

# Murder at the Red Arrow Motel: Nicole Brossard's *Mauve Desert* as Dystopic Mystery

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## ABSTRACT

In *Mauve Desert*, a novel of two fictions, that of the translation itself and the narrative that forms the content to be translated, Nicole Brossard makes creative and minimal use of elements of the mystery novel genre to evoke an intellectual curiosity and emotional desire for understanding in readers. Brossard seduces readers into an investigative role by means of the postmodern complexities and opportunities of the metatranslational narrative and the gaps she leaves in the traditional mystery genre.

## RÉSUMÉ

Dans son livre intitulé *Mauve Désert*, un roman de deux fictions, celle de la traduction elle-même et la narration qui forment la matière à traduire; Nicole Brossard utilise de façon créative et minimale des éléments du genre roman de mystère pour susciter chez la lectrice la curiosité intellectuelle et le désir émotif de comprendre. Brossard séduit les lectrices dans un rôle d'enquêteur par des moyens des complexités postmodernes et les narrations métatraductionnelles et les vides qu'elle laisse dans le genre de littérature de mystère traditionnel.

The murder of Angela Parkins in Nicole Brossard's *Mauve Desert* is an unexpected and disturbing event in a novel that constantly disrupts reader expectations. As Brossard's meditation on translations, fiction and reality, *Mauve Desert*, her seventh novel, is a triptych that comprises two segments which are materially defined as novels; that is, each has its own title page, press, pagination, and purported author (Laure Angstelle) while one also has a translator (Maude Laures), and there is also a transitional segment between the two, which traces the pre-text of the translator and completes the triptych. This level of the narrative is metatranslational and has inspired most critics to respond in kind by focussing on Brossard's presentation of translation as transformation which plays out the epistemology of the spiral.<sup>1</sup> Less obviously, and certainly challenging of the limits of that genre, *Mauve Desert* is a murder mystery.

To reveal the murder mystery it is necessary to concentrate on the other fiction of *Mauve Desert*, that which is represented by the narrative "authored" by Angstelle. Her novel, which is also entitled *Mauve Desert*, is found and then "read," questioned, and extrapolated upon in "A Book To

Translate" by Laures, who then re-presents its narrative as the translation, *Mauve, the Horizon*. Mélanie, a fifteen year old who is growing up at a motel owned by her mother, Kathy, and her mother's lover, Lorna, in the Arizona desert, is the primary narrator here. She is coming to grips with life by writing herself, initially by driving her mother's white Meteor across the desert night and finally with words on paper. As Brossard has said of any woman's journey towards subjectivity: "It is through seeking her words - and nowhere so much as in writing does one seek words - that a woman initiates herself to the positive image which makes her exist as a subject" (1986, 12). In this narrative, the murder of Angela Parkins ends the narrative but begins the mystery.

As Rosalind Coward and Linda Semple note, "[c]lassic detective fiction usually starts with a disruption of the status quo and proceeds to a discovery (and eradication) of the perpetrator of this disruption...[It] takes place in closed hierarchical communities, is solved by...an establishment figure, and ends with the restoration of the old hierarchies" (44). Sally Munt agrees that "[t]he traditional crime novel is a site for the

expression of anxieties about society in which the enemy is named and destroyed;" however, she also points out that "[i]n the lesbian and feminist crime novel, the terms often become inverted so that the state is identified as the corrupt enemy and the lesbian sleuth...is the victor" (505). *Mauve Desert* challenges both of these models. Instead, it presents not merely content but rather the type of feminist narrative that Barbara Godard identifies as "a set of relationships by which knowledge is made intelligible to readers" (45).

In even a radical feminist mystery, however, there is usually an investigating character. Not so in *Mauve Desert*. The effect of the shock of the murder of Angela coupled with the shifting textual reality created by the monolingual translation, forcibly encourages readers to fill the generic vacuum by becoming investigators themselves.<sup>2</sup> Readers are open to this encouragement partially because, as Godard argues in relation to other feminist texts, through the use of postmodern techniques that "refuse the comfort and stability of a fixed subject position to their readers... [they are] distanced...not totally interpolated into a fictional world" (46-7). This distance permits the reader an active intellectual engagement with the text while the translating activity within the text itself encourages readers to flip back and forth, to compare statements and events, in a seeking that is more emotionally powerful because there has been a murder of a subject that the text (through Mélanie) finds attractive. Brossard uses the genre minimally but creatively to reinforce her literary desires.

