the novel, they have all been stripped of their names while they were alive *and* by traditional historical discourse through their depiction as collectives rather than individuals. Alessandra Ferraro notes “le nom propre reste la marque qui assure un individu son identité” (371), and it is also used in *Le Premier Jardin* to assure the individual history. In line with Lyotard’s assertion that “être nommé, c’est être raconté” (*Enfants* 50), Hébert uses one of the most fundamental elements of normal historical practice in a novel way to create a new historical space and a new historical discourse. In giving the (hi)stories of forgotten women, including her own, voice and body and speaking their names, Flora allows the individual—not just the collective—to be told and honored.

The fear of losing one’s identity seems to be a universal aspect of the feminine (hi)story in Hébert’s text. All of the female archetypes from Québec’s past must go through this process of self-denial for a variety of reasons. For many women like Guillemette Thibault, “ce qu’elle craignait plus que tout au monde, [c’est] qu’on lui prenne son nom” (87), however, this was an inevitable fate regardless of the path chosen. Unable to join the family business with her father because of her sex, and unable to keep her name, she enters the convent where all individuality and original identity is stripped. “*Les filles du Roi*,” too, lost their names and identities upon crossing the ocean to the new world and marrying male colonists. Once they crossed the ocean, “*les filles du Roi*” were “sans passé, purifiées par la mer, au cours d’une longue et rude traversée sur un voilier” (97). Despite the fact that they did not enter the church, nor did they necessarily marry, domestic servants were also forced to relinquish their names. Girls who found employment in the mansions along the Grande-Allée were often required to assume new names in order to “éviter toute confusion avec celui de Madame ou de

Mademoiselle” (116). In all cases, Flora recites their names individually, “comme une litanie de saintes [...] [aux noms] qui sont à jamais enfouis dans des archives poussiéreuses” (99).

Further distancing Hébert’s text from the historical “facts” on which it is based, the names traditionally spoken and honored by historical discourse become secondary and are not as prevalent or as important as those of “minor” feminine historical players in *Le Premier Jardin*. As discussed previously, Québec is never mentioned in the novel, and there are other examples where names that traditional historical discourse favors are conspicuously absent. Although the narrator does mention the Battle of Sainte-Foy,<sup>22</sup> there seems to be a concerted effort to erase or minimize the names common to traditional historical discourse from the (hi)stories being (re)told. By anonymizing the names that normal historical discourse has traditionally honored, Hébert is reversing the standard hierarchy of traditional historical discourse. Now it is the names of “minor” female historical figures like Marie-Ange, Alma, Emma, Blanche, Madeleine Fabrecque (as Renée Chauvieux), Ludivine<sup>23</sup> and others that will receive more than just a brief mention in a “*fait divers*.” Rather than telling the stories and speaking the names of major/male figures from the province’s past, Hébert chooses to honor and remember the minor/female heroes that have historically been disregarded.

The desire to highlight minor/female (hi)stories extends to (re)tellings from Flora’s own personal past as well. As part of the feminine historical lineage of nuns, “*filles du Roi*,” domestic servants, and mothers from Québec’s past, a discussion of Flora’s own loss(es) of name further signals a desire to create a new historical space in which the individual and collective as well as fiction and fact can coexist. Throughout her life and career, Flora has played countless parts, including virtually

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<sup>22</sup> The Battle of Sainte-Foy, also called the Battle of Québec, took place on April 28, 1760 near Québec City between the French and English. It was the last victory for the French in the French and Indian War, and had many more casualties than the better known Battle of the Plains of Abraham in 1759.

<sup>23</sup> Here we have another subtle example of intertextuality that also reinforces the importance of names in Anne Hébert’s œuvre. Remember that Ludivine is the new name given to Marie-Josephte Corriveau in Hébert’s retelling of her (hi)story in *La Cage*.

all of the archetypes discussed here. In her life, Flora has been an orphan like many “*filles du Roi*”; lived amongst nuns as a child; was employed as a maid on the ship that took her from Québec to Europe when she was 18; and is a mother to Maud, albeit an untraditional one. The second name given to her, Marie Eventurel, also indicates her function as a representation of all women, in particular the two original mothers of Christianity, Marie and Ève, as well as the original mother of Québec, Marie Rollet (Saint-Martin “Les premières mères, *Le premier jardin*” 681). In this way, her personal history parallels the history of all women in Québec, as well as the history of the province. Flora’s (hi)story is integrated into the feminine lineage of women in Québec’s past “comme si l’évocation de l’histoire de la colonie faisait ressurgir des souvenirs douloureux chez Flora. Les événements concernant le passé national et la vie de la protagoniste constituent deux récits parallèles, marqués par un manque originel, par un abandon douloureux” (Ferraro 375).

Flora has felt a strong desire to become another ever since her arrival at the Eventurel home. She likens existing indefinitely as Pierrette Paul to being permanently stranded, “les deux pieds enfoncés dans la neige” (63). To combat this forced immobility, she has learned that assuming a new identity provides an opportunity to fragment herself, become another, and avoid her lack of origins:

Son désir le plus profond était d’habiter ailleurs qu’en elle même, une minute, rien qu’un toute petite minute, voir comment ça se passe dans une autre tête que la sienne, un autre corps, s’incarner à nouveau, savoir comment c’est ailleurs, quelle peine, quelle joie nouvelles, essayer un autre peau que la sienne comme on essaie des gants dans un magasin, ne plus gruger sans cesse le même os de sa vie unique, mais se nourrir de substances étranges et dépaysantes. (64)

As was the case for women who had to relinquish their names in patriarchal society, Flora’s desire to become another represents not only a personal choice, but also a coping mechanism and a means to



survive in front of her new “audience.” Upon entering the Eventurel household, Flora had to learn to play the part required of her to survive. This meant she *had* to become Marie Eventurel, as she was the future of the family’s name and legacy. With all eyes on her—from the bourgeois society to which she now belonged, her adoptive parents, and above all her exceedingly critical adoptive grandmother<sup>24</sup>—Flora’s decision to become another was both self-motivated and coerced. It is through playing her first “theatrical” role, the first instance where she had to utterly transform herself in order to meet her audience’s standards and fulfill their expectations, that Flora gains some level of acceptance in the family and in their social circle.

She “plays the role” of Marie Eventurel until the age of 18, when she rejects the life her adoptive parents have prescribed for her, chooses to call herself Flora Fontanges, and moves to Paris to become an actress. In a pivotal moment, the protagonist begins to find her own true voice and her authentic self when she announces her intention not to marry and to seek out a disreputable profession. Flora decides to “[se] choisir un nom qui soit bien à [elle]” (162). The change in name allowed her to fully disconnect one identity from the next and to attempt to unburden herself from the painful history attached to playing Pierrette Paul and Marie Eventurel. In choosing her own name, Flora begins the process of establishing her own authentic story and filling the void left by her lack of original identity.

The act of choosing her name and separating from her past does not mean that Flora has completed the process of (re)telling her own (hi)story, however. She still relies on the names of fictional(ized) female characters whom she plays in countless theatrical performances to simulate an individual, personal history as a means to avoid dealing with her own traumatic past. Just as she did when she assumed the role of Marie Eventurel, Flora relies on theatrical roles to cope with the traumas

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<sup>24</sup> Flora calls her adoptive grandmother “*la fausse grandmère*,” and describes how she never fully accepted Flora into the family. In her view, Flora was not a “real” Eventurel, but rather was borrowing the family name “l’espace d’une saison, le temps nécessaire pour qu’elle se trouve un mari” (160).

she has experienced throughout her life, and to temporarily fill in the gaps left by her lack of origins. Retelling another's feminine (hi)story allows her to continue to ignore this emptiness and the fact that "hors de scène, elle n'est personne" (9).

Upon her return to Québec, Flora is forced to confront her demons. Initially, certain streets cause her to run the risk of "waking ghosts and playing a role amongst specters" (22, my translation). Once she has wandered the streets with Raphaël, has resurrected many other feminine (hi)stories, and has spent three days isolated in her dark hotel room, Flora musters the courage to walk around the city unaccompanied and to visit neighborhoods she had intentionally circumvented before. The seclusion echoes ones she has experienced previously in her life, from all of which she emerges a new woman.<sup>25</sup> In the solitude and the dark of her hotel room, "de grands pans de mémoire cèdent alors qu'elle est couchée dans le noir, livrée pieds et poings liés,<sup>26</sup> aux images anciennes qui l'assaillent avec force" (127). Just as she has resurrected "*les filles du Roi*," the nuns, and servants forgotten by traditional historical discourse by speaking their names, Flora recognizes that it is necessary to do the same for herself and all of the children from her childhood who perished in the orphanage fire. Through this process, new heroes emerge and a new (hi)story is retold. Hébert again seems to underscore the importance of names and the dehierarchization of traditional historical discourse. We have already discussed the choice to change the name of the orphanage that caught fire, which was based on an actual event. Hébert also chooses to honor Rosa Gaudrault, the young domestic servant who keeps returning to the burning building to save as many children as she could from the fire and who represents

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<sup>25</sup> After being adopted by the Eventurels, Flora spends 48 days in quarantine for scarlet fever. During this period, she goes silent but eventually returns "refaite à neuf, elle pourra peut-être exister une seconde fois" (130). She also spends three months after giving birth to Maud in a small isolated house in the countryside near Touraine where they have a sort of symbolic extended birth (110-111).

<sup>26</sup> This phrase appears several times in Hébert's œuvre, most notably in *Kamouraska*.

the only real maternal figure Flora ever knew.<sup>27</sup> In depicting Rosa as the ultimate maternal hero, Hébert criticizes traditional historical discourse's disregard for such figures. She also deposes the standard heroes, in that a young woman exhibits more heroic qualities than do typical masculine saviors: "même les pompiers avec leurs masques et leurs grandes échelles n'ont pas son courage et son audace" (129).

In the new historical space Hébert creates in *Le Premier Jardin*, names are critical and can be equated with existence. If an individual is unnamed, they do not exist. This includes the women from Québec's past, the children from the orphanage, and Flora herself. Flora assumes the role of the historian/director/actress/subject in order to reverse the hierarchy of traditional historical discourse and speak the names of those whom history has anonymized. In speaking her own names and the names of others, and in lending her voice and body to their (hi)stories, Flora becomes both the artist and the masterpiece. Once she is able to speak all the names from her past and Québec's past, it becomes possible to "briser et de réinventer l'identité, de se libérer des chaînes du passé et de se donner naissance à soi-même en tant que création, mais aussi en tant que créateur" (Lemmens 176). Through the creation of a new historical space unburdened by the weight of normal historical practice and traditional historical discourse, Anne Hébert demonstrates the possibility of a medium where "le réel est imaginé [et] l'imagination recrée le réel qui l'alimente" (Lemmens 177).

### **Rewriting québécois motherhood**

The new historical space Anne Hébert creates in *Le Premier Jardin* serves to (re)tell the individual (hi)stories of several collective groups of women from Québec's past, but one group in

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<sup>27</sup> "La seule vraie mère peut-être qu'elle ait connue, c'est-à-dire la seule femme qui lui ait prodigué attention, tendresse, chaleur, c'est Rosa Gaudrault, qui s'occupait des petites filles de l'orphelinat et qui en a sauvé un grand nombre du feu, au prix de sa propre vie: on la retrouvera brûlée, Pietà carbonisée, tenant deux petites filles dans ses bras" (Saint-Martin "Les premières mères, *Le premier jardin*" 670).

particular experiences the most significant transformation. As we have already discussed, Anne Hébert places great importance on the role of the mother, both in Flora's own life and in her treatment of Québec's history. In fact, according to Lori Saint-Martin, who has written extensively on maternity in québécois literature,<sup>28</sup> *Le Premier Jardin* is defined by "le rapport à la mère et au maternel [qui] sous-tend les structures narratives du roman" (668). As such, she posits that the work is formed through a "structure maternelle" ("Les premières mères, *Le premier jardin*" 668-672). Along with this "maternal structure" and the focus on different examples of mothers from Québec's past (both factual and fictional) like Marie Rollet, Barbe Abbadie, Rosa Gaudrault, Madame Eventurel, and Flora herself much of the plot centers around the universal idea of motherhood represented by the original mother, Eve. "En réalité, c'est d'elle seule qu'il s'agit, la reine aux mille noms, la première fleur, la première racine, Ève en personne [...] fragmentée en mille frais visages" (99). In her role as the first mother, Eve serves as the link to connect all subsequent mothers together throughout time and space.

An examination of the roles of various types of mothers again demonstrates a reversal in *Le Premier Jardin* of the standard roles played by men and women. In both traditional historiography and literature, men have appropriated the notion of "creation" for themselves, and "laissent aux femmes la responsabilité de la simple reproduction de l'espèce" (Saint-Martin "Les premières mères, *Le premier jardin*" 681). Instead in *Le Premier Jardin*, mothers, in all their various forms,<sup>29</sup> serve as the origin and the generator of (hi)stories. We see several examples, including most notably Flora who is an artist, but who also assumes the active role is bringing history to life. We also see Guillemette Thibault who physically makes something, her hammer and scissors, which even history cannot erase. Finally we

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<sup>28</sup> See for example,; *Le corps et la fiction à réinventer: métamorphoses de la maternité dans l'écriture des femmes au Québec*; "Le Nom de la mère. Mères, filles et écriture dans la littérature québécoise au féminin;" and "Le Nom de la mère: Le Rapport mère-fille comme constante de l'écriture au féminin," to name a few.

