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# Picture Theory: On Photographic Intimacy in Nicole Brossard and Anne Carson

SOPHIE MAYER

**T**O INTIMATE A CONNECTION between Nicole Brossard and Anne Carson seemingly hinges on geographical chance, in that they emerge from Montréal at overlapping moments. The lack of interpersonal intimacies of literary or social networks between the authors points emphatically to the cultural dimensions of Canada's "two solitudes." While Brossard collaborated with the Canadian anglophone feminist literary community through *Tessera*, and through that journal with a wider group of English-language experimental feminist poets, exemplified by her inclusion in the US anthology *Resurgent: New Writing by Women* and the translation of *Typhon Dru* by British poet Caroline Bergvall, Carson's Canadian literary network extends via *Brick* and is unaligned with *l'écriture au féminin* or any national or transnational literary movement. Rarely reviewed or discussed critically in light of other poets, Canadian or international, other than the Classical writers with whom she proclaims her affiliation, Carson's singularity is reflected in her oblique relationship to both form and autobiography. More openly political than Carson, Brossard engaged in formal experimentation at the forefront of a productive anglophone-francophone dialogue about the intersection of the personal and political, centred on the feminist magazine *Tessera*. Yet Carson, like Brossard, is manifestly a feminist; while not openly lesbian, her work is regarded as queer enough to be used as seduction on *The L-Word*.<sup>1</sup> This essay contends that it is their re-visioning of the way in which women gaze at women's bodies (including their own) that these writers have a resonance.

## **Spill, and Spill Again: Documentary Poetics**

While their geographical overlap in 1990s Montréal points to the depth of the dichotomy between the anglophone and francophone commun-

ities, their work points to and through a way of bridging another dichotomy of two solitudes, those of literature and visual culture. What unites their work is an attempt to bridge this textual dichotomy, drawing on multiple languages and a shared intertextual palimpsest of European modernist literature and arthouse cinema to do so. Formally, they engage this hybridity through use of a number of formal strategies explored in this paper: the serial and long poem forms that blur formal and discursive boundaries, references to modernist aesthetics, and a metaphoricity of photography and cinema. Rather than engaging in the essentialist or mimetic representation of female subjectivity through these strategies, I argue that Carson and Brossard differently deploy these forms to construct a reflexive intimacy (to the author's persona, to the female bodies in the text) arising through repeated and foregrounded attempts to develop a language in which to summon, rather than merely describe, the visual image, whose equation with the female body is deconstructed and critically deployed. Intimacy between women is aligned with intimacy between text and image, and between reader and text; all three are problematic, but in their intersections they create a partial, tangential, fragmentary, and often ironic intimation of the nature of the female gaze and its relation to the real.

Robert Stanton posits that for Carson "*mimesis* is no simple matter of documentary 'realism.' . . . [It] could be usefully described as something akin to 'emotion *verité*' [*sic*]" (34). Carson herself writes in an essay on documentary:

What you enjoy in a documentary technique is the feeling that you are crossing back and forth on the frame of facts, skating from document to document, while retaining your own point of view — which is called 'objective' because you make the facts into objects by viewing them this way. You are not so swept along by the facts as to forget your own viewing, as you would be in the middle of a story or poem or dramatic film. Instead you insist on seeing the edge of the frame wherever you look. In a good documentary the facts spill over the frame, then spill again. ("Foam" 96)

The frame is both Carson's spatial metaphor for the field of theory and a recognition of documentary as a cinematic form, especially as it is the grounds for figure movement — the viewer "skating" on the frame as if it were an ice rink. This embedded image evokes both the ice's transparency and the sharpness of blades, attributes that are lent to the

frame, which is “objective” and also edged. Carson argues also that the facts are active, “spilling” like volcanic lava. This messy excess is, for Carson, a sign of artistic engagement not only with the creative process but with theorizing it. “Foam,” she writes, “is the sign of an artist who has sunk his hands into his own story, and also of a critic storming and raging in the folds of his own deep theory” (“Foam” 98). Excess as art/theory is recognized as paradox, as the watery imagery of foam and depths is answered by Carson’s favoured image of the volcano: “Foam is a sign of how close the threat came . . . notice how, on the brink of Aetna [in a quotation from Longinus], documentation intervenes” (99). “Foam” — her metaphor for the sublime excess that characterizes the documentary mode, which she pictures as work that theorizes itself — is produced when reflexive style collides with the threat of the real.