Similarly, in classic and feminist mysteries, it is the identity of the killer which is at the heart of the mystery. Again, I would argue that in *Mauve Desert* that is not the case. Although critics disagree on the extent to which the killer is known,<sup>3</sup> of more interest to me (as a forty-something lesbian-feminist reader) is the question asked of the "auther," Angstelle (131) by translator Laures<sup>4</sup> in the voice of Angela Parkins: "Why did you kill me?" (132). This is the crux of the mystery that *Mauve Desert* presents to readers; however, it is not unconnected to another site of difficulty. As a reader, I share the translator's uneasiness with the significant age difference between the fortyish

Angela and Mélanie, who is only fifteen. I believe that Brossard deliberately creates these additional sites of mystery discomfort to further disrupt reading and to force the reader to solve the puzzle that her narrative presents; Brossard dis-spells lesbian utopia to encourage readers to reassess the contexts of both the novel and the world: "there are true landscapes that pry us from the edge and force us onto the scene" (133).

The murder of Angela Parkins may also be read as an example of Angstelle's injunction to Laures to "[I]earn to bear the unbearable: the raw of all things" (134). Angela is a geometrist about whom Mélanie's mother, Kathy, has created a "mystery" (25) which arouses a curiosity in Mélanie that is not satisfied in their first meeting. The narrative portrays Angela as an elemental woman; she is strong, independent, centred in her self. There is a congruence between her name and that of the "auther," Laure Angstelle. Angstelle may be translated as the angel of the stars and *Ange là* as the angel there below. In their second (and fatal) meeting, this time at The Red Arrow Motel, which is owned by a friend of Kathy's, Angela's connection to the body, beauty, and the desert, which are all presented as sources of women's power and subjectivity, is emphasized. Just before her murder, her corporeality is accentuated: "Angela Parkins' body is fanatical, filled with urgency. It leaps like a spirited, capricant animal, flutters and wildly soars, wild Angela Parkins...Beauty is suspended, the beauty that precedes reality...[Mélanie and Angela] are the desert and *matter of fact*" (35). The murder freezes a striking moment of *corps/texte* (body/text), which Parker cites as integral to Brossard's redefinition of "new relations among women" (110). Although critics generally relate Brossard's cor/tex to the writer's and translator's embodied engagement with the text, this more shocking juxtaposition forces readers to investigate its moment and its context.

It is interesting that Angela displays some aspects of a mythic figure; she is presented as animalistic and "stronger than reality" (132). Furthermore, in both Angstelle's text and Laures' imagination and translation (for Laures she is an "ultimate presence" [131]), Mélanie seems to have been waiting for the older woman as for a presence

of some significance, announcing that she "was finally able to see this Angela Parkins my mother often talked about" (25); and that she "finally saw the famous Angela Parkins whom my mother said was excessive" (181). The attraction that arises between Mélanie and Angela is a source of discomfort that, especially as it is enmeshed with Angela's murder, also forces readers into a deeper examination of the text and its context. This investigation into what Karen Gould calls "the continuous mirroring effect" (104) yields interesting discrepancies. Perhaps, as some readers have, the translator mistakes the possibility for the actuality and assumes that Angela and Mélanie are lovers; certainly she indicates her discomfort with the age difference between Angela and Mélanie in her translation. For instance, "[Angela] must have been forty years old" (25) becomes "She was still young" (181). As well as demonstrating that translation is really transformation, this alteration implies not only that Lares is privileging her own point of view over that of Angstelle and Mélanie (fortyish may be young to Lares), but also that she is uncomfortable with a flirtation between a forty year old and a fifteen year old, even if Mélanie is a "night teen" (46), who the owner of the Red Arrow motel decides "must surely be nineteen" (44). Those who wish to gloss over any possible moral questions that may arise in an erotic relationship between a mature woman and a (male-defined?) minor, take comfort, as does the motel owner who serves her beer, in the hopeful ambiguity with which the text surrounds Mélanie's age. Similarly Lares provides ambiguity to Angela's age as she seeks to make both women "young."