<sup>29</sup> As we have seen in *Le Premier Jardin* and in *La Cage*, Anne Hébert shows several alternative forms of motherhood that did not force a woman to reproduce biological children.

have “*la fausse grand-mère*” who is responsible for sharing news of the day and for telling the family history of the Eventurels (124-125). In this new historical space, mothers are honored as individuals and their individual, varied contributions as both procreators and creators are acknowledged.

Flora’s character again serves to drive home this connection between maternity and creation that Hébert demonstrates in feminine historical (re)tellings, and as such there are several instances where Flora’s work as an actress is described in maternal terms. Flora is described as having the power to change ordinary words into “paroles sonores et vivifiantes” (30) and “faire sortir au jour” the (hi)stories of the historical and fictional women she plays. Flora’s description of preparing to play Winnie in *Oh! les beaux jours* employs obvious metaphors of labor and delivery. She is “grosse de Winnie” (11), “le rôle de Winnie bouge déjà en elle” (174), and she is anxious for Winnie to [sortir] au grand jour” (45). In assuming the roles of women forgotten by traditional historical discourse, Flora “gives birth” to this new (hi)story and becomes “la mère du pays” for those whose (hi)stories had been forgotten (*Le Premier Jardin* 79). According to Saint-Martin, “l’histoire du Québec au féminin est donc mise au monde par une mère-créatrice” (“Les premières mères, *Le premier jardin*” 678), and the notion of a male dominated process of history-telling is again rebuked. In Hébert’s new historical space, women are both the subject and the author.

Although Flora is the “mère du pays” for this new historical space, she is also a biological mother to her daughter Maud. This relationship too underscores the importance of mothers in the québécois context. Just as in traditional historical discourse, the mother-daughter relationship between Flora and Maud is defined by a constant alternation between plenitude and lack. Far from being a traditional relationship, Maud and Flora demonstrate the strength of the maternal bond/presence, which is equaled in the trauma felt when that bond dissolves (Hirsch 102-103). We have discussed at length

how Flora has experienced this lack in her role as “daughter without a mother,” and the imbalance is repeated between Maud and Flora because of Flora’s career as an actress. Flora admits that:

— Si l’amour est un piège, avec moi ça n’a pas été pareil, c’était plutôt le contraire, il y avait plein de mailles filées dans le filet, rien qui puisse le retenir, et c’est ce qu’elle n’a pas pu supporter. Une mère actrice, ce n’est sans doute pas un cadeau pour un enfant. Trop de câlins à la fois, entre deux représentations, puis l’absence prolongée des tournées. Ce n’est pas normal, cette alternance de trop et de rien. Impossible à vivre sans doute.” (102)

In response to the “*va-et-vient*” of maternal love, Maud runs away every time her mother accepts to play a new theatrical role (62). There is a shift in the lack/plenitude of the mother’s love in the case of Flora and Maud that distinguishes their mother-daughter relationship: the ever-shifting balance is due to Flora’s agency and her ability to choose her own identity that she and Maud cannot permanently remain in the paradise lost, the “*amour fou*,” and “fusion amoureuse” following Maud’s birth (110). Because Flora assumes an active role, she cannot fulfill the role of the *mère canadienne-française* archetype. Echoing the metafeminist<sup>30</sup> view of motherhood as “indispensable à la complexité de l’expérience féminine” (Kristeva 264), Flora chooses to become a mother but rejects the traditional obligation to abandon all other elements of her existence. Just as the women she resurrects, Flora will remain multidimensional, an individual with unique desires, joys, and pains. Compelled to become a mother despite its costs, Flora is like many other mothers in metafeminist texts who “sont prêtes à des sacrifices immenses pour le bonheur maternel et familial, [mais] elle n’iront pas jusqu’à briser leur vie

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<sup>30</sup> Writers of metafeminist literature in Québec refused to submit their texts to any one ideology—even feminist—and they emphasized the importance of the individual from within the collective. No longer marginalized or silenced to the same degree as their predecessors, metafeminist writers focused on denouncing injustices against individual women, rather than against a “nous féminin indifférencié” (Fonteneau 128-130).

pour leurs enfants,” (Fonteneau 137). Flora chooses maternity over her intense, violently passionate relationship with Maud’s father who wanted to “faire disparaître [Maud] comme si elle n’avait jamais existé dans son insignifiante petitesse de moule d’aveugle” (109). Flora also suffered poor reviews upon returning to the stage after the three months she spent secluded with infant Maud, because she was too happy to fully demonstrate another person’s miseries (112). However instead of abandoning her work as would the archetypal French Canadian mother, or rejecting her daughter in favor of her career, Flora attempts to play both roles. In order to achieve the same level of success as before her maternity began, Flora must rely on the joys she feels as a mother *and* the pain she felt from her past. After receiving positive reviews for her portrayal of Fantine, Flora recognizes the importance of balance between her role as a mother and as an actress: “Ne pas savoir garder ses distances, ni avec sa fille qui rit aux anges ni avec Fantine qui tousse à fendre l’âme” (113). In the new historical space created by Anne Hébert, the myth of the French Canadian mother archetype can still be honored for her role as founder of the province and procreator of children through the women Flora portrays and Flora herself, but she will also be recognized as more than “un ventre fidèle, une matrice à faire des enfants” (*Kamouraska* 10) or “les jeunes corps voués sans réserve à l’homme, au travail et à la maternité” (*Le Premier Jardin* 97). In this new historical space, the French Canadian mother will be an individual, she will choose and speak her own name, and her (hi)story will be heard.

## Conclusion

Traditional historical discourse assumes that the experiences of collective groups, such as the female archetypes presented in *Le Premier Jardin*, are the same and as such it is acceptable to “les raconter en bloc parce qu’elle n’a aucune raison de se passionner pour l’un d’eux en particulier” (Veyne 73). Anne Hébert rejects this notion, and directly contradicts it through the creation of a new historical

space that favors both fiction and history to (re)tell the individual feminine (hi)stories of Québec's past, present, and future, including Flora's own (hi)stories. Flora Fontanges serves as the groups' spokesperson, is the most contemporary in a long lineage of women forgotten by traditional historical discourse, and personifies Hébert's new historical space to show the multidimensional nature of these groups and also the multiple nature of each individual woman and her feminine (hi)story. Through Flora's portrayals of women from Québec's past and her own personal journey with memories, Hébert criticizes many aspects of traditional historical discourse that have left women anonymous and homogenous, if not completely effaced from the historical record.

Hébert's new historical space recognizes the "nature lacunaire de l'histoire" (Veyne 27) rather than a "plenitude of the past." Through Flora Fontanges, it becomes clear that "les peuples qu'on dit sans histoire sont plus simplement des peuples dont on ignore l'histoire" (Veyne 27). By turning a critical eye on the dominant male gaze of traditional historical discourse and art, returning a name and a voice to women from the past who have been anonymized, and "*boucher les trous*" in the telling of her own québécois feminine experience, Hébert both writes women into the History and attempts to right the wrongs done to them in the past. Through the almost indistinguishable coexistence of fiction and fact, feminine (hi)stories are transformed from "*le non-événementiel*" to the fullest representation of the past, which most appropriately and completely exposes the truths of the feminine experience throughout Québec's past.

The new historical space and the process of unearthing previously unheard individual feminine (hi)stories serves not only to write/right the wrongs of the past, but is critical for women in the present and future. Flora's resurrection of feminine (hi)stories allows her to confront her own personal past in the present. If "History is the 'privilege' (*tantara*) that must be remembered so that one shall not oneself be forgotten" (de Certeau 4), Hébert questions how women can form an identity in the present with no



representations of themselves as individuals from the past? To make sure the “boucle est bouclée,” to be able to more closely look at herself “pour être vue et reconnue par elle” (*Le Premier Jardin* 154), Flora must first unearth the “remainders left aside by an explication” of traditional historical discourse to engender “a return of the repressed, [...] of what [...] has *become* unthinkable in order for a new identity to *become* thinkable (de Certeau 4, emphasis in original.) Flora is more than the sum of her parts; she is more than the lack of mother and name that has defined her. She is at once uniquely herself and all women, just as the individual and collective (hi)stories of women from Québec’s past that she (re)tells. In the past, present, and future, the new historical space she creates provides the stage for the individual and collective feminine (hi)story to be heard.

## Chapter Five

### Writing Alternative Biographies with Fictional (Hi)stories

*C'est par la fiction de l'Homme que nous sommes devenues fictives, sortons de la fiction par la fiction. Nous existerons dans le récit que nous inventerons.*  
(Nicole Brossard, Elle serait la première phrase de mon prochain roman)

#### Introduction

Previous chapters in this work have examined texts in which the subject of the feminine (re)telling was a historical figure, one whose biography could be verified—at least in part—with historical records. These works included subjects from Québec's past, as well as women who are well-known globally as mythical and/or legendary figures. We have discussed how these texts have relied on both minor and major histories to (re)tell the feminine story in a fictional context in order to better reflect the completeness and the truth of those feminine stories. We now shift to two texts written in the 1980s by women writers from Québec that demonstrate the process of (re)telling the feminine story in a purely fictional setting. As in Jovette Marchessault's plays discussed in Chapter 3, Madeleine Monette's *Le Double suspect*<sup>1</sup> and Nicole Brossard's *Le Désert*

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Double suspect* is, at its center, a mystery novel. Focusing on various forms of seduction between sexually ambiguous characters, the novel's main theme is on duality or doubles, as the title suggests. The story begins with two women meeting in Rome, the departure point for their joint trip to North Africa. But one of the women, Manon, abruptly abandons the other, Anne, and their planned voyage. The same night Manon leaves, Anne is informed that her friend has died in a car accident, which seems to be an apparent suicide. Manon has left behind several items in her hotel room in Rome, including a personal journal that Anne feels compelled to study and eventually rewrite. For Anne, Manon's journal becomes not only the key to understanding her enigmatic friend, it is also inspiration for a novel she feels she must write. *Le Double suspect* narrative thus constantly shifts between descriptions of the actual journal, Anne's experience reading the journal, and the work of fiction Anne creates. Ultimately Anne (re)tells both Manon's and her own (hi)story.

*mauve*<sup>2</sup> are centered on the figure of the feminine/female writer. Also like Marchessault's work, Brossard and Monette do not simply attempt to retell the writer's personal biography. In these works of fiction, the other('s) story is retold not through actual historical events that take place in a known writer's history (which occurs in a fictional world), but rather through an examination and retelling of an author's literary work. In other words, these novels both figuratively and literally retell the other('s) story—both her individual history and the piece of literature she created.

This representation of the writer figure in a fictional context, along with several other elements, aligns both *Le Double suspect* and *Le Désert mauve* with postmodernism, as they expose the crisis of narratives, rejection of grand narratives and incredulity toward metanarratives common to the “postmodern condition” (Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition*). Although there are certainly some differences in terms of their presentation and strict categorization as such, both of these texts feature strategies common to postmodern literature, such as intertextuality, the use of mirroring as a means of autorepresentation, complex “*mise en abyme*” structures, and the reevaluation of History and other grand narratives in order to retell another('s) feminine (hi)story.

While both Brossard and Monette rely on literary strategies common to postmodern literature for the retelling process, it is important to consider the differing degrees of political engagement present in these works, and in general for these two authors. The eight years between

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<sup>2</sup> First published in 1987, *Le Désert mauve* is considered a seminal feminist Canadian text. It is simultaneously a single novel (by Nicole Brossard) that includes three individual novels (by fictional characters within Brossard's text). In the first novel, *Le Désert mauve*, 15-year-old Mélanie discusses her life in the Arizona desert at the motel owned and managed by her mother and her mother's lover, Lorna. This section is written by fictional author Laure Angstelle. In the second book, another fictional character named Maude Laures discovers Angstelle's text and becomes obsessed with the story itself and the mysterious author who wrote it. She becomes consumed with a desire to understand the text, its characters, and its author and “translate” or rewrite it in her own words. The third book – *Mauve, l'horizon* – is Laures' translation of *Le Désert mauve*, which simultaneously remains true and departs from Angstelle's work.

their births, the 15 years that separate the publication of their first literary works, and their personal political causes contribute considerably to the feminist nature and level of open activism present in these novels. However, it is important to note that these two texts were published within a year of each other.

Québécois poet, novelist, and essayist, Nicole Brossard was born in Montréal in 1943, and was educated at the Collège Marguerite Bourgeoys and the Université de Montréal. She began her career during the Quiet Revolution. As mentioned in the introduction, the Quiet Revolution was a period of intense socio-political and socio-cultural change. The Quiet Revolution was characterized by a desire on the part of the Québécois for secularization, the creation of a welfare state, increased sentiments of nationalism based on growing support for a sovereign Québec and the belief that the French language was Québec's new ultimate pillar of survival rather than the Catholic religion.