Both Carson and Brossard attempt to find a place for the excessive ‘other’ — the woman, the madman, the monster, the queer — in the contemporary scopic regime. To do so, they “picture theory,” as Brossard titles one of her most influential texts; they construct theory as itself excess, creating poetic essays (de)composed of ekphrases, digressions, braided forms, incursions into narrative, and invisible images for which space is left in the text. These images, which are always given in textual form, are often of the intimate self: Carson’s *Autobiography of Red*, for example, concerns itself with a character called Geryon, a photographic self-portraitist whose autobiography ostensibly includes of a number of photographs, described by Carson impossibly as at once completed and in the process of being taken. Brossard’s *Journal intime*, originally devised as a series of radio broadcasts for CBC, often uses memories related to movies to make transitions from the day on which writing is occurring to a past event being recalled. Cinema and photography organize intimate temporalities whose “spillage” relates to the self as a kinetic assemblage of desire, of the sort made manifest and modern by the cinema screen.

### **Journaux Intimes: Essaying Life as a Movie (Star)**

Skating back and forth on the surface of temporality, *Journal intime* lays claim to multiple genres: not only the journal and poetry (which is often found in personal journals) but also a more formal autobiography that seeks to constitute, by describing, a feminist and/or lesbian community built on cultural referents. Temporal intimacy — the writing happening

so close to the time of events — turns the journal into a documentary in which the frame is always visible, creating both motion and an awareness of discontinuity. Brossard frequently notes the filmicness of observing herself observing her. Cinematic reference skates across temporality, as a vision of the park appears from the bus “comme une séquence d’hiver gris, puis [elle] déplace lentement vers les terrains vagues dans *Mama Roma* de Pasolini” (20).<sup>2</sup> The author’s experience in the present, the very stuff of intimate journals, is qualified or adjectivized by her memory of an old (and mothering) film, Rome overlaying Montréal. The “sequence” is a simile for the real park, the film a simile for the real spaces in which the author walks. In a sense, the first simile, with its filmic terminology, “déplace” the author into the second, and the second “déplace” her into a subsequent entry that takes place in Rome two years previously, in which she buys a collection of Pasolini’s poems, “*Poesia in forma di rosa*” (*Journal* 21). Film becomes poetry, yet the poetry invokes the visual *forma di rosa*, and also adds to the palimpsest with the echo of *Roma in rosa*, and also of the name *Rosa* — poems, then, in the form of a woman who is a flower who is a city, an image-chain that Brossard’s journal rewrites to liberate it from patriarchal symbolism.

Rome is one of the several European cities that overlays, through reminiscences, the Montréal in which Brossard is writing. There are several memories of Paris, the quintessential modernist city, one particularly striking in which Brossard alludes to, alludes to meeting a significant meeting a significant woman writer, Simone de Beauvoir, to interview her for Brossard’s documentary on American feminism. Yet the claim to documentary is both allusive and elusive. The footage that she manages to shoot disappears. “Disparu comment? *Mystère à l’office du film*. Travelling dans les corridors, à la cafeteria. Pas de zoom en perspective. Hier, tout à l’heure, tantôt pas d’histoire” (52).<sup>3</sup> Lost documentary footage is reimagined as “un mystère,” a thriller shot in the unpeopled corridors of the National Film Board. English words adopted into technical French stand out, “Travelling . . . zoom,” notations for camera and lens movement as well as movement across language.<sup>4</sup> Compacted within the reference is Brossard’s documentary of life under patriarchy: travelling shot of corridors in which feminist history gets lost, no change of focus in prospect. *Journal intime* thus (re)constitutes the footage of Brossard’s feminist moment(s), doing exactly the work that Brossard calls “picture theory.” While the documentary *Some American Feminists* records interviews — or rather, monologues with the occasional hint of

Brossard's presence — and cityscapes, its temporally contained focus (despite the presence of a few clips of historical newsreels from events such as Stonewall) cannot match the range of *Journal* as a document of the feminist movement and Brossard's place in it, from references to modernist writers to memorable encounters with writers and artists who both speak and form the lingua franca of 1970s feminism.