However, the role that Angela Parkins plays in *Mauve Desert* requires that she be an older woman in relation to a young woman, although I will argue for a more complex reading of "erotic" in this encounter. Angela's character allows Brossard to focus and fictionalize an historical problem that lesbians have had in passing on their acquired wisdom to the next generation. The erasure of lesbian cultures or even individual lesbian images from the dominant culture (which nevertheless produces most lesbians) makes the development, continuity and advancement of any lesbian culture problematic. As Lillian Faderman explains in *Odd*

*Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*, in Western cultures, "lesbian" was not an available identity for women-loving-women until sexologists pathologized "female friendships" and "Boston marriages" during the late nineteenth century, which created a negative stereotype of women-loving-women that became increasingly generalized throughout the West during the first half of the twentieth century (37-61). Once it was named and pathologized, public references to love between women were repressed but, ironically, the opportunity to "become" a "lesbian" increased. As Faderman notes, by the 1950s "[t]he choice of love object determined more than ever before a social identity as well as a sexual identity" (159). This paved the way for lesbians to respond as groups, instead of as isolated individuals to McCarthyism in the 1950s (190), and, in the 1960s, to the movement to reclaim and assert marginalized identities that began with the American Civil Rights movement. The first response was to acknowledge lesbian identity and cultural expressions; the next to embrace the identity as positive. Clearly, without the recognition of social good in one's way of life, it is difficult to consider the important social activity of passing on knowledge to the next generation. Brossard is perhaps one of the first writers to attempt to capture the complexity of this necessary gesture in fiction.

In *Mauve Desert*, although Mélanie inherits identity from her lesbian parents (Lorna and Kathy), she also inherits from Angela, the public, aging and single lesbian. Angela joins Mélanie's parents in preparing Mélanie for her role in the next twist of spiralling lesbian (and therefore also female) subjectivity. Her role is crucial: whereas Kathy will not risk "a lament or a huge uproar in her voice making her lose control of it" (90), nor allow her voice to "dissolve into disorder and chaos" (91), Angela risks everything:

She is talking, talking, takes off who knows where, she says it starts all over, speech, paths, butterflies and that she just loves words' inevitable slowness, she says that when in distress everything is overcome by the sound of words and that everything then becomes

impossible to understand, she says things are exploding in her head and that everything must be attempted again like a backhand, a lob in mindspace, she repeats the mind is fragile but the eyes, but the eyes, Mélanie, she says one must not give up, that nothing is impossible if in the realm of the improbable memory realizes the certitude which in us keeps an eye out for beauty on the horizon, she talks about our attachment to certain words, that they are like small slow deaths in concise reality.

(45)

There are specific instructions in this speech which treads the border between sense and nonsense, the borderland where Brossard claims that women can create new realities which may eventually change patriarchal reality (Ideas). In particular, Mélanie is advised "that everything must be attempted again;" she is encouraged "not [to] give up," to watch "for beauty on the horizon," and to beware "our attachment to certain words." I would argue that Angela is exhorting Mélanie to embrace the erotic, as it is defined by Audre Lorde: "an assertion of the life force of women; of that creative energy empowered" (1991, 149). Lorde also recognizes the importance of the intergenerational act: "The aim of each thing that we do is to make our lives and the lives of our children richer and more possible" (148). It is Angela's desire to get close to Mélanie and to communicate this wisdom to her which exposes Angela to danger.

The lesbian on the dance floor, the perhaps drunk dyke who dares give voice to semiotic sense/nonsense is a figure who has haunted Euro-American lesbian communities in fiction and in reality. Faderman exposes the connection between the role of the bar as meeting place (particularly for working class lesbians) and alcoholism (163), which has contributed to the social phenomenon of the drunk dyke. Bonnie Zimmerman, though she notes that increased "[s]ensitivity to alcoholism within the [sic] lesbian community" is changing this aspect of lesbian fiction (1990, 142), also notes that "substance abuse is argued to be a more serious problem for lesbians than for other groups (214) and writes of the

fictionalized lesbian bar, "as an idealized location of community and home" (141).