According to Brossard, prior to the 1960s and Québec's political awakening, her relationship to language and writing was normative. During the Quiet Revolution, the question of "*joual*"<sup>3</sup> and the notion of alienation led her to develop a more critical sense of reflection on language and writing, which would continue more passionately once she became preoccupied with the questions of feminism and "*écriture au féminin*" (Larose 14). Described as both avant-garde and formalist, Brossard's work explores the connection of feminism and female desire to language's structure and flexibility. Her preoccupation with feminism, language and the collision of the two is evident simply from looking at Brossard's bibliography, which includes titles like

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<sup>3</sup> "*Joual*" is the nonstandard form of French spoken by some in Québec. Coming from the rural or working-class pronunciation of "*cheval*," "*joual*" was often used a derogatory term during the Quiet Revolution and referred to a lack of culture within the French Canadian community. "*Joual*" assumed a political and literary importance for the Québécois cause in 1968 when Michel Tremblay produced a play called *Les Belles sœurs* written and performed entirely in the dialect.

*Lovhers*, *Mordre en sa chair*, *Amantes*, and *Sous la langue*. *Le Désert mauve* is no exception, and we will examine how her treatment of the feminine story, the female writer, and the power of language bolsters the political engagement of her works.

Although her work also emphasizes and is preoccupied with “*écriture au féminin*,” Madeleine Monette seems to devote more energy to novels and short stories that combine acute social consciousness and an intimate sense of reality in which she examines notions of territory, multiculturalism, and physical and imaginary geographies. Born in Montréal in 1951, she moved to New York City in 1979 and has remained there ever since. Beginning her literary career with *Le Double suspect*, she later turned to poetry in order to explore one’s individual subjective and physical place in the world as they relate to the historical and social reality of the time. Like Brossard, her singular narrative style and linguistic experimentation attempt to reexamine and renew conceptions of reality, fiction, and the interplay between the two.

Regardless of the influence one can attribute to the Quiet Revolution or the level of political engagement, both *Le Désert mauve* and *Le Double suspect* deemphasize an element that has played a central role in establishing the Literature of Québec since Lord Durham posited that it was a land without History or culture<sup>4</sup>: the province of Québec itself. In contrast to many of the other works we have examined in this dissertation, Québec and its History play a minor role in these novels, a role that could be described as superficial at most. *Le Double suspect* provides many more details about Rome and its landmarks, streets, and citizens than it does about Montréal, despite the fact that the action takes place in both cities. The desert landscape, its barren “*arroyos*” and impressive,

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<sup>4</sup> Lord John George Lambton Durham was governor general and high commissioner to British North America with responsibility for preparing a report on the Canadian Rebellions of 1837. In January of 1839, he completed his famous *Report on the Affairs of British North America*, in which he made his recommendation to reunite the Lower (French) and Upper (English) Canada in order to accelerate the assimilation of the French Canadians, whom he characterized as a people without a history or a culture. The union occurred in 1840, and was one of the first in a long line of events that would place francophone culture in a subordinate position to English Canada.

open expanses dominate *Le Désert mauve*, although the character responsible for the retelling hails from Québec. Although the mention of the province and its History are not featured in an obvious way, its presence can be felt in other ways. Specifically, the French language seems to become a proxy for “*québécoisité*” rather than an overt discussion of the province’s past status or current struggles in these two texts.

In this section, we will examine how the retelling process is affected when a purely fictional character is the subject of the retelling in a purely fictional space; when literary strategies and concerns common to postmodern literature are employed; and when the particular History and identity of Québec and the Québécois are not emphasized. I propose that the above elements present in both *Le Double suspect* by Madeleine Monette and in *Le Désert mauve* by Nicole Brossard allow for language, fiction, and writing to become the predominant vehicles through which to transmit culture, lineage, and History that may in fact provide a more complete and truthful representation than those in the grand narratives of History.

### **Literary artifacts**

At the base of both Nicole Brossard’s *Le Désert mauve* and Madeleine Monette’s *Le Double suspect* is a “*mise en abyme*” of the writing process in which a female character finds a text written by another woman and then becomes compelled to rewrite, or “translate” the text. For the narrator,<sup>5</sup> Anne, in *Le Double suspect*, the found text is a “*journal intime*” left by her friend Manon who has just committed suicide. For Maude Laures in *Le Désert mauve*, the found text is

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<sup>5</sup> Although the narrator explains that Anne is her middle name and never divulges her actual name, we will refer to her as Anne throughout this chapter in order to simplify the presentation. Analysis and discussion of her use of her middle name will follow later in the chapter.

a short novel of that same name written in French by an author named Laure Angstelle that Maude<sup>6</sup> happens upon in a used book store. In both cases, the original text serves as the artifact by which one woman must rewrite another woman's story.

An artifact, which is an object made by a human being that is typically of some cultural or historical interest, is a physical relic from the past that offers a glimpse into how an individual or a group lived. Brossard and Monette choose a literary artifact from the recent past that compels a character to not only imagine the original user's experience with the artifact, but to retell the story of the artifact itself. Thus, the literary work is as worthy of retelling as the story being retold. Although the artifacts in *Le Désert mauve* and *Le Double suspect* refer to fictional subjects in fictional worlds, within the texts themselves, the artifacts are relics or remains to be examined. In other words, they are historical within the fictional spaces created by Brossard and Monette. In the case of Manon's journal, it could be considered a work of autobiography, albeit an incomplete one. For Maude in *Le Désert mauve*, the artifact is itself a work of fiction that is as much a part of Angstelle's "story" as it is the story of the characters she created. Similar to artifacts in postmodern art,<sup>7</sup> these textual artifacts are incorporated into the work in such a way that it allows for new meaning to be unearthed rather than focusing on grand narratives as does modernist literature (Malpas *The Postmodern* 12).

For Anne in *Le Double suspect*, the artifact comes in the form of several journals left by her friend Manon who has recently had a fatal car accident that is assumed to be self-inflicted. In

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<sup>6</sup> In order to clearly distinguish between Laure Angstelle and Maude Laures, I will call the former "Angstelle" and the latter "Maude." Analysis and discussion of the use of almost identical names for the writer of the artifact and the writer of its translation will follow later in the chapter.

<sup>7</sup> The use of found objects from every day Western life were common in postmodernist art. For instance, industrial objects in art that celebrated/criticized consumerism in post-World War II America, collages, pop art like Andy Warhol's, and installation are all examples of postmodern art using artifacts.

response to Manon's black journals, which are almost illegible according to Anne, are the red and white journals that Anne begins using for her retelling. The red journals are the so-called novel<sup>8</sup> that Anne is writing in order to more fully tell Manon's story, while the white journals contain Anne "the author's" notes about the rewriting process. Over the course of several months, Anne remains in Rome where she and Manon met before Manon's suicide.<sup>9</sup> Anne uses this time to study Manon's original journals, to reflect on them and the writing process in her new white journals, and finally provide a fictional retelling of Manon's (hi)story in the red journals. The red and white journals thus become a form of artifact for the reader of *Le Double suspect*, as we learn about both Manon and Anne's histories in them. Interestingly, however, the reader never actually gains direct access to Manon's black journals; we only hear about their contents as we read Anne's white and red journals. We have no choice but to accept Anne's representation of Manon and her retelling of the (hi)story Manon left behind in her artifact, despite the fact that Anne admits it will not always be a factual representation of the original journals. Although *Le Double suspect* is not strictly speaking a historical novel, it nonetheless simultaneously relies upon this historical dimension in order to problematize the entire notion of historical knowledge, a common trait of what Janet Paterson terms "*le roman historique postmoderne*" (*Moments postmodernes* 53). Echoing Paul Veyne, Michel de Certeau, and many other French theorists who questioned History's legitimacy as a "récit véridique, totalisant et scientifique," Monette's use of a literary artifact demonstrates that both fiction and History are limited, subjective, and incapable of directly or completely representing an event (Paterson *Moments postmodernes* 54-55).

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<sup>8</sup> "Disons un roman..." is how Anne describes what she's doing because there's no other word and it is something those who ask about the text she has created can understand.

<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that the plot of *Le Double suspect* begins at the end of the story, like a mystery novel or a crime story might. The book opens in Rome just prior to Manon's suicide. After Manon's death, Anne begins to study her journals and begin the retelling process.



Coupled with her inherent lack of objectivity “à l’historienne,” the way in which Anne critiques Manon’s personal journals leaves the reader constantly questioning what elements of the retelling did actually appear in Manon’s black journals, in other words, what is “true,” and what Anne has reworked in order to “réparer les négligences, d’en combler les vides, d’en supprimer les redondances, les purs ornements, comme on le fait d’un premier manuscrit maladroit” (51-52). This instability and lack of trust between the narrator and the reader, not to mention the direct comparison with a work of fiction, exposes the problematic relationship that exists between artifacts and traditional historical discourse. As is the case with Manon’s journals and Anne’s retelling, History’s representations are only as reliable as the historian retelling them. The historian’s role is to use evidence to tell a story, to fill in the voids with what s/he believes to be the truth based on all the facts, to “comblent les vides” and “réparer les négligences” as Anne has done for Manon’s story. In *Le Double suspect*, the one seemingly reliable element, the one central point on which the reader believes s/he can feel some sort of trust with the author—the clear distinction between the different colored journals—is also unreliable and fluid. There is no “*point de repère*,” there is only reality, invention, and the interplay between the two.

Although discussed in the context of large-scale, extreme historical events, Monette’s treatment of Manon’s (hi)story aligns with Hayden White’s analysis of postmodernism and historiography. Supported by a belief that not all treatments of the past are “historical,” Monette’s novel exemplifies White’s assertions that:

[...] History is (nothing but) a text, that the principal problem of historical representation is that of narrativization, that, when it comes to representing the past, there is no important distinction between fact and fiction, and that, finally, historical phenomena are best made sense of by storytelling rather than by model building

and causal analysis of chains of events. (“After Metahistory: Lecture on Postmodernism by Professor Hayden White”)

Nicole Brossard chooses a different approach to the found text, or artifact, and subsequent structuring of her novel, *Le Désert mauve*. While we have parallelism and cyclical “*aller-retour*” between Manon’s history and Anne’s retelling in *Le Double suspect*, Brossard’s work features a more delineated structure beginning with the artifact, moving on to the author’s notes, and finally the (re)telling. In other words, while Monette’s (re)telling would be depicted as a circle, Brossard’s is a straight line. Another major difference between *Le Désert mauve* and *Le Double suspect* being that the reader is granted direct access to the original artifact, the novel also titled *Le Désert mauve* by Laure Angstelle within Brossard’s *Le Désert mauve*. Angstelle’s novel immediately follows Brossard’s title page and epigraph<sup>10</sup> and even has its own separate cover, publishing house, and page numbers within Brossard’s own *Désert mauve*, reinforcing the sense of authenticity surrounding the artifact and, unlike *Le Double suspect*, removing any question about what was or was not in the original, found text. Angstelle’s novel is then followed by a section called “Un livre à traduire,” in which Maude Laures discusses the process of translating and rewriting Angstelle’s *Le Désert mauve*. In some ways, this section is the equivalent of Anne’s white journals in Monette’s *Le Double suspect*. Maude Laures is a school teacher who stumbles upon Angstelle’s book in a used bookstore and finds herself compelled to “translate” it and she is equally intrigued by the fictional story as she is by the life of the author who wrote it. The “Un Livre à traduire” section of Brossard’s *Le Désert mauve* is the place where Maude Laures can explain herself as an author, discuss who she is and why she was compelled to retell or “translate” another woman’s

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<sup>10</sup> The epigraph is a quote by Italo Calvino, which reads “Lire, c’est aller à la rencontre d’une chose qui va exister mais dont personne ne sait encore ce qu’elle sera...” Along with an obvious nod to the drama within Brossard’s text regarding Maude’s discovery of a text and subsequent compulsion to rewrite it, this quote also speaks to Brossard’s book, *Le Désert mauve* itself.

literary work. Here the reader is again reminded of the separateness of Maude's notes from the artifact since they too have their own pagination that is distinct from Angstelle's and Brossard's texts. The final section of Brossard's novel is Maude's retelling of Angstelle's book titled *Mauve, l'horizon*, which Maude calls a "translation" despite both works having been written in French.<sup>11</sup> This last section also begins with its own cover page, a publishing house (which is different than both Angstelle's and Brossard's), and separate pagination from the other two sections and from the global pagination of Brossard's *Le Désert mauve*.

Despite its inclusion of the found text, the fictional author's notes about the retelling and writing process, and the final product which are presented in their entirety, the structure within Brossard's *Désert mauve* still renders the reader uncertain and calls into question many of the traditional assumptions typically present in the "grand narrative" of traditional fiction. For instance, there are two *Désert mauves* that must constantly be distinguished, Brossard's and Angstelle's. The use of identical titles for Brossard's global work and for Angstelle's artifact is certainly not an accident. The effect that this choice has on the reader is a destabilizing one, leaving the reader unsure and uncomfortable despite having the opportunity to read each text for herself.