"Irony Is Not Enough," says Carson in response to the question of referentiality, intertextuality, auto/biography, fiction, and reality, and subtitles the poem "Essay on My Life as Catherine Deneuve." The dangerous potential for spillage is marked by an unusual paratext located at the other end of the material book: "This book is a work of fiction. The reference to Catherine Deneuve that appears in 'My Life as Catherine Deneuve' is an allusion to a character in the film *Les voleurs*. All other characters and all actions, events, motivations, thoughts and conversations portrayed in this work are entirely a product of the author's imagination" (*Men* iv). Not only does this colophon lose the "essay[istic]" nature of the poem's title, but it also separates Deneuve/Marie (her character in *Les voleurs*) from "all other characters" included in the book who are biographical individuals. Calling her essay/character "Deneuve" invokes the star as icon, as author of her performances: a star in any language, even with the poem's French intertitles.

Carson's poetic transpositions of the cinematic image yoke desire, violence, and formalism. "Two parallel red lines of different lengths inch forward, not touching" stands as a delicate description of the relation of film and poem because it evokes and alters a moment of the film in which Marie's younger girlfriend Juliette smashes a wineglass from which she has been drinking (glancingly referenced in the line "Deneuve washes her glassware" [120]) and attempts to swallow some of the fragments, leaving a smear of blood on Marie's white robe that mirrors the bloody stain on Juliette's lips (120). The drama is replayed in a later section of the poem, when Deneuve makes dinner for her students and the girl does not show up. "Deneuve drains a wineglass and wipes her mouth. . . . Hotel room is blowing with moonlight, streaming with moonlight. *What's that you've got there a scar?*" (124). "Hotel room" is the repeated scene of Deneuve's fantasies of connection with the unnamed girl, although in the film Juliette meets her male lover in a series of cheap hotels, but stays with Marie at her apartment. The conjunction of wineglass, mouth, and scar rewrites the painful cine-

matic suicide attempt as a fragment of a narrative of desire, in which the moonlight almost transposes the scar into a star, rewriting the lesbian body as Elizabeth Grosz suggests in “The Lesbian Postmodern,” as a model of “surfaces and intensities” (74). In such a model we might find “fingers becoming flowers, becoming silver, becoming torture instruments,” Grosz continues (80). Coupled with her multiple negotiations with Sappho, from *Short Talks* to *If Not, Winter*, Carson’s approach to autobiography via Deneuve/Marie performs a fascinating and dynamic realization of Grosz’s experimental question, which “is not am I — or are you — a lesbian but, rather, what kinds of lesbian connections, what kinds of lesbian-machine, we invest our time, energy, and bodies in. . . . What is it that together, in parts and bits and interconnections, we can make that is new” (80-81).

Discussing Sappho’s fr. 31 (“It seems to me”), Carson redefines the erotic triangle of watching, performing, and feeling that is constructed by the female-female gaze in the poem:

We may, in the traditional terminology of erotic theorizing, refer to this structure as a love triangle, and we may be tempted, with post-Romantic asperity, to dismiss it as a ruse. But the ruse of the triangle is not a trivial mental maneuver. We see in it the radical constitution of desire . . . three points of transformation on a circuit of possible relationships, electrified by desire so that they touch not touching. . . . When the circuit-points connect, perception leaps. And something becomes visible . . . that would not be visible without the three-part structure. The difference between what is and what could be is visible. The ideal is projected on the screen of the actual, in a kind of stereoscopy. . . . Desire moves. (eros 16-17)

Triangulation produces (and triangulates) not only desire, but also theory (“perception”) and cinema “visible . . . difference . . . projected on the screen.” Desire creates movement, and itself moves. This “maneuver,” language’s motivation of the image, is repeated throughout the work of both authors, documenting poetic language’s ability to mobilize the elements of a scene through the construction of the body as both audience and performer (as the poet records her senses’ responses), uniting visibility and motion, which is desire.