But Mélanie and Angela are not in a lesbian bar nor in the protected space of Kathy's bar: "in the Bar of the Red Arrow Motel the desert does not really exist" (44); "in the Bar of the Red Arrow Motel the desert is out of place" (200). In *Mauve Desert*, the desert is the matrix of female subjectivity and the Red Arrow (a phallic symbol appropriately bloodied) Motel is the home of Longman, the "anonymous" representative of patriarchal reality, whom Gould has linked to Robert Oppenheimer, whose equations created the atomic bomb (99). Angela, however, does not consider her position in patriarchal reality; like Laure Angstelle and Maude Laures (133), "Angela Parkins never thought of protecting herself" (93); all three are intent only on getting their story out.

Moreover, although Brossard endows Angela with several myth-like characteristics, she is not supernatural; above all, she is not invulnerable. Instead Brossard uses her character and the narrative to undermine patriarchal definitions and its supporting myths, which tend to underestimate and/or overestimate women's capabilities (in regard to, say, women's rationality or suffering, respectively). Lesbians (as authors or characters) are in a unique position to challenge patriarchal definitions because, as Brossard points out "[a]mazons and lesbians are the only women not to have been invented by Man. For that reason, they are utopic and damned. Figures forbidden access, like the desirable writing" (1986, 11). Brossard uses the "otherness" of lesbians to subvert the status quo but she also breaks out of the reductive binary opposition of utopic/damned into lesbian self-definition through the killing of Angela. It is impossible to see the vibrant Angela as damned and her death ensures that she cannot be read as utopic, contrary to Parker's assertion of "a utopian urge that inhabits Brossard's later writing...[in t]he project to create a space for lesbian desire/subjectivity" (1990, 108). The murder demonstrates that Brossard neither underestimates men's power nor overestimates lesbian invulnerability and the narrative specifically invokes "reality" (132) as opposed to utopia.

In "A Book To Translate," Angstelle ("author")

explains not only why Angela was murdered but also takes pains to disclaim personal, that is, fictional, responsibility. She tells Angela, "*I didn't kill you. That man killed you*" (133). (Readers interested in the killer's identity may note that this statement would seem to eliminate Mélanie as a suspect. However, Maude Laures' imagination may also be suspect.) Angstelle seems to be struggling against guilt as she attempts to reassure herself that Angela "*didn't see anything coming*" (132). She explains to Laures (and thus to her audience of reader / investigator / translators), that Angela's death is "*reprobation*" (132), not for Angela herself but for "*everything around [her]. Intolerance. Madness. Violence*" (132). If this were the only reason given, it would seem, outrageously, that Angela has been murdered for the sins of the (patriarchal) world. Furthermore, this would make of Angela a Christ-figure, which would be in direct opposition to Brossard's stated preference of challenging patriarchal reality without indulging in the creation of parallel mythologies (Ideas).

However, Angstelle goes on to attribute some responsibility to Angela herself: "You died because you forgot to look around you. You freed yourself too quickly and because you thought yourself free, you no longer wanted to look around you. You forgot about reality" (132). Angela is not only a lesbian but a successful professional. She is a "loophole" woman; that is, she has slipped through the obstacles that (still) block most women and, therefore, does not see or identify with the oppression experienced by other women. Furthermore, her profession may implicate her in the destructive world of Longman. In *Mauve Desert*, Angela's lack of awareness of patriarchal reality in relation to her self exposes her to danger but it is no coincidence that that danger strikes at the moment that she encourages Mélanie towards the erotic. As Lorde points out, "women so empowered are dangerous" (1991, 148).