The fact that Brossard's poetic novel contains within its bounds the artifact that inspires the retelling recalls postmodern literature's drive to question historical discourse and to interrogate notions of representation, narrative, truth, and fiction. Similar to postmodern novels considered "*historiques*," Brossard's text "n'est plus lié à une autorité antérieure, fût celle du roman classique ou du discours historique traditionnelle. Au contraire, par le biais de nombreux procédés, il ne cesse de subvertir les fondements de cette autorité" and by putting the grand narrative's conceptions of "authentic" on trial, *Le Désert mauve* "célèbre de façon magistrale l'hétéromorphie

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<sup>11</sup> It is interesting and telling to note that Maude uses the term "innocent" to describe Angstelle's original text in comparison to her "translation" (55).

de tous les discours—historiques, fictifs, masculins et féminins” (Paterson *Moments postmodernes* 66).

Despite a lack of historical references or subjects, Brossard and Monette’s use of artifacts in the form of found texts that compel the feminine character to retell the other(’s) feminine story blurs the boundaries between history and fiction, fiction and reality, as well as fiction and truth. Echoing Barthes in questioning whether or not it is legitimate to oppose fictional and historical narratives,<sup>12</sup> these novels exemplify the postmodern assumption that knowledge is heterogenous, reinforce that it is no longer tied to an anterior authority, and confirm that it is instead related to a new notion of legitimacy founded on a recognition of the heteromorphy present in “des jeux de langage” (Lyotard *Enfants* 27-28).

### **Autorepresentation through mirrors and angles**

The authors’<sup>13</sup> use of artifacts as the basis for their retellings in *Le Double suspect* and *Le Désert mauve* inherently implies that there will be multiples of most literary techniques, functions, and roles. In order to generate these multiples, both texts rely on the notion of mirrors and/or the altered reflections that result from gazing upon a subject in a mirror from a different angle. In addition to the use of “*mise en abyme*,” the autorepresentation caused by the use of mirroring and the importance of angles characterizes the postmodern aesthetic present in literature, as well as visual art and film. In fact, according to Janet Paterson “on ne saurait, en fait, sous-estimer

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<sup>12</sup> “[...] la narration des événements passés, soumise communément, dans notre culture, depuis les Grecs, à la sanction de la ‘science’ historique, placée sous la caution impérieuse du ‘réel,’ [...] cette narration diffère-t-elle vraiment, par quelque trait spécifique, par une pertinence indubitable, de la narration imaginaire, tel qu’on peut la trouver dans l’épopée, le roman, le drame?” “Le Discours de l’histoire.”

<sup>13</sup> It is important to note that here I mean to discuss all authors—Monette and Brossard who wrote the texts we are discussing in this chapter, as well as the authors they have created within those texts. This inclusive terminology will be used throughout the chapter, while “Monette” and “Brossard” will be used to distinguish when only the non-fictional authors are in question.

l'importance de l'autoreprésentation dans le roman postmoderne : narcissique, autoréflexif, celui-ci exhibe toujours son propre fonctionnement" (*Moments postmodernes* 25), and causes the fictions in which autorepresentation plays a key role to constantly "se recourber dans un perpétuel retour sur soi" (Foucault *Les Mots et les choses* 313).

Both Monette's *Double suspect* and Brossard's *Désert mauve* rely upon autorepresentation in the postmodern sense through mirroring in order to demonstrate fiction's ability to "engendrer du réel, du réel inédit, qui n'avait pas d'existence à l'intérieur de l'univers patriarcal" (Brossard qtd. in Larose 19) and in opposition to literature and the historical discourse of grand narratives. For Monette, the autorepresentative mirror serves to highlight the multiple nature of humanity, regardless of sex or traditional gender roles. For Brossard, the angle from which the narrator/author chooses to view and retell the other('s) feminine story is the predominant subject of inquiry. Using Brossard's own terminology,<sup>14</sup> these instances of literary modification called "variations" or "angles" are responsible for creating the autorepresentation present in *Le Désert mauve*.

The use of mirroring within *Le Double suspect* is probably the single most important factor contributing to the work's structural complexity, and acts as the lens through which the entire work should be viewed.<sup>15</sup> Although it is hard to define, mirroring in *Le Double suspect* results in a sort of blending or doubling of many fundamental elements of characters' identities, whether it be

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<sup>14</sup> In an interview with Karim Larose in *Voix et images*, Brossard discussed her views on angles, variations, and repetitions: "Il y a la question des angles et aussi celle de la variation. Nous répétons constamment nos gestes, nos paroles, nos idées. Je crois que la numérotation rencontre en moi un plaisir de la classification, de l'illusion de la précision et ce au moment même où les dérives du cœur prennent d'assaut le poème. J'aime aussi les chiffres, au même titre qu'une allée de palmiers ou de cyprès. Ils me donnent intrinsèquement du plaisir" (22-23).

<sup>15</sup> The concept of the mirror that reflects, but can also distort is personified in the character aptly named "Lemire." Lemire is the seductive and aggressive, if not violent, friend of Manon's husband, Paul, who takes pleasure in exposing Paul's homosexuality to Manon and insinuating that it was her inability to give him what he desired that led to Paul's suicide.

physical, emotional, or experiential in nature, so that it is impossible to disassociate them from one another, and in many instances the reader—and to a certain degree the characters themselves—confound certain aspects of a character’s identity or history. Evidence of this mirroring is constant, and examples of characters sharing traits abound.<sup>16</sup> Monette’s mirroring adheres to the postmodern assumption that through the duality and multiplicity it produces, autorepresentation contains a freedom that allows fiction to transgress the principles of temporal and spatial unity in modern fiction and great historical narratives (Paterson *Moments postmodernes* 35-36).

The most obvious example is between Manon and Anne, who share so many physical traits that they are often confused for one another at the newspaper where they both work (231). From the beginning of the text, the relationship between Manon and Anne is complicated, to say the least. For both the reader and Anne, Manon is an elusive character whose desires, emotions and history are never completely expressed and seem in constant flux. The reader and Anne also struggle to differentiate Anne and Manon, to separate their (hi)stories, which constantly mirror and distort each other. For instance, Manon explains to Anne that she intends to abandon their plans to travel around Europe and North Africa together because she would rather be with a German man named Hans whom she met on a beach in Yugoslavia. After Manon’s suicide, Anne tries to fill in the blanks in Manon’s about Hans story with an almost identical experience from her own past: “Et je m’imaginai cet homme dont elle ne m’avait presque rien dit, lui attribuant petit à petit le physique d’un Allemand que j’avais connu deux ans plutôt au Portugal et dont le nom soudain m’échappait, parce que celui de Hans seul m’occupait l’esprit” (24). In Anne’s subsequent descriptions of her intense three-day relationship on a nude beach in Lagos with this German man,

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<sup>16</sup> The text is filled with so many examples, it would be virtually impossible to supply all of them within this chapter. The mirroring ranges from subtle, seemingly mundane hints like when Manon takes a final sip of coffee before leaving Anne at the cafe, yet Anne is the one who remains seated “avec un goût de café sur la bouche” (22) to very obvious and openly discussed similarities in major life events.

she abandons all attempts to distinguish him from Manon's German and even begins to call the man she met in Portugal "Hans" (25).

Thus, Anne's Hans and Manon's Hans are now one and the same. As Anne wanders the streets of Rome simultaneously reliving her own experience and imagining Manon's, she goes as far as to begin to believe that she and Manon were in love with the same man, which causes her anxiety and irritation:

[...] je pensais donc à ces deux Allemands qui, se confondant, me suivaient de rue en rue, de café en café, comme si Manon avait été amoureuse du même homme que moi, et *je m'impatients en m'avisant tantôt que ce Hans était peut-être une pure invention, tantôt que Manon vivait peut-être ce que je m'étais refusé.* (25, my emphasis)

On the surface, it seems as though Anne is questioning the existence of Manon's Hans; she is questioning whether or not Manon created a decoy story about a German love interest in order to avoid their joint travel plans. However, both from a narrative and grammatical point of view, this line of questioning could also be understood to apply to the German man Anne claims to have met in Portugal, given her admitted confusion and incomplete memories about the experience. Thus, Anne's Hans is just as likely to have been "pure invention" as Manon's, a realization that again destabilizes the reader and reinforces the distorted mirroring that exists between Manon and Anne. This leads Anne to question Manon's motives, to feel completely destabilized and unable to differentiate between what is true and what is invention—sentiments also shared by the reader of Monette's *Le Double suspect*.

In fact, the choice of names is very important in both texts and it allows the effects of mirrors and angles to be more fully developed. Monette and Brossard both employ character names

that serve a specific purpose to further destabilize the reader and force a questioning of traditional social constructs of the patriarchal order. Brossard uses mirroring of names most obviously with her two female writers, Laure Angstelle and Maudes Laures. The choice to name the two women writers in this way has several effects. First, it reinforces the mirroring between the artifact and the translation, since although they are not identical, the two names clearly echo one another. Secondly, it continues the trend of destabilizing the reader since confusing the two women writers is now almost impossible to avoid, as is evidenced by the need to call Laure Angstelle by her last name and Maudes Laures by her first name in this dissertation in order to simplify the analysis. And finally it creates a lineage and a legacy for women through their writing rather than through the family structure with the father as head promulgated by the traditional patriarchal order. As we will discuss in greater detail later on, Brossard distinguishes and creates distance between masculine and feminine (hi)stories through the inclusion of separate narrative paths for the main characters in Angstelle's *Le Désert mauve*, Mélanie and "l'homme long." There is virtually no discussion of fathers in Brossard's *Le Désert mauve*, and that is because lineage and family (hi)stories are passed down through women instead of men. Beyond this, literature and writing are the ultimate means of binding women together, since the "Laures" (Laure Angstelle and Maude Laures) are responsible for creating and disseminating their (hi)stories. Through this reorientation of what links women throughout history, Brossard shows how and why it is necessary to expand the meaning of your story into the realm of social values and ideology requires that you understand where and why your story does not fit into the system and standard values. By doing so, you are forced to reevaluate the dominant forces that prevent your story from existing loudly and clearly in the public forum. (Brossard "A State of Mind in the Garden" 38)



Monette too uses mirroring of names to destabilize the reader and to diminish the traditional patriarchal construction of family lineage and legacy. There is mirroring between the names of all female characters in *Le Double suspect*: Anne, Andrée, and Manon. This not only links the women together, but it also contributes to the likelihood of confounding the characters. Along with this echoing of names, lineage and legacy are realigned with the mother rather than the father. Although she calls herself Anne in her retelling of Manon's story, this is not actually the narrator's real name. Named after her father's sister who passed away at a young age, "Anne" is the name the narrator's mother had hoped to call her. Monette implies that it is the fate of many women to "porter le poids" of masculine regrets due to the traditional patriarchal passage of history and identity through a father's family name (257). Rejecting the name given to her by her father, the narrator is critical of women's historical lack of or inability to defend their daughters against the patriarchal system and thus shifts towards a world in which the woman can choose her own name and her own identity. It is through fiction that this can occur, and in Anne's case the choice of character names continues to undermine the grand narrative that lineage passes through men. Masculine characters are given names that are easily feminized, like Michel, Paul, and Daniel, and renders them indistinct from their female counterparts/mirror images. Their characteristics and personalities echo their androgynous names, and all of the male characters display qualities that standard gender norms would consider effeminate. Androgyny is mirrored in the names of female characters, most notably with Andrée and Manon that play with the traditional gender binary and what it means to be feminine, masculine, and human. In Monette's text, blurring of boundaries and mirroring of character names exposes the sameness, rather than the distinction, between men and women.

With this mirroring, Monette puts on display the mirror stage described by Lacan<sup>17</sup> but with two adult women rather than one single infant. In fact, the process is almost reversed in order. Upon finding her mirror image in Manon, Anne experiences a flurry of negative affects: anxiety, distress, frustration, existential malaise, etc. The result is the same, however, in that gazing upon her mirror image causes the subject's "je-idéal" to enter into a line of fiction (Lacan *Écrits* 94). She too will search in vain for a "unified, pulled-together whole, an integrated, coordinated totality like the [...] others in [her] life" (Johnston). In the section on the role of writing and the writer that appears later in this analysis, we will further consider Monette's treatment of the unattainable state of harmony and mastery first falsely promised during the mirror stage.

In the case of *Le Désert mauve*, the mirroring effect does not occur between characters, but rather between the artifact and its translation. While the identities of the characters and their narratives have some overlap, it is limited and clearly separated in the two versions of the story presented. Brossard's mirroring and use of "angles" introduces variations into Maude's translation of Angstelle's text at the linguistic level, which causes changes in the retelling and forces the reader to question why Maude chose to alter particular elements while faithfully reproducing others. This process of selection recalls the postmodern belief that there is little difference between the grand narratives of historical discourse and fiction since both require the agency of an author who selects and represents the event in question through an unavoidably subjective lens.