Brossard, imagining the desiring body as camera, writes, “du desir broyé terriblement dans une vision de soleil rond immense et fou s’avançant vers la pupille violemment diamètre ruisselant de lave, coulée, coule

se moule au moule: le sexe ambiant” (qtd. in Forsyth 344).<sup>5</sup> Conflating the female gaze with the female sex in the metaphor of the volcano’s eye, she establishes a site of potentiality and instability. The gazing volcano, feminized by its association with the “sexe ambiant,” points to the excessiveness of the female gaze, its constant threat of spilling over the frame. Several of the poems in Brossard’s series *Installations* take place “dans l’extrême immédiat du seuil” (9), at the “seuil de conscience” (39), and “des sens l’ultra, l’infra, le seuil” (89).<sup>6</sup> The threshold — le seuil — is a boundary defined by being crossed, a frame that includes the necessity of excess. Trembling with the promise of movement, it stands in relation to the text as the photograph does to film. Both writers interrogate the difference between still photography and film in this context; film often irrupts within the photograph, introducing a sense of movement to render the photograph filmic.

### Long Poems / Poems Long: Movement as (Modernist) Desire

Movement, *kinesis*, is the etymological root of cinema, and a condition of modernity reflected in both poets’ work. Carson’s characters are often nomadic: “The Fall of Rome: A Traveller’s Guide” and “The Lives of Towns” are both travelogues, and travel features heavily in *Red*. This peripatetic is paired to a macaronic style, which embraces Greek, Latin, French, Hebrew, and Japanese phrases, particularly as they refer to or mark the body. Likewise, Brossard “is a whirling, free-floating figure, an explorer using words to mark the fresh lines of each new trajectory” (Forsyth 335). Her characters are nomadic, in the Deleuzian sense, but they also suggest Virginia Woolf’s proclamation that “as a woman, I have no country” (*Three* 146). Even the cities and countries visited in Brossard’s works are decontextualized, rendered amorphous and palimpsestic. In *Picture Theory* she walks (Montréal) in the foot/prints of *Ulysses*, fascinated by Joyce’s dual reading of the city and the erotic (female) body. Lorraine Weir sees a direct response to Joyce’s depiction of femininity: “*Hologramme* [the final section of *Picture Theory*] . . . is a lyrical celebration of the skin in which the rhythms of the conclusion of the ‘Penelope’ chapter of *Ulysses* are echoed, creating an ironic counterpart [to] Molly Bloom’s ‘Yes’” (247). It is ironic because Brossard’s passionate reverie, shifting from continuous prose to poetic fragments, communicates over the head of Joyce’s text through its lesbian sexuality, but also because it is rooted in the idea of women as travellers, as explor-



ers — as errant. Its other irony is its embracing of the fragment in favour of Joycean excess, and its concern with the visual as well as (or more than) the aural embedded in the poetic language of desire.

Like Carson's, Brossard's forms are errant: *Picture Theory* is a novel that includes (or exudes, as spillage) serial lyric fragments in Florence's voice, as well as excerpts from Florence's critical paper on Joyce's *Ulysses*. Many of Brossard's books, such as *Installations*, are serial poems, while *Journal intime* inhabits the short prose form of the journal, but also constantly and reflexively resists it.<sup>7</sup> Barbara Havercroft observes that, "à l'intérieur de chacune de cinq sections [en prose] du journal, on remarque un passage perpétuel vers la poésie" (30).<sup>8</sup> In their operations of seriality (maintaining a narrative) and lyricism (linguistic intensity), her texts often resemble, or play off, the long poem, itself a hybrid form of epic and lyric and a core practice of modernist poets H.D. and Gertrude Stein, whose influence resounds explicitly in both Brossard and Carson. Smaro Kamboureli has asserted that the long poem is also a typically Canadian form, and her theorization of its characteristics applies to Brossard's work, as well as to Carson's:

If, despite its questioning of documentary authenticity, the long poem has a tenacious relationship to documents, it is because its genre is constituted, to borrow Philippe Hamon's term, by a 'semi-otics of *knowing*'. . . . The serial poem moves towards an entirely new definition of the document through its emphasis on dictation, an emphasis that shifts the poet's attention to questions regarding sources to issues relating to poetics. (97)

Kamboureli sees the long poem as invested in a tangential relationship to historicity, drawing on documentary evidence in errant ways to provide the form with necessary and sustained political engagement absent from the short lyric.