Angela's murder forces the post-modern and anti-utopic recognition that "[t]he dream that objects or events can be isolated from their contexts, that lines or borders can be drawn around them is another metaphysical fiction" (Crowley 1989, 11). In fact, the text may be read as a cautionary tale that deconstructs the dream of

lesbian utopia.<sup>5</sup> Politically, and as Alice Parker has pointed out, "Brossard does not separate literature and politics" (1990, 110), Angela's murder may also be read as addressing the issue of lesbianism lived solely as a personal solution. In the US and Canada, it is possible, albeit difficult, for (some) lesbians to create lives that, by virtue of being more insulated from immediate patriarchal control, are comparatively utopian. Under such circumstances, it is often easy to see, but more tempting to ignore, the horrors that patriarchy perpetrates. Like Angela Parkins, some lesbians have interesting jobs within the patriarchal system, attend the opera, read books and "try like every night to forget the image of hell" (94). Angela's particular "image of hell" was the atomic bomb test explosion but most women can bear witness to at least one patriarchal atrocity.

"[R]eality catches up" (133) with Angela because she doesn't notice anything deadly "in [Longman's] ways, in his gaze. He looked normal" to her (132). Yet the "tiny pattern on [her] temple, a tiny little hole, eyespot," while no doubt a bullet hole, can also be read as the track, the result, of "Longman's impassive stare" (46). The male gaze in *Mauve Desert* not only constructs but destructs. Longman's gaze connects the pornographic pictures he uses for his personal explosion / ejaculation and the pictures of the public / nuclear explosion, which is the social pornography of Thanatos. The same gaze murders our Angela, and also explodes the myth of the possibility of lesbian utopia within patriarchy.

As Brossard checks her readers' impulse towards the utopic, the "author" checks a similar tendency in her translator. Although "Maude Laures started ticking off other words that could in her language get meaning restarted and spare her from facing Angela Parkins' brutal end" (159), this alternative is denied her. Unlike Mélanie's wild rides before she was "allowed everything," Brossard's project here is not to create "a character cut out of history. Saying 'so many times I have sunk into the future'" (13) or "'so many times I have ended up in utopia'" (169). Angela, the translator, Mélanie, and readers must all face the hard truth that *Mauve Desert* presents: "That man exists. He could be compared to the invisible wire that sections reality from fiction. In getting closer to

Mélanie [Angela] wanted to cross the threshold" (133). Death happens at the rupture point where the older, relatively powerful Angela assumes that she is living in a utopic fiction, ignores patriarchal reality, and reaches out to Mélanie, to the next generation. She did this on territory controlled by patriarchal reality. This is how "death transits between fiction and reality" (131), which is the writerly mystery explored by *Mauve Desert*.

*Mauve Desert* is a book of reversals. In one sense, there is a similarity to "classic" detective fiction defined by Coward and Semple: Angela Parkins disrupts the status quo; her "crime" is discovered by "an establishment figure;" she is "eradicated." However, this hierarchy is implicitly interrogated because, unlike the traditional genre, the disruptive element is the murder victim herself. But this is not the simple inversion adopted by most lesbian and feminist mystery fiction. There is no "lesbian sleuth" within the novel to become "the victor" to which Munt refers. Beyond the page, Mélanie may become that person but in the time/space of the novel only readers can continue the translation begun by Laures to unravel the mystery of Angela Parkin's death. In this way, "knowledge is made intelligible to readers" (Godard

1989, 45). However *Mauve Desert* continues to challenge both genres in that the solutions available do not reassert the status quo nor do they evoke lesbian utopia.

It is a book of beginnings without endings, a book where the desert is not portrayed as arid and sterile but rather as a place that nurtures strength, beauty and identity, a book where the utopic lesbian dies imparting the forbidden knowledge of the "erotic" to the new woman/lesbian who is "literally creating [herself] in the world" (Brossard 1991, 254). Evolving an understanding of why and how the crime was committed de-scribes the current social order, which provides a starting point for re-inscribing a differing social order. As Karen Gould notes, it also "affirms the importance of women's interpretive role in reading and in life itself" (104). Finally, *Mauve Desert* may be read as a cautionary tale that advises lesbians to recognize the fragility of our (always already) endangered "freedom" and the power of the patriarchy while it encourages us to find, write, read, and translate women's "true landscapes" as we find them (133).