Brossard's artful and dedicated commitment to making the artifact and its translation virtually identical in structure is impressive. Not only sharing much of the same content, the two

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<sup>17</sup> The theory of the mirror stage posits that children between the ages of six and 18 months gain the ability to identify their own images in reflective surfaces and experience.

texts are identical in pagination<sup>18</sup> and their division into paragraphs and sentences. For all intents and purposes, the retelling is the mirror image of the artifact. According to Patricia Smart, despite this seemingly faithful structural mirroring between the artifact and its translation, “les deux versions sont pourtant l’expression de deux sensibilités différentes, et c’est dans la variation de mots et d’images de la première à la deuxième qu’émerge le mouvement vers une réconciliation avec le temps et le réel” (*Chroniques*, 497). In this study, we contend, however, that before this reconciliation with time and reality can take place, the reader’s perception must be adequately destabilized in order for her to recognize that a reconciliation is necessary.

The destabilization process begins even before the reader opens Maude’s translation of Angstelle’s text, since the book covers and titles are not identical. While Laure Angstelle’s *Désert mauve* features a cover devoid of images and largely composed of blank space, the cover of Maude Laures’ translation is almost overcrowded with a heavy, bold title in all capital letters and a large, dark picture of the desert that consumes more than half of the page. The titles themselves are also different—*Le Désert mauve* as compared to *Mauve, l’horizon*, and Brossard again acknowledges the importance of variations in choosing to have Maude’s publisher be named “Éditions de l’Angle.”<sup>19</sup> Thus before the actual text even begins, the reader is confronted with the duality of the two works, the variations that will clearly abound if the covers are any indication. This sets the stage for other angles and the variations they will engender, preparing the reader to consider the

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<sup>18</sup> While incredibly interesting and impressive, this identical pagination can make referencing specific sections of *Le Désert mauve* confusing. To simplify this, we will use page numbers from the overarching text, i.e., from Brossard’s text rather than from Angstelle or Maude’s, to refer to citations throughout this analysis.

<sup>19</sup> Angstelle’s book is published by Éditions de l’Arroyo, which translates from Spanish as “wash” and from French to Spanish as “*ruisseau*.” An “*arroyo*” is a dry creek or stream bed that fills with water or floods upon sufficient rainfall. The metaphor here is relatively obvious: Angstelle’s text, with its blank cover page and complex poetic language, is a forgotten, barren work until Maude reinvigorates and nourishes *Le Désert mauve* by showering it with a flow of new literary interest.

fictional world(s) being created, and ultimately the perceived reality/invention dichotomy. According to Frédéric Rondeau, “c’est ainsi que Brossard engage son travail dans un temps long, qui n’est pas celui de l’histoire ou du discours hégémonique, mais qui fait entendre l’ardente réverbération de la parole à travers les lieux et les âges” (68). It is this “ardent reverberation” caused by mirroring, angles, and variations that allows Brossard to expose the need for reconciliation between time and reality.

Examples of variations between the artifact and its translation that provide new angles permeate the text and are intermingled with faithful reproductions in such a way that reading Maude’s translation becomes more a hunt to identify and explain the variations themselves than to read the narrative of *Mauve, l’horizon*. For instance from the very first page, the reader is compelled to consider Maude’s choice to faithfully reproduce the opening sentence—“Le désert est indescriptible” (11)—and “translate” the second—“La réalité s’y engouffre, lumière rapide” versus “La lumière avale tout, gouffre cru” (181). These small, seemingly subtle changes in the text gain incredible power when considered in conjunction. Despite using many of the same or similar words—désert, lumière, s’engouffrer/un gouffre—the meanings of the original sentence and its translation seem very distinct. On its own, either sentence might not elicit much thought and certainly would not cause a reader to feel destabilized, however, Brossard is able to create a strong sense of instability and force the reader to consider what the seemingly minor changes in language mean for these sentences and the fictional world in which they reside. Brossard’s variations/angles between the artifact and its translation form a “parallélisme et [une] relation que le lecteur ne peut s’empêcher d’établir entre eux, constituent un effet d’intertextualité dans le système fermé qu’est *Le désert mauve*” (Guillmette-Fournier 101). This reinforces the postmodern aesthetic and showcases language’s ability to subvert grand narratives and create new meaning.

Angles and variations are not simply repetitions, rather they are the means by which a sense of completeness—both literary and otherwise—can come into view.

Although Monette and Brossard use different techniques to accomplish this, just as they did with their distinct use of artifacts, the result is the same: the process of retelling another woman's story is employed within the confines of a postmodern aesthetic to destabilize the readers' beliefs about both literature and the world itself, leading to the possibility of a fuller understanding of that world. In other words, the reader discovers that only through accepting one's inability to view the fullness of another's (hi)story is it possible to appreciate that fullness, if it even exists at all. For both Monette and Brossard, the mirror is not an object that faithfully displays the image of a subject, but is rather one that distorts. These texts speak more to the advantages of multiple mirrors that when placed in opposition reflect multiple images of the original subject, providing for the possibility of a fuller representation.

### **Retelling the (hi)stories of men and women**

In general and in the context of contemporary québécois feminist literature in particular, there is a trend towards postmodernist strategies to contest the prevailing patriarchal social constructs and oppressive totality of what Lyotard calls "cultural policy" (*The Postmodern Condition* 76). Both postmodernism and feminism(s)<sup>20</sup> reject "toute vision figée, fermée et linéaire qui nous propose l'Histoire" through a validation of differences that occur through multiplication rather than division (Dupré 21). Just as we have seen in previous sections, to demonstrate these differences through multiplication and to challenge the grand narratives of History, postmodern

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<sup>20</sup> Contemporary feminist theory requires acknowledgement of the multiple nature of feminisms, given that it emphasizes the plurality of feminist voices and fundamental differences of class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc. and it also further speaks to the multiple, non-unified vision of feminine culture, history, and identity.

literature often situates itself within the context of the grand narrative it attempts to problematize in order to subvert it.

It is easy to understand why feminist authors would employ postmodern strategies such as autorepresentation through mirroring, “*mise en abyme*,” and polyphony to provide “a cultural critique and practice of social change that seeks to transform those relations of power, namely patriarchy, [that] rewrites not only our knowledge of but also our construction of society by inscribing gender into social relations, [and] exposes the fraud of inclusivity, justice and universalism of patriarchal categories” (Ebert 888). In the case of *Le Double suspect* and *Le Désert mauve*, what is primarily in question is the masculine/feminine binary upon which patriarchal social constructs are founded. Through the use of postmodern strategies and the confrontation between and/or convergence of men/women and masculine/feminine (hi)stories, Monette and Brossard subvert these binary distinctions and allow women to rewrite themselves and each other. Despite these similarities, it is also important to consider and examine how Brossard and Monette’s differing levels of political engagement, personal sexual orientation, and influence of the social changes engendered by the Quiet Revolution contribute to their respective questioning of the gender binary of the patriarchal social order.

Rewriting of the feminine story in postmodern literature comes as a result of the fact that “[patriarchy] works through a double move [in that it] asserts and depends on binary oppositions of gender differences, but [...] naturalizes these necessary differences as biological and thus the inevitable effect of ‘nature,’ thereby making them ‘unnoticeable’ and not in need of change” (Ebert 888). In *Le Désert mauve*, Brossard exposes the differences between the masculine and feminine by depicting men and women who barely interact and whose (hi)stories are discussed separately, existing simultaneously but on different tracks. In other words, Brossard creates a world where

both women and men exist, but they do not exist together. This distinction speaks both to the actual comportment of characters, who are largely female except for “*l’homme long*,” and to the differences in Brossard’s view of the world: men and women have different histories, different cultures, and different stories, despite instances where they might overlap—for better or for worse. A separation of masculine and feminine stories underscores Brossard’s open political engagement, which is largely influenced by her activism for lesbian causes as well as her literary and personal experiences during the Quiet Revolution. Brossard’s more overt rejection and criticism of the patriarchal, male-centered version of History results from a belief that

chaque génération de femmes doit non seulement veiller au maintien et au renouvellement des gains obtenus par les générations précédentes, mais elle doit aussi faire en sorte d’inscrire par des œuvres de création des espaces imaginaires qui renouvellent ou qui peuvent entamer un champ symbolique qui n’a vraiment jamais jouer en faveur du féminin théorique ni des femmes réelles. (Brossard “Horizon du Récit et de la Voix” 496)

This also speaks to Brossard’s rejection of any totalizing vision or comprehensive historicity of knowledge or unified discourse, a sentiment that is echoed globally by postmodernists and feminists alike (Gould 102).

In her analysis of Brossard’s text “Revenue des utopies, Nicole Brossard devant l’histoire contemporaine,” Patricia Smart posits that there exist two parallel narratives in both Angstelle’s artifact and Maude’s translation: the narrative of Mélanie, the 15-year old who largely serves as narrator in the artifact and its translation; and the mysterious “homme long” who remains in his motel room throughout both versions, and becomes increasingly obsessed with the impending

“explosion.”<sup>21</sup> According to Smart, the story of “*l’homme long*” is “celle de l’homme du vingtième siècle, piégé par les chiffres et les équations d’une science qui fut à l’origine quête de beauté, un homme dégoûté par son propre corps, et habité par la vision apocalyptique de la fin d’une culture érigée contre le féminin” (*Chroniques* 498). In contrast, Mélanie’s story is “celle d’une jeune femme au seuil de la découverte de son désir, assoiffée et vulnérable, cherchant à exister pleinement et à ‘faire sens’ de l’existence malgré le vide dont elle a hérité” (498). Brossard further emphasizes the distance and distinction between the masculine and feminine (hi)stories by using cold descriptions in the third person for chapters about “*l’homme long*” and emotive, first person reflections for Mélanie’s chapters.

According to Karen Gould, the juxtaposition of the masculine impersonal and the feminine intimate (hi)stories alerts us to the imminent danger and violence that “se prépare toujours lorsqu’une culture se fonde sur la loi et le pouvoir du plus fort,” (107) which comes when the two distinct (hi)stories collide. The world in which Mélanie lives is one populated predominantly by women. She lives with her mother, Kathy Kérouac, and her mother’s partner, Lorna Myher,<sup>22</sup> at the motel her mother operates in the desert. Mélanie also has a somewhat ill-defined intimate relationship with her “cousin,” Grazie, another teenage girl who lives in Tempe. The final feminine character within *Le Désert mauve* is Angela Parkins, a 40-year old mathematician working with a group of men on a mysterious, highly technical project in the desert. Except for Parkins’ colleagues

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<sup>21</sup> “*L’homme long*” is believed to be a metafictional representation of J. Robert Oppenheimer and is the only truly “historical” figure in *Le Désert mauve*. Oppenheimer was an American theoretical physicist and professor of physics at the University of California. He was the wartime head of the Los Alamos Laboratory and as such has been called the “father of the atomic bomb” for his role in the Manhattan Project. Along with his obsession with the impending “explosion,” Brossard includes details pertinent to Oppenheimer’s life, such as his knowledge of Sanskrit.

<sup>22</sup> These names also support literature (Kerouac) and women’s (*My-her*) roles in creating legacies and lineages.



and a description of a man flirting with a group of girls by the motel's pool, there are virtually no other interactions between men and women.

That is, until the end of both versions when Angela Parkins mysteriously dies in a crowded bar while she and Mélanie dance. In both the artifact and the translation, the cause of Parkins' death is unclear. Just prior to her demise, however, Parkins discusses how “ça recommence parole, sentiers, papillons et qu'elle aime ça la lenteur obligée des mots” (49-50) and that “en réalité il suffit de quelques mots concis pour changer le cours de la mort, pour effrayer les petites douceurs” (220).<sup>23</sup> In both the artifact and the translation, “*l'homme long*” looks on without feeling as Parkins inexplicably collapses on the dance floor (50; 220). The “interdépendance et l'affrontement inévitable” (Smart *Chroniques* 498) of the male/female narrative trajectories culminates in this scene of Parkins' death, which for many Brossard scholars, including Smart, is a murder committed by “*l'homme long*,” one that represents patriarchal culture's “murder” of the feminine identity and (hi)story:

Meurtre aussi froid, abstrait et dévastateur que l'explosion silencieuse par laquelle la technologie pourrait annihiler la terre, et que l'homme long semble avoir accompli par le seul pouvoir de son regard haineux. Meurtre qui survient au moment où Mélanie et Angela sont au seuil d'une rencontre—sensuelle, émotive et d'intelligence—qui aurait porté tout le sens du roman vers la possibilité d'une transformation culturelle. (Smart *Chroniques* 498)

In other words, the masculine story destroys the feminine one, without explanation or witnesses: this is just how it is, it seems, how it has always been. The incident is unavoidable in both the

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<sup>23</sup> Here we have selected references from both the artifact and the translation since ultimately the action/narrative is at question here, and in both versions it remains the same. There is no variation in the plot due to variations in word choice.

artifact and its translation, despite Maude's expressed desire to eliminate the act from her rewriting of Angstelle's novel (175). Unable to remove the event without "fausser les faits et faire mentir l'histoire," (Gould 204) Maude instead presents Parkins' murder from her own "angle" and places more onus on Mélanie. This variation grants to Mélanie a sort of strengthened agency in deciphering what happened and what will happen next.<sup>24</sup> And although in both versions Mélanie finds herself alone and unable to establish an intimate bond with another woman due to the destruction engendered by the collision of the masculine and the feminine narratives ("Je ne peux tutoyer personne" *Le Désert mauve* 220), this newly granted agency seems to leave the hopeful possibility that such collisions might one day be overcome and less dangerous for the feminine (hi)story. ("Il y a des mémoires pour creuser les mots sans souiller les tombes" *Le Désert mauve* 220).