Brossard uses prose poems and serial forms to engage in a historiography of the proto-lesbian feminism of modernist "écrivaines" such as H.D., Woolf, and Stein, but *Picture Theory* also offers a space for cinematic modernism in the formation of her aesthetic. For Florence, a rhapsodic memory of cinema forms the nexus of female communitarian love, including mothers, daughters, and lovers. The four women protagonists gather around Oriana, Claire, and Florence's Austrian communist mother, to hear stories of her past: "À l'entendre, c'était en images les samedis soirs à l'Elysée ou au Verdi, Visconti, Fellini,

Antonioni, l'indépendance du Québec, Pink Floyd. It was Montréal Paesano, Vito, Saint-Léonard . . . le feu aux poudres" (*Picture Theory*).<sup>9</sup> The great Italian cinematic modernists Visconti, Fellini, and Antonioni are part of an imagistic syntax that leads to francophone political history, a snapshot album of the 1960s that associates revolutions in film production with actual political movements.<sup>10</sup> Fireworks are a synecdoche for both the chromatic explosions of Italian neo-realist cinema, and the prophetic celebration of a potential future Québécois independence.

Moments of the political and cultural real collide to create the "tridimensionnalité" of Brossard's text, the hologrammatic effect that she posits will more completely realize feminine biography (Havercroft 34). Yet *Picture Theory*, a chronicle of female friendships across continents and texts, contains no pictures. An earlier article in *Tessera*, "Certain Words," uses a postcard of a Duane Michaels's photograph, "Certain Words Must Be Said," to connote the impossibilities of finding a language in which to produce theory within intimate friendships in feminist writing circles. The card is from Nicole to a fictional writer called Claire Text (a literal French translation of photo-graph, light-writing), sent on Nicole's reading of Claire's book. Her critical notes find themselves at odds with the intimate nature of a postcard between friends. This is the paradox in the image, as well as of the image-text relationship: the words that must be said occupy the space between the two women who are not looking at each other. This is a conversation of silences, of bodies, of ellipses — and of pictures.

*Picture Theory* circles elaborately around the moment imagined in Duane Michaels's image: the moment of conversation between the bodies of two women, assaying multiple forms and genres to see which will translate the moment onto the page. Susan Friedman, writing on the long poem, argues for "a gynopoetic of the outside that establishes a new inside" (19). Her formula is suggestive of *l'écriture au féminin* and its positing of language as mediating a relationship between outside and inside. Carson and Brossard originate a discourse that draws on an "outside" of film and photography for exposition or models of the "inside" of language and bodies alike. Geryon's final photograph, in the penultimate section of the "Romance" of *Autobiography of Red*, is an astonishing example of the interchange of inside and outside, language and image. The photograph is simply titled "# 1748," as if language were not adequate to describe it. Hovering on wings set free by Ancash's

recognition of them, Geryon attempts to record the sound of a volcano for Herakles and Ancash's film about Emily Dickinson. When Geryon "flicks Record" on the tape recorder, the volcano responds by "dumping all its photons out her ancient eye and he / smiles for / the camera: 'The Only Secret People Keep'" (*Red* 145). The volcano is both "earth heart" and "ancient eye," organs of circulation and vision and, as it foams with light, a camera. Its photographic excess records Geryon in "a photograph he never took, no one here took it" (*Red* 145).

The volcano's "secret" is suggested by its name, *Ichchantikas*, which is not the name of a Chilean volcano, but a term that came into Chinese Buddhism from the Indian caste system. The *Lotus sutra* claims that *icchantika* are those who live only for the gratification of worldly desires. Several Buddhist glossaries also give *icchantikas* as the term for 'persons of two vehicles,' Buddhists who have mastered intellectual training but not Bodhisattva-hood. They are scorned as being scholarly at the expense of others whom they do not use their scholarship to aid (Lusthaus). Carson's act of naming marks the centrality of desire (to know) to photography, as in Geryon's daring act of recording the volcano. The alternate, connected secret kept by the volcano is the Bodhisattva-like gift that Ancash claims is bestowed by the volcano onto the culture heroes who grow red wings after they survive jumping into it: immortality, the same gift that theorists from Roland Barthes onwards have associated with photography.