## ENDNOTES

1. For works that primarily discuss the issues of translation in relation to *Mauve Desert*, see Beverley Curran and Mitoko Hirabayashi 1997, Kristine J. Anderson 1995, Alice Parker 1990, and Susan Holbrook 1997 (Holbrook discusses *Mauve Desert* only briefly). Katherine Conley 1994-5, who traces Surrealist influences in *Le Désert Mauve*, an influence that Brossard explicitly rejects ("One thing you can be sure of is that the word surrealist is not part of my vocabulary or my intention" [Brossard Interview 1988, 187]), but for which Conley makes an excellent case nevertheless, also discusses Brossard's spiral theory, which is outlined by Brossard in *Aerial Letter* (1988, 103-120).

2. Although Susan McGahan also "re/cover[s] Brossard's] mode of investigation in terms of the mystery novel" (1992, 104), she locates the sleuth within the novel, in the translator Maude Laures, while I locate the sleuth in the novel's readers. In this I am influenced by the exchange between Angstelle and Laures in which Angstelle privileges the critical reader over the translator:

-- I can reproach you for what is in your book.

-- By what right?

-- Reading you gives me every right.

-- But as a translator you have none" (133).

However, since I feel that Brossard uses Laures, who is appropriately a schoolteacher, to model a critical reading/investigative stance to readers, she certainly can be read as a sleuth herself. Although I examine much of the same territory as McGahan, we define the mystery to be solved differently, so that our conclusions also differ; for McGahan (1992) "[t]he signifiers or clues to be followed in solving the puzzle or the crime are absent" (109) and "the mystery is unsolvable" (110). While I agree with Godard that "Brossard's work is situated in a state of hesitation oscillating between several possible meanings where language resists our efforts to take from it a single tyrannical meaning" (1984, 33), I will argue that there are clues to at least some questions and that the some of the meanings we can apprehend lead to ideas that are politically relevant to the lives of women and especially lesbian women.

3. McGahan (1992) and Conley (1994-5) suggest that it may be Mélanie or Longman while Anderson asserts that Laures transforms

Longman into "the designated, and not just the suspected murderer of Angela" (71). Parker (1990) observes that "Brossard studiously avoids identifying (with) the killer" but nevertheless asserts that the murder is a "senseless act of male violence/violation" (115).

4. It is interesting that the translator Lares' last name may be read as a possessive of the "author's" first name while her first name, Maude, *en français*, is a virtual homonym for *mots* (words). This points to an aspect of translation in which the translator may be understood to become possessed by the originating author as she struggles to produce what Conley has called "mots de Laure" (147). A double-edged fear haunts translation; the translator's inner landscape and language may transform the text but the text to be translated may also transform that inner landscape and make the translator the author's woman. As Angstelle says, "How am I to believe...that the landscapes in you won't erase those in me?" and Lares responds, "Because true landscapes...settle into us" (133).

5. In this *Mauve Desert*, first published in French as *Le Désert mauve* in 1987 and in English in 1990, may have been responding to the preceding years, "1968 to 1985 [which] saw one of the greatest concentrations of feminist utopian fiction in US history" (Crowder 1993, 237), which certainly would affect at least all English-speaking countries. Both Diane Griffin Crowder (1993, 245) and Sonya Andermahr (1992, 137), although presenting different perspectives, have noted the connection between separatism as a politics and the proliferation of all-female utopian fiction that dominated this period. *Mauve Desert* may be read as a critique of this genre, which tended to pay inadequate attention to "reality." In using (some) conventions of the mystery genre to dis-spell utopia, Brossard takes part in a general shift noted by Zimmerman (1990), who observes that the "lesbian detective novel has replaced the SF/utopian novel as the quintessential lesbian genre" (210). Of course, *Mauve Desert*, is only a "detective novel" to the same extent that Godard identifies for Carol Shield's *Swann: A Mystery*: "[it] subverts the genre by becoming unique and 'literature,' that is, productive of its own reality" (1989, 58).

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