Despite being traumatic for Mélanie and Maude Laures, Parkins' death "est porteuse de sens et exige qu'une lutte soit menée. [Dans la traduction de Maude], les policiers et la voix de la multitude sont effacés pour laisser place à Mélanie, sur qui repose maintenant la poursuite de la lutte féministe" (Guillemette-Fournier 106). The variation introduced in Maude's translation makes way for an important look towards the future that is not present in Angstelle's original artifact, and exposes a direct political engagement on Brossard's part for a specifically feminine gaze to the past and vision for the future. Relying on lesbian activism, feminist awareness and a postmodern sensibility, Brossard introduces this variation as a means to problematize the masculine/feminine binary of traditional patriarchal society, to expose the degree to which the two

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<sup>24</sup> In her translation, Maude specifically calls on Mélanie to explain what happened ("Mélanie, fille de la nuit, que s'est-il donc passé?" 220), while Angstelle's original text only includes an open questioning of events ("Que s'est-il passé?" 50).

are forever linked to the detriment of women, and to subvert the notion of History as unified or closed to the feminine narrative.

While Brossard creates distance between men and women through the masculine/feminine binary, Madeleine Monette's *Le Double suspect* challenges patriarchal norms by blurring or eliminating the boundaries between her male and female characters. Again relying on the mirror and mirror image, Monette's characters are constantly preoccupied, if not totally consumed, by their relationships with the "Other," and the anxiety the socially constructed distinctions between men and women cause. In opposition to the "specularizations" of Western patriarchal discourse described by Luce Irigaray through which the woman is the mirror image/negative reflection of man that allows him to obtain primary status in the gender binary, Monette's mirror deconstructs the distinctions between masculine and feminine in an attempt to promote a plural rather than divided vision of feminine (hi)story.

Manon's relationship with one of her mirror images, Michel, underscores the constructedness and inherent danger in supporting the gender binary of traditional patriarchal culture. Manon and Michel engaged in a casual sexual relationship before Manon's marriage with Paul, and she explains that during their encounters, it is almost as though the two were one and the same, anticipating what the other would enjoy and sensing the pleasure that the other was experiencing (86). This intimate "*jeu de miroirs*" is possible because of a disregard (at least on Michel's part) for traditional conceptions of masculine and feminine roles that rely on strong distinctions between the nature of men and women to perpetuate dominance/submission, virility/femininity and other gender binaries:

Jamais il ne paraissait soucieux de sa virilité. Ni conforté par ma féminité. En d'autres mots ce n'étaient pas deux sexes, mais deux corps qui se rencontraient [...]

Nous devenions l'envers l'un de l'autre, et faisant l'amour avec lui j'avais l'impression tant de me perdre ou de m'abandonner, que de me retrouver, de me reprendre. (86)

In the relationship between Manon and Michel, the traditional gender roles are subverted, due in part to a lack of even a “trace de tension qui s'établit dans la plupart des rapports de séduction” (87). The two lovers are instead bolstered by this blurring of boundaries between masculine and feminine.

The relatively carefree un-gendered relationship between Manon and Michel is sharply contrasted in Manon's relationships with women like Andrée and Anne. Troubled by her desires towards her female friends, Manon cannot cope with the lack of well-defined gender roles and boundaries in which she took comfort with Michel. She is unable to distance herself from the notion of woman described by Irigary as merely the specular surface for man's negative reflection (*Speculum of the Other Woman*); thus she is also unable to rediscover herself in the multiplicity of her pleasures and desires—her “*jouissance*”—“which is the excess of her sexuality, of her being, of her desires that patriarchal discourses cannot represent and thus cannot know” (Ebert 895).

This refusal to accept her full self and her multiple desires eventually leads to Manon's death by her own hand. As a victim of the gender binary,<sup>25</sup> Manon and other characters in *Le Double suspect* who struggle with their sexuality and relationships with their own mirror images underscore the postmodern and feminist critiques from the 20th century that warn against trying to define the feminine through a “logic of the same” or decidability. It is essential to exceed and disturb this logic by continuously examining the ways in which patriarchal society has constructed

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<sup>25</sup> “Victime de mes propres préjugés, je me disais qu'il agissait davantage comme une femme, affranchie, que comme un homme, inhibé ou non. Je sais que ces comparaisons sont injustes, mais à l'époque les simplifications de ce genre ne me gênaient pas, avaient même leur utilité” (87).

woman as a response to man. Through the mirroring and blurring of boundaries between men and women, Monette succeeds at demystifying the dominant patriarchal discourse of gender binary by rejecting its “naturalness” and exposing its constructedness. Not to reject the constructedness of the gender binary causes anxiety, is dangerous, and ultimately leads to death.

In *Le Double suspect*, exposing the constructedness of the gender binary does not, however, have as its sole aim to support feminist values and the feminist cause. For Monette, undermining the boundaries imposed on notions of masculine and feminine is an issue of concern for all humans, male or female. As an author whose career did not begin until long after the Quiet Revolution, Monette’s engagement is less overtly political and certainly less based on issues of female sexuality specifically than is Nicole Brossard’s. For Monette, literature and language allow for a better understanding of the human experience in all its forms, and fiction is the preferred method for relaxing the strict divisions that traditional patriarchal social constructs have imposed. Monette seems to propose a more inclusive openness and fluidity between men and women that Brossard does not. In an ideal world for Monette, this openness between men and women would/should extend to literature and create a sort of global human (hi)story: “je me plais à imaginer les œuvres littéraires de différents pays dans une vaste chambre d’échos, une chambre de réverbération espace-temps, où elles seraient lues dans la mémoire les unes des autres, appréciées ainsi à la loupe et par satellite” (“Liens et balises” 5). The “*lutte*” is thus more a philosophical quest to understand the individual’s place within a universal context rather than a more specific fight to carve out the feminine or lesbian space within a given society. It is clear that while Brossard and Monette both target patriarchal constructs of gender differences, Monette focuses less on allowing a distinct feminine narrative to exist in relation to the traditional masculine narrative, but rather in forcing recognition of both feminine and masculine voices within a unified human narrative.

Although Monette's portrayal of the intersection between men and women results in anguish, identitary unease, and ultimately death, like in Brossard's *Le Désert mauve*, there is hope that this can be corrected and that it does have a positive by-product. Whether connected or distinct, together or separate, the (hi)stories of men and women in both *Le Double suspect* and *Le Désert mauve* lead to literary creation (life) despite its inspiration (death). The feminist struggle at the center of *Le Désert mauve* will continue and be strengthened as female characters like Mélanie and Maude Laures use the pen to launch the "*revanche des stylos*."<sup>26</sup> Instead of continuing the mirror/double motif and killing herself upon recognizing her own repressed sexuality, Anne creates a work of fiction through which she is able to accept her plural, multiple nature as a woman and human.

The outcome of the collision and/or blurring of men and women's (hi)stories is troubling, complex, violent, and even deadly, but in both instances it leads to a new story and a different future through invention, creation, and writing. The postmodern sensibility and feminist awareness present in both *Le Double suspect* and *Le Désert mauve*, through retelling the other('s) feminine story, allow for what Ebert terms "activating the other" which has historically been suppressed and concealed through grand narratives (888). We will now consider how the role of the writer, writing, and reading contributes to the process of retelling the other('s) feminine story within a postmodern framework and allows for Monette and Brossard to demystify the dominant logic of patriarchal discourse.

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<sup>26</sup> See chapter 2 for a discussion of the "*revanche des berceaux*."

## Role of the writer/writing

According to literary scholar Brian McHale, the writer at his desk reflects a *topos* of postmodern literature (*Postmodernist Fiction* 198). Beyond this, the theme of writing itself as well as the figure of the writer in the midst of the writing process are prevalent in postmodern works from Québec. Many of these texts focus on the figure of the writer telling his or her own story while describing the writing process. Such self-referential texts in all of their diverse forms—diaries, memoirs, confessions, autobiographies, epistolary novels, etc.—were so abundant in Québec between the 1950s and the 1980s that some critics suggest that a “retour sur soi, [une] mise en scène d’un narrateur ou d’une narratrice qui se raconte, en se présentant comme sujet et objet de sa propre narration, constituent un des traits fondamentaux du roman québécois contemporain” (Leblanc “Vers une rhétorique de la deconstruction” 1).

Speaking to both an emerging collective notion of individuality and of “self” for the Québécois (Hébert “Pour une évolution de la littérature personnelle” 21-22) and also to fictionalized autobiography’s contribution to a text’s “*véridicité*” through imitation of various non-fictional forms (Whitfield 313), contemporary québécois authors rely on autobiography to not only memorialize the self, but also to put on display the writing process that allows for memorialization. Despite relying on the framework inherent to autobiography, autobiographical fictions should not be confused with autobiography “*pure*,” especially in the québécois context. Although many contemporary québécois novels featuring an autobiographical narrative begin with a narrator/subject speaking in the first person and describing self-referential events of an intimate nature, their similarities with autobiography are often quickly called into question as they are destabilized by various narrative and discursive methods that are incongruous, if not antithetical to non-fictional works of autobiography (Leblanc “Vers une rhétorique de la deconstruction” 2).

In the case of contemporary novels that can be described as postmodern, this is due to the fact that “writing identity is not simply an expressive act, but a process of negotiating the conflicting terms and terrains of subjectivity” (Watson). Watson goes on to recall that, within postmodern autobiography, narratives often considered “marginal” to the “high” literary canon of 20th writings of identity—such as those of women and formerly colonized people—are of central importance. Through the optic of the postmodern novel, autobiography, and biography, we will now examine how the depiction of the writer and writing affects the retelling of the other(’s) story in *Le Désert mauve* and *Le Double suspect*.

In the case of *Le Désert mauve*, Brossard clearly separates the autobiographical and biographical sections of her text, much as she has done with her treatment of men and women’s (hi)stories and the original artifact and its translation. In the middle section of Brossard’s *Le Désert mauve*, “Un Livre à traduire,” that features her notes about the translation process, Maude Laures provides both an imagined biography of Laure Angstelle and her own self portrait. Despite separating the sections and providing descriptive titles, each three and a half page section<sup>27</sup> strays from the standard practice of non-fictional biographical and autobiographical narratives in virtually every way. In “Un Livre à traduire,” the reader is immediately confronted with the fictional nature of Angstelle’s “biography” and Maude’s “*autoportrait*” because the cover page that precedes them is titled “*Personnages*,” calling into question any similarities the sections might share with the non-fictional versions of these genres. As a postmodern work, it also echoes Barthes’ assumption regarding the “death of the author,” in which Barthes challenges the sacred image of the “*Auteur-Dieu*” (“La Mort de l’auteur” *Le Bruissement de la langue* 61-67). The inclusion of Maude Laures and Laure Angstelle in the “*Personnages*” section destabilizes the

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<sup>27</sup> It is interesting to note that Angstelle’s imagined biography and Maude’s self portrait are virtually identical in length.



reader and forces an examination of the role of the author and the authority (or truth) in the writing. Rather than reinforcing a traditional notion of the author as an ultimate authority figure who instills a universal, almost theological meaning to his/her text, through writing the author or “*scripteur*” creates “un espace à dimensions multiples, où se marient et se contestent des écritures variées, dont aucune n’est originelle” (“La Mort de l’auteur” 65).

The language used also departs from concise, factual descriptions and is decidedly poetic, which acts as another element distancing *Le Désert mauve* from the grand narratives of traditional biography and autobiography. A vocabulary associated with doubt and uncertainty is employed for the section on Angstelle. There is not even a landmark to which Maude can point, because “il est impossible de dire avec précision dans quelle ville ou à quelle croisée de chemin” one should look (87). Each biographical possibility offered in the section begins with a disclaimer, indicating that it is something “on peut imaginer,” that “on peut penser,” or that “on peut croire” (87-88). Angstelle’s biography is a complete mystery, as Maude does not have an artifact about her life specifically to retell, or translate. This leaves her with a giant void in her work as a “translator”—that of the personal and literary history surrounding the creation of Angstelle’s novel and of the text’s creator. Brossard, just as in other examples of the postmodern Québécois novel, thus puts in place “des personnages auteurs en chair et en os dont la fragilité intellectuelle et morale est évidente, des auteurs qui se débattent souvent avec l’écriture, des auteurs enfin qui interrogent le procès de la parole [qui détruisent] effectivement l’image de l’écrivain comme figure de Dieu” (Paterson *Moments postmodernes* 98).