### **A Star in any Language: Electrifying the Female Gaze**

Roland Barthes's classic study of photography, *Camera Lucida*, makes much at the metaphorical level of the importance of *lucida* (light). Describing the "detail [that] overwhelms the entirety of [his] reading" of a photograph (49), a detail that he is in the process of theorizing as the *punctum*, the point or puncture that causes an unintentional exchange of heightened sensation between photograph and viewer, he assays it as "lightning-like" (45), "a fulguration" (49). The detail invokes a recognition with his "whole body," often of some bodily detail (a hand, a shoe, a pose) (45). Framing and style, which he includes among the codes of connotation (*Image* 20-25), disrupt the unconscious process of *punctum* that takes place in a glance "at once brief and active" (*Camera* 49). This is the lightning: not the detail captured by light striking a chemical-coated plate, nor the eye of the photographer, but the gaze of

the photograph's audience who, through the detail, takes the photograph into his or her body. Barthes describes this moment as one of "an *intense immobility*: linked to a detail (to a detonator), an explosion makes a little star on the pane of the text or the photograph" (*Camera* 49). He compares the photograph possessing *punctum* to a haiku, the form whose metaphorical compression inspired Ezra Pound's Imagism. Barthes links the explosion of the *punctum* to what he calls "catastrophe," the realization through a historical detail of past or future death (*Camera* 96). Like starlight reaching us long after the star's death, the *punctum* signs the traumatic imperative of mortality in a flash.

His route to this reading is through contemplation of a photograph of his mother as a child, found after her death. Barthes, reflecting on the passage of photographs into memory and vice versa, suggests that, in the interaction between living bodies both language and image (haiku and photograph) are inessential: "we [he and his mother] supposed, without saying anything of the kind to each other, that the frivolous insignificance of language, the suspension of images must be the very space of love, its music. . . . Which was my way of resolving Death" (*Camera* 72). Yet it is only the photographic image and the density of lyric, imagistic language that are capable of translating this experience both for Barthes and for others. Writing about Paul Celan, Carson identifies a chiasmic relation of silence and star, death and documentation, that resonates profoundly with Barthes's idea of *punctum*: "throughout [Celan's] later poetry and nine times in "Engführung" [*sic*], he refers to things that cannot be said by using the printed symbol called the asterisk. Asterisk, that perfectly economical sign. A star in any language. A mark on the page that pulls its own sound after itself and disappears" (*Economy* 119). Celan's asterisk is a detail that opens the text to us, and us to the text. For Carson, this flash between text and audience is the structuring principle of the creative process, and goes some way to explaining her obsession with observing the moment of photography as traumatic and therefore poetic.

"If my efforts are painful," writes Barthes of theorizing photography, "if I am anguished, it is because sometimes I get closer, I am burning: in a certain photograph I perceive the lineaments of truth. This is what happens when I judge a certain photograph a 'likeness'" (*Camera* 100). While the *punctum* is brief and involuntary, it is also, as he writes, active: it both demands and produces activity that is simultaneously intellectual

and cutaneous. The photograph transmits its chemical processes to the “burning” skin (or eyes) of the viewer. The pain is a product of ‘likeness,’ both a recognition of the subject of the photograph as being like an object in reality, and a process of identification, in which the subject of the photograph is ‘like’ the viewer. “It pains me to record this, / / I am not a melodramatic person,” writes Carson in “The Glass Essay,” as she describes a series of “naked glimpses of [her] soul” that appear as a series of violent, and violated, images, mostly of nude women (*Glass* 9). The first appears to her shortly after an imagined “videotape [of her past romantic relationship] jerks to a halt / like a glass slide under a drop of blood” (8). The invocation of microscopic vision, medicalized and bloody, encapsulates the serial poem’s pathologically dissective approach to questions of desire and identity. It also performs a reversal that acts as a *punctum*, a searing detail: the expected simile would be a drop of blood being fixed in place under a glass slide in order to be examined. Instead, it is the glass slide, the screen, that has been “jerk[ed] to a halt” under the burden of the living image. The surface of the glass is rendered static by the appearance of microscopic life teeming in the blood, on the one hand, and its transparency is clouded and ended when brought under the microscope for examination. The videotaped images of the poet’s relationship with her partner are stopped by the force of her poetic examination of its presence “running underneath” the events that she is recounting (8). Figure and ground have changed place, the videotape becoming the slide on which the blood of the poet’s broken heart is dropped.

The videotape is replaced by, or has dropped upon it, a series of Nudes, images that come to the poet during meditation. The first is “Woman alone on a hill. / She stands alone on the wind,” reproducing the preceding image of the poet on the windy hill watching her internal videotape (9). The stanza following drops blood onto the glass slide of the image:

Long flaps and shreds of flesh rip off the woman’s body and lift  
and blow away on the wind, leaving

an exposed column of nerve and blood and muscle  
calling mutely through a lipless mouth. (9)

This is what it “pains” the poet “to record,” the pain of the vision transmuted to the poet-audience through the act of description. The body without skin has lost its screen, in the sense of that which protects it, and that which receives impressions, from the outside world. Inside has become outside, and the outside can no longer act as a screen.

“Screen Skin,” as Brossard titles, in English, the penultimate sections of *Picture Theory*, becomes in its final iteration “Screen Skin Utopia,” the body of the author/lover as idealized surface for inscription, and idealized surface for projecting the visibility of female (specifically lesbian) desire: “C’est au bout de la nuit patriarcale que le corps s’anticipe à l’horizon que j’ai devant moi sur un écran de peau, la mienne, dont la résonance perdure dans ce qui tisse le tissu *la lumière* lorsque sous ma bouche la raison du monde ruisselle” (Brossard, *Picture* 167).<sup>11</sup> Patriarchal night will end when “la raison du monde ruisselle.” “Raison,” with its associations with facticity, will overflow from “*sous [la] bouche*” (emphasis added), somewhere beneath the mouth — perhaps from the breasts, or from the vagina, the *sous-bouche*, that disrupts reason, as Carson records in “The Gender of Sound,” noting multiple examples of the conflation of women’s (uncivilized and uncivilizing) open mouths and genitals in Western cultural discourse.<sup>12</sup> “Le corps s’anticipe” this ending “sur un écran de peau, la mienne,” a bodily surface that is both screen and image, flesh and poem, artefact and discourse: “text/ure t/issue,” in Barbara Godard’s translation. The image hinges on “*la lumière*,” the light that both illumines the skin and proleptically pours, as well as standing metonymically for “la résonance . . . dans ce qui tisse le tissu,” light marking traces of the body in the text projected onto the reader’s skin and the author’s, the *punctum* of “la mienne” moving both ways.

“I am my own Nude,” echoes Carson. “And Nudes have a difficult sexual destiny” because images are unavoidably nude women and vice versa in the patriarchal night (*Glass* 35). Nudes are recorded and projected through language that, like Brossard’s, imbricates cinematicity and sensuality, both troped by glass. Glass, as screen and shield, as brittle, frangible skin and as alchemical substance, pervades the essay, which also, in the alchemical sense, essays the glass of the poet’s language as it stands between event and reader, jerks it to a halt with blood. “I want to speak more clearly,” states the poet: “Perhaps the Nudes are the best

way” (35). Nude #7, fulcrum of the series of thirteen, combines “l’écran” and “*la lumière*” to suggest an inside of visuality:

Nude #7. White room whose walls,  
having neither planes nor curves nor angles,  
are composed of a continuous satiny white membrane

like the flesh of some interior organ of the moon.

It is a living surface, almost wet.

Lucency breathes in and out.

Rainbows shudder across it.

And around the walls of the room a voice goes whispering,

*Be very careful. Be very careful.* (35)

Most pressing about this iteration is the absence of the Nude: the female figure who appears in all the other Nudes. The woman and the poet may have been elided to become the person observing this vision (from within), rather than the figure observed. The vision suggests “interior[ity],” something both organic, a “living surface” of language being made new, and traditionally symbolic (the moon is often identified with the female). The white room is the inside of an eye, a reversal of the ocular-centric hegemony asserted by Emerson’s “transparent eyeball.” Carson recasts the transparency of vision from the (female) inside, watching the eyeball watching. Whiteness, wetness, lunacy, and lucency seal the poet inside seeing.