This too applies to *Le Double suspect*. In fact, in her role as writer, Anne discusses the process of retelling at length, while blurring the lines between biography and fiction. She explicitly confirms the lack of factual evidence in her retelling: “Ne me berçant pas d’illusions, je ne

prétendrai ni à la vérité ni à l'autenticité des faits. [...] Après tout, rien n'a jamais empêché un écrivain de s'inspirer, pour la rédaction d'un roman, de la vie de personnes aimées ou connues [...] (52, 55). This is not to say, however, that the retelling will ignore or negate Manon's story, quite the contrary. Anne admits that only Manon would be able to provide the precision and impromptu to the holes in the journals, but her goal is not to produce a traditional, non-fictional biography. Rather Anne is preoccupied, if not obsessed, with injecting the "imaginaire qui est rattaché [à la mémoire]" (52)—that is where the ultimate truth of Manon's story (as well as Anne's) resides. What is important, what is vital and gives truth to the text is not what can be confirmed and cross-checked against Manon's day to day life. For Anne, "la vérité [n'est pas son affaire], si elle ne doit être que la qualité de ce qui est vérifiable" (145). This implies supplementing the artifact with qualities and experiences, emotions, and descriptions, that Anne perceives to be true, but which distance Manon from Anne's world and push her toward the world of fiction she is in the process of creating. Monette's depiction of the writer and the writing process underscores the postmodernist view of the past more as a means of comprehending the present than a thing in and of itself. According to Hayden White, postmodernism maintains that "all knowledge is not only 'knowledge about' particular things but also 'knowledge for' particular social groups and cultural projects. Thus, the validity of any given presentation of the past and history is to be assessed in terms of its utility for the group for which it has been produced" ("Postmodernism and Historiography"). In this case, the retelling of Manon's story will lead to knowledge *about* Manon (and Anne) and *for* Anne (and the reader).

As we have seen previously, autorepresentation and intertextuality are important to the postmodern text. There are several subtle examples of biographical intertextuality that further reinforce the reality/invention dichotomy in question within Brossard's work. For example,

qualities or experiences that Maude imagines for Angstelle's biography occasionally echo experiences lived by characters from *Le Désert mauve* or that are similar to her own background, but these instances are never entirely identical to those in the novel or in the subsequent "self portrait" she provides. Maude imagines that perhaps Angstelle was drawn to Sonora after having spent several years studying in universities in "une grande ville de l'Est," (87) much as she herself did as a "fille studieuse" (121) before her routine was interrupted when she discovered *Le Désert mauve*. Like Mélanie, perhaps Angstelle "fume un petit cigare [...] appuyée contre sa vieille Dodge" (88). This practice continues in her own self portrait when, like Mélanie, Maude wants to be "fast so fast" during a tennis match (120). Just as the narrative itself continually "se [recourbe] dans un perpétuel retour sur soi" (Foucault, *Les Mots et les choses* 313), so too do the elements of each character's personal (hi)story.

This postmodern tendency towards self reference and intertextuality also appears in *Le Double suspect*. We have discussed at length the instances in which the (hi)stories of Manon, Anne, and other characters in this text overlap or mirror each other, and this motif extends also to Anne and Manon as writers. Just as Manon finds herself compelled to write her journals in response to her husband Paul's apparent suicide (resulting from his own existential crisis surrounding his burgeoning homosexuality), so too does Anne experience a frenetic anxiety about the hybrid work of fiction and reality she is producing (51). She is able to take on the task, it seems, only after having inhabited Manon's space—she moves to Manon's pre-paid hotel room that Manon left "presque habitée" and to which Anne has the impression that Manon will return "comme si elle n'était sortie que pour un instant" (53)—as well as inhabiting her body and mind. Anne puts on Manon's old clothes and buys high heels like Manon used to wear (49), and after allowing herself to both possess and be possessed by the memory of Manon, she begins the process

of assimilating herself into the space where Manon's elusive identity and intimate truth truly lies—her writing (52). Anne's retelling is then able to incorporate the “cohabitation des langages” described by Barthes that so characterizes postmodern literature in general, and the contemporary Québécois novel in particular (*Le Plaisir du texte* 25-26; Paterson *Moments postmodernes* 100).

In both novels, the process of writing the other(s) story allows the narrators to write themselves, although unsurprisingly, the autobiographies or “self portraits” in Monette and Brossard's works again play with the standards of the genre. In *Le Désert mauve*, Maude's “self portrait” demonstrates the extent to which Brossard is challenging the standard elements of non-fictional autobiography. Maude begins this self portrait in the second person—a narrative style that is neither typical of fiction, nor of autobiography or biography. Half way through the section, the narrator switches to the third person, using “elle” when one would expect the first person “je.” At times, the section is almost reminiscent of a conversation, since the “narrator” (whoever that may be<sup>28</sup>) provokes Maude with requests to “Dis,” “Dis-moi,” and “Dis-moi, Maude Laures” (121-122). This switching between points of view aligns Brossard's text with other works of modern and postmodern literature, but distances it from what it claims to be—a self portrait. Instead we have a polyphonic vision of the character that is not a “universalized and transcendent self-presentation” (Watson), but rather demonstrates the unfinalizable and polyphonic relationship between self and other proposed by Bakhtin (59). As such, Maude is treated (or treats herself, depending on whom we believe the author to be) almost the same as the fictional characters; she becomes more a character in the fictional world than an actual actor existing outside of it. Not quite a “ghost” like Angstelle, not quite at the same level as the fictional characters like Mélanie,

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<sup>28</sup> When confronted with this instability, it is impossible to avoid questioning if Monette and Brossard are writing themselves into these fictional worlds in some way. This further destabilizes the reader who continually pauses to consider whether or not the author—the “real” one—is speaking directly through her work.

the fictionalized Maude Laures now becomes another destabilizing postmodern element caused by the process of writing the retelling.

The notion of polyphony and unfinalizability of the self are paramount in *Le Double suspect* as well. Anne's discussion of her unease regarding the choice of pronoun to employ for her retelling exemplifies the problematic, murky distinction between subject, narrator, and author; reality and fiction; and biography and autobiography in these two texts. Experiencing writer's block, Anne realizes that retelling Manon's story with a narrator that uses "je" is causing her anxiety. "Il y a là un piège, je le sens. Et j'ai peur de m'y prendre" (54). Framing the retelling as a novel, rather than a traditional non-fictional biography, frees Anne from this anxiety, so that once she has accepted the rules of the literary parody, the danger is no greater than that of a writer who

sur le point d'entamer un récit, se demande s'il aura ou non le recours à l'alibi de la fiction, s'il se mettra ou non en scène en se dédoublant, s'il consentira ou non à décaler son propre discours d'un cran pour se soumettre aux lois de la narration, avec tout ce que cela implique de fraudes et de détours, de glissements et de substitutions... Car si d'autres auteurs s'en portent intacts, du moins en apparence, je ne vois pas pourquoi je n'en ferais pas autant. (54-55)

In retelling Manon's story, she is also telling the story of their friendship and of her own role in it. By fictionalizing Manon's story, she is actually also providing her own fictionalized autobiography and adding polyphonic elements regardless of the pronoun she chooses to use. Anne admits that the process of assimilating Manon's writing is largely of interest to her because it will allow her to discover what parts of herself are enclosed within it. After she has completed the retelling, she realizes that "ayant voulu refaire patiemment et fidèlement le trajet des cahiers noirs, j'en étais devenue l'unique cible" (260).

The polyphonic nature of the “*mise en abyme*” of the writing process causes the writers in *Le Désert mauve* and *Le Double suspect* to become acutely aware of their “own inner unfinalizability, [their] capacity to outgrow, as it were, from within and to render untrue any externalizing and finalizing definition of [themselves]” (Bakhtin 59). Ultimately it is this realization that allows Anne not to repeat Manon’s (hi)story that we discussed in the previous section. She is able to break the cycle of suicide through the retelling process. In Maude’s translation, we sense a vision for the future as a place where the woman assumes a more active role in writing herself into her own (hi)story and the (hi)story of (hu)man kind. In both novels, the narrators, the characters and the readers realize that “as long as a person is alive he lives by the fact that he is not yet finalized, that he has not yet uttered his ultimate word” (Bakhtin 59).

## Conclusion

In contrast to the texts we have previously discussed in this work, *Le Désert mauve* and *Le Double suspect* are undeniably and completely fictional. Within these retellings, the focus is based on individual, minor (hi)stories of feminine characters in which the personal and intimate story eclipses historical or geographical *lieux communs*. Despite this basis in “invention,” both authors exhibit a preoccupation with the notion of “reality” and as a result their works share many qualities and employ many of the same techniques as the contemporary québécois retellings that are anchored in historical facts written by women authors discussed in previous chapters. What ultimately unites these texts regardless of the presence or absence of verifiable historical facts is the belief that history/fiction and reality/invention are not mutually exclusive. In fact, Monette and Brossard’s novels constantly underscore the interrelated nature of these concepts and seem to posit that the combination rather than the division thereof has the potential to offer a more complete,

true vision of the world in which we live. For, as we have already seen, it is fiction that has the power to generate the “réel inédit [...] qui n’avait pas d’existence à l’intérieur de l’univers patriarcal. Elle amenait aussi à tirer de nouvelles conclusions, théoriques, sur le monde dans lequel nous vivions et à modifier le visage réel de notre société” (Brossard qtd. in Larose 19).

There are, however, several elements that distinguish Monette and Brossard’s purely fictional retellings from those inspired by historical people and events. First of these is the preeminence of “*jeux de langage*” that is so critical to postmodern texts. Rather than focusing on (re)telling the other(’s) story in order to add additional voices to the historical register, Brossard and Monette attempt to create a new register, to expose the power of language and words to “refaire le monde.” It is through words and their composition in a fictional work rather than in undermining and revising accepted views of collective historical and cultural knowledge that these authors aim to provide a reconceived universal feminine and/or human history. The two texts discussed in this chapter suggest that in order to appreciate the fullness of the feminine, masculine, and human (hi)stories, “il est nécessaire de faire valoir le fragment, c’est tout l’être qui rayonne et s’éclaire en même temps, car il y a plusieurs identités en nous et chacune est à l’œuvre d’une manière singulière et collective” (“Horizon du Récit et de la Voix” 497).

Québec and its specificity do not, thus, receive the same level of direct attention that we have seen in the works of Anne Hébert and Jovette Marchessault, for example, due to language’s superior position in the rewriting process. Although both *Le Désert mauve* and *Le Double suspect* are partially set in the province and both challenge patriarchal social constructs important to Québec’s history like the gender binary, Brossard and Monette look beyond the province’s collective experience to the collective feminine and even the collective human experience. Monette and Brossard suggest that the retelling process in a fictional work allows the toxic, empty discourse

of modern consumer culture to be left behind and where “tout à coup on s’habite soi-même à travers la langue, on éprouve dans les mots son rapport affectif au réel, on entrevoit aussi les fils de sa propre histoire, on sort de soi en se tournant pourtant vers l’intérieur, on devient généreux dans la lenteur de la lecture, d’une intelligence tendre et empathique, toutes antennes dressées. *Le monde nous importe, on fait face à notre humanité*” (“Liens et balises” 2007, my emphasis).

The use of destabilization and uncertainty created through mirroring, narrative repetitions or “angles,” and the other structural techniques discussed in this section embody Brossard and Monette’s admitted desire to create distance in order to view the world more fully. For both authors, it is clear that all fiction, and especially fictions in which women retell another woman’s (hi)story, have the power to offer a different perspective on reality. The language of fiction and the writing process are as essential to this aim as are the works of literature created, since neither Brossard nor Monette’s “écriture ne se veut pas transparente, elle ne disparaît pas derrière l’histoire racontée, mais elle reste plutôt à l’avant plan, impossible à ignorer” (“Liens et balises”). Fiction and its retellings allow for a more complete and truthful view of the intersection between reality/invention and fiction/history and to, perhaps, also allow for a more truthful, complete view of humanity. The feminine story can enter into this view of humanity through fiction, since as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, “[c’est] par la fiction de l’Homme que nous sommes devenues fictives, sortons de la fiction par la fiction. Nous existerons dans le récit que nous inventerons” (Brossard. *Elle serait la première phrase de mon prochain roman* 96-98).



## Conclusion

The combination of fictional “invention” and historical “truth” allows Anne Hébert, Marie Laberge, Jovette Marchessault, Nicole Brossard, and Madeleine Monette the opportunity to challenge the absoluteness of grand narratives, and ultimately to reverse the reader’s perception of these notions. In the end, the referential historical narrative no longer represents the “*récit véridique, totalisant et scientifique*” (Paterson *Moments postmodernes* 54), but rather it is the hybrid fictional/historical alternative biographies that allow for fullness, plurality, and thus truth. This fullness stems from asking for the first time questions that no one had bothered to ask before: Who is the woman behind the History? What is her name? What was her specific human experience in the past? The works presented in this study seem to suggest that these are the vital questions if one is to understand the feminine historical experience in a true way. Sharing the answers to these questions allows these authors to, in Jovette Marchessault’s words, “retracer, retrouver ce temps qui n’est pas du temps perdu, mais du temps gaspillé et trafiqué, notre temps à nous, l’humanité des femmes” (Gaudet 126).

Responding to the perceived “plenitude of the past” (Berkhofer 30) espoused by normal historical practice, Marchessault and the other authors discussed here, along with many other postmodern scholars, assert the exact opposite, or at least strongly urge the inclusion of a caveat: while there may exist a plenitude of the past as it took place, History and the *stories* told by historians about that past reflect a marked lack of plenitude, an inadequacy in representations of the feminine historical experience, and a paucity of feminine voices and identities that only the inclusion of fiction can attempt to expose and/or correct. The alternative biographies discussed in this study attempt to correct and expose the deficiency of normal historical practice, since fiction

is not limited in the same ways as “scientific” historical discourse, said to be “[saisi] toujours incomplètement et latéralement, à travers des documents ou des témoignages, disons à travers des *tekmeria*, des traces” (Veyne *Comment on écrit l’histoire* 14). In combining fiction and these incomplete historical “traces,” the authors discussed in the current work are not limited, but rather bolstered. The feminine historical experience becomes more completely (re)told as a result of mixing elements that normal historical practice considers antithetical, allowing for flexibility and fluidity that lead to fullness.

The fluidity of historical and fictional elements is mirrored by the fluidity of other concepts within these texts and that are common to postmodern fiction. The “subversive texture” of “*écriture féminine*” welcomes the lack of boundaries and absence of borders, as opposed to men’s writing, which “has a tendency to privilege linearity, logic, and a concept of identity that is closed [and] exists in a relationship of proximity (of ‘sameness’) to the Law,” (Smart *Writing in the Father’s House* 7-9). For this reason, we could consider all “*écriture féminine*” to be “postmodern,” to some degree, since the form inherently implies subversion of the patriarchal institutions and discourses promulgated throughout history. In putting on display the norms of men’s writing as seen in traditional historical discourse and literature, the authors discussed here challenge their productions and suggest that, in fact, the introduction of fiction into historical discourse is not only acceptable, it has been standard practice even in the “scientific” works of normal historiography. As a result of the fluidity and blurred boundaries between history and fiction present in the works discussed within this study, there is an additional challenging of the distinction between the two, between the concepts of “*témoignage*” and fiction, between fact and fiction.

Despite their differences in genres, historical subjects, and levels of political engagement, the texts examined here utilize several literary techniques common to postmodernist historiography and literature in their respective (re)telling processes, such as polyvocality, intertextuality, and autorepresentation. We have seen common trends and themes appear in many of the works, a phenomenon which speaks to the universality of the perceived need for additional feminine (hi)stories on the part of these diverse québécois authors, both about subjects from Québec and beyond. It also speaks to what these authors consider the most appropriate elements for (re)telling those (hi)stories and creating alternative feminine biographies. Some of these elements include an importance placed on names and being named, a very basic yet fundamental form of autorepresentation. We see this in *Kamouraska*, *Le Premier Jardin*, *La Cage*, *Le Désert mauve*, and *Le Double suspect*. For instance, as Flora Fontanges suggests in *Le Premier Jardin*, the patriarchal practice of taking away the feminine name and thus the unique feminine identity applies to all women at some point in their lives. The authors analyzed here expose this patriarchal practice that literally strips women of their personal identity, and then subsequently subvert it by allowing for an abundance of feminine autorepresentation through women naming themselves and each other. Women can now be named, with their own voice in a fictional/historical world created by women.

The feminine voice is amplified further in these works thanks to their sheer abundance. In allowing the feminine voice and name to actively create the alternative feminine biography, the authors emphasize a plurality of voices and a plurality of (hi)stories. Many of the texts include several narrators, while still allowing the possibility for a plurality of voices within a single feminine figure. This is most easily seen with the characters created by Anne Hébert, in particular Élisabeth in *Kamouraska* and Flora Fontanges in *Le Premier Jardin* as a result of their multiple

personalities, multiple pasts, and multiple (hi)stories. However it can also be more subtly perceived in the works of many of the other writers discussed here, since the choice to present alternative biographies inherently suggests that there exists a plurality of representations or adaptations of their (hi)stories. In other words, in creating a Héloïse in *Pierre* that is drastically different than the Héloïse from the standard myth, Marie Laberge is adding yet another voice to the chorus. Brossard and Monette too assert the necessity of plurality in fictional (re)tellings, given that there are multiple versions of the characters they create within their fictional worlds, all of whom are afforded the opportunity to have their (hi)stories (re)told. This serves to again challenge the assumptions of absoluteness proposed by traditional historical discourse and literature, and which is a common target for many postmodern works.

Plurality serves to counteract absolutism, as does the intertextuality that many of our authors chose to include. Intertextuality in postmodernist fiction and historiography contributes to the subversion of the entire notion of absolutism and generic imperialism. For some, “aux principes totalisants d’homogénéité et d’unité, le discours intertextuel oppose l’hétérogène et la multiplicité” (Paterson *Moments postmodernes* 21). In the context of the québécois women writers discussed here, we see that intertextuality creates a literary history that recognizes feminine contribution in the face of traditional historical discourse by which it has been minimized, anonymized, homogenized, or completely ignored. Anne Hébert recycles characters like John Crebessa and repeatedly uses imagery and quotes from her own works to indicate the connected nature of the themes she treats. While Ludivine, Élisabeth, Nora, and Olivia might not appear in the same book, these intertextual whispers connect them and their (hi)stories and create a sort of fictional lineage between them. Jovette Marchessault’s characters often demonstrate filial ties to a feminine community within the texts, as well as a connection to women in the past that paved the way for

future women writers. Her reliance on countless quotes from other works also implicates these women in traditional history, forces entry for their stories, and creates a new space where their alternative biographies can be appreciated and recognized. Into this newly formed space, she posits a figurative lineage between all women, especially those who have written the province's "national text." By allowing her feminine communities to be unrestricted by the bounds of time, space, or traditional notions of historical fact, they can unite in the fictional world to confront absolutism, patriarchy, and all the agents of the "syndicat du crime." While History and fact might preclude Germaine Guèvremont from having given birth to Gabrielle Roy, Marchessault's alternative biography provides a space where a mother-daughter bond is possible, and in many ways, seems "true," since it is clear that Guèvremont's "*romans du terroir*" "gave birth" to new, realist urban novels like *Bonheur d'occasion* by Gabrielle Roy. History, men's writing, and the "Law" that gives them power lose their importance and authority as the examples of intertextuality accumulate in these (re)tellings to connect women and honor their contributions.

Through these alternative biographies, several altered visions of the Québécois woman have been created. No longer is the self-sacrificing, ideologically limiting figure of the québécois mother the only vision of Québécois femininity. Not only is there an alternative vision, but it is one created by women for women, allowing future women writers to treat other topics and tackle other struggles. *Le Désert mauve* and *Le Double suspect*, as the two works in this study that are entirely fictional,<sup>1</sup> indicate that the process of writing "true" versions of women into the historical record has been achieved, and no longer necessarily needs to be the central focus of an alternative biography. As two of the younger authors writing two of the later texts in this corpus, Monette and

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<sup>1</sup> While at first glance *Le Premier Jardin* might seem also to be entirely fictional, the degree to which Québec's history pervades the text as well as the inclusion of several minor referential events such as the orphanage fire discourage this conclusion.

Marchessault do not focus their postmodern questioning on traditional historical discourse as much as they do on other elements of absolutism and homogeneity for all humans—male and female.

While it is clear that history and the past remain critical to the creation of alternative biographies, these authors have been freed from the constraints and limitations of traditional historical discourse and the feminist struggles present in works by the other authors analyzed in this study. This liberation allows their writing about the feminine historical experience to open up to other topics and other issues, rather than focusing of the injustices of records of the past. Especially in Monette's text, we sense that as the youngest author in the corpus, she has inherited the solutions for which women writers before her have fought. Thus the alternative biography she presents in *Le Double suspect* can explore other issues, human issues, rather than just the problematic of the feminist struggle for recognition. While Brossard can certainly be classified amongst the more militant feminists, ~~we see that~~ this work does not consider the text to be the site of combat, as she does in other novels like *L'Amer*. In *Le Désert mauve* at least, Brossard is one of the "*aînées féministes*" who finds herself producing literature that could be considered metafeminist, and explores other aspects of the feminine experience beyond the struggle for political equality and a place in history. Her other more militant works are in part responsible for this liberation, since,

[si] dans les textes plus récents, la création au féminin ne pose plus de problèmes particuliers, c'est justement grâce à une évolution des mentalités qu'a rendue possible la réflexion féministe [...] Beaucoup a été dit sur le sexisme du langage, sur l'oppression, sur la solidarité, et les nouvelles écrivaines n'éprouvent pas le besoin de répéter tout cela, qui est de l'acquis désormais. (Saint-Martin "Le métaféminisme et la nouvelle prose féminine au Québec" 82-83)

Because of the women who have written politically engaged texts before—Brossard included—and the stories they have told, the works of postmodern fiction by Monette in *Le Double suspect* and Brossard in *Le Désert mauve* demonstrate that, in the Québécois context, it is time to move on to other (hi)stories and fill in other gaps.

While this study too attempts to “fill in gaps” that exist in the scholarship relating to the intersection of history and fiction in the Québécois context, the question remains how male and female authors’ construction of alternative biographies differs, what implications it has on the rewriting of Québec’s national text. Opportunities exist to more fully examine this aspect of alternative biographies in the québécois context, and in fact, it would be possible to include some of the texts already analyzed here in such a future study. For instance, there are several examples of alternative biographies written by both male and female authors about la Corriveau. Along with Anne Hébert’s *La Cage*, *Ma Corriveau* by Victor-Lévy Beaulieu (premiered professionally in 1976) revisits the Canadian legend in another theatrical work. There are striking similarities between the two works, such as the use of “black” and “white”<sup>2</sup> that appears prominently in both authors’ alternative versions. While Hébert has “Black” and “White Fairies” who bestow ambiguous curses and gifts on Ludivine and Rosalinde, Beaulieu has two Corriveaus—one “white”/innocent and one “black”/guilty. Is Beaulieu, like Hébert, providing an alternative biography that challenges not only the accepted history of la Corriveau but also the patriarchal institutions that allowed for her subjugation? Alternatively should we consider Hébert’s text a

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<sup>2</sup> Beaulieu revives a character from Louis Fréchette’s adaptations of the legend to serve as narrator for his play. Louis Fréchette was one of the authors from the nineteenth century whose adaptations ignored many historical facts related to the Corriveau legend and is largely responsible for having vilified the actual historical figure behind the tale, Marie-Josephite Dodier. Anne Hébert also features a narrator for the tale, however, in her version this role is filled by one of Ludivine’s adopted children, Babette. Not only is the narrator/passers on of history a woman, she is a woman who feels love for la Corriveau and who unequivocally pronounces her innocence.

direct response to Beaulieu's piece, as well as to traditional historical discourse and other versions of the legend, since she seems to play with so many elements from his work? Such questions can only be answered by directly comparing examples of "men's writing" and "*écriture féminine*" in which alternative biographies about the same or similar historical subjects are presented.

In addition to exploring the differences in alternative biographies written by male and female authors, the question of genre in their works also begs further examination. It seems not to be a coincidence that so many contemporary authors, both male and female, choose to write biographies in dramaturgical works intended to be performed live. Understanding why this is, as well as considering the differences that appear in the theatrical productions, could elucidate both the motivations and the outcomes of such works. What do theatrical alternative biographies written by men and women have in common? What distinguishes them? How does the relationship between fiction and history take shape in the theatrical alternative biography? In addition to the ways in which the story itself is shaped because of these questions, we could also consider who is "emplotting" the production, just as we would in studying the texts themselves. For instance, while Marchessault admits that one of her goals in producing theatrical works is to provide more and better opportunities for entire communities of women—writers, directors, actresses, etc.—this does not seem to concern many of her male contemporaries, although some at least seem aware of the problem.<sup>3</sup> For instance in the case of Beaulieu's *Ma Corriveau*, of the 12 writers, producers, and actors involved with the production, nine were men, a fact that is even more striking given there were *two* actresses playing la Corriveau—one black and one white. As we have seen throughout this study, understanding who is writing the history in the Québécois context, whether

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<sup>3</sup> Renowned theater scholar Richard Schechner, for instance, calls for totally "open casting" regarding not only gender, but also race, age, and body type ("Race Free, Gender Free, Body-Type Free, Age Free Casting" in TDR (1988) 33, 1: 4-12).



it be an alleged work of history or admittedly fictive, is critical in the process of creating alternative biographies.

In examining a selection of feminine (hi)stories (re)told by contemporary Québécois women writers, we are reminded that the process of writing the feminine experience into traditional historical discourse is as much for the women of the present as it is for those from the past, and is also as important for the authors as it is for their subjects. Both the content and the choice to produce an alternative biographical work in particular underscores the lack of and lacking authentic representations of the feminine historical experience in both historiography and fiction globally and for women in Québec specifically. The apparent need to write alternative biographies exposes the difficult relationship contemporary québécois women writers have with their province's and their gender's past, which consequently allows them to assume a more active role in the construction of their own (hi)story. In short, while Hébert, Laberge, Marchessault, Brossard, and Monette provide alternative biographies for other feminine figures, they are also ultimately creating a space in which to situate their own work and their own historical experiences in Québec's historical and literary tradition. In creating a present that honors the past, they have created a past for the present.

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