The white screen that protects or warns the woman against being seen evokes *Picture Theory*’s “scène blanche” (white scene) that is (and is not) the subject of Florence’s conference paper on *Ulysses*. In its first citation, the women in the scene are: “Ici sur le tapis, enlacées. Visible . . . Elle ajouta: «L’instant est brutal et insensé». Relief, j’en dis l’intensité, la force vive comme un cliché: la répercussion” (24).<sup>13</sup> Godard translates the final phrase as: “the vital force like a cliché: click, photo, the repercussion” (20). The repercussion of women’s bodies entwined on the carpet is brutal and, in translation, photographic, English needing twice as many words to convey the pun of “cliché” (clicked), the conventional imagining of female desire as photographed in pornography brutally rendering the scene imagistically clichéd. The “cliché” is like an inverse *punctum*, a click that pierces the sensual reception of the scene and makes visible its framing within a patriarchal discourse in which all nude women are images, and vice versa. Yet the scene is also

l'Idée, tout ce qui parvient à métamorphoser l'espace mental. . . . La scène blanche est un relais qui persiste comme écriture pendant que le corps dicte ses clichés, ferme les yeux sur les bouches qui ouvrent à répétition. . . . Face à ce qui s'offre: l'extravagance des surfaces, transparence de la scène holographiée. (27)<sup>14</sup>

The scene is the ability of writing itself to reconfigure the visual field (specifically and metonymically the female nude), for which Brossard draws on Wittgenstein's theory of the hologram, a linguistic, cinematic, three-dimensional Cubism: "Opposed to the hologram [in *Picture Theory*] is this commanding Presence of the picture which has long held us captive, describing woman's body in a two-dimensional picture/book" (Weir 349). Holograms, like cinema, necessitate light to mobilize their repetition-with-difference. The white scene thus conveys the idea of transmission, the relay that allows writing to convert clichés of the body into "l'extravagance des surfaces," like Carson's room behind closed eyes that is "composed of a continuous sanity white membrane."

"La scène blanche" as room of writing is later refigured in "Screen Skin," where Brossard writes of the transfiguration of suffering into pleasure as a cinematic act:

Parfois les mots restaient en place (aucun glissement) filtrant la souffrance sans concession jusqu'à ce qu'il ne reste qu'un vague souvenir qui, suite à sa métamorphose, prenait la forme du plaisir, voire d'un désir. Écran de sélection. When you have a room of your own, you still have the privilege to screen off a corner of the room. Sparkling words behind the screen. (*Picture* 127)<sup>15</sup>

The association between modernist literature — here, Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* — and cinema emerges against modernism's insistence to the contrary (both Joyce and Woolf were suspicious of cinema as it was at the time, although Woolf argued for its utopic potential [Woolf, "The Cinema"]). The screen is both the cover and surface for "sparkling words," a sparkling that is associated with the earlier luminosity of the image. Thus, to write after/using modernism as a woman, is to write (like) film. Words, if they sparkle, are not always "[sans] glissement": they can refuse stasis, move beyond memory and toward metamorphosis, take the form of desire (the cinematic image of the woman). They echo across languages, the sibillance of the passage drawing together "souffrance" and the sparkling screen that is both the written page and cinema, the screen that separates off a space in which women's writing



can happen, and provides a ground for female figuration, which takes place through cinema itself, particularly its static images of women. Patriarchal codes require repetition without difference, which is the opposite of the constant (light) movement of “sparkling.”

Carson also places the screen in the “room of one’s own,” and theorizes about the gender difference in perceptions of that which marks the screen, both aesthetically and politically. Her essay “Ordinary Time: Virginia Woolf and Thucydides on War” sets up the first of two political debates between Woolf and Thucydides, the second being presented in the form of a transcription of an on-set conversation between the two writers as they engage in making a Beckettian documentary about the Peloponnesian War. Carson’s essay is a meditation on the effects of war on conceptions of time, which draws from Woolf’s own essay on the same subject, “The Mark on the Wall.” Carson argues that the mark Woolf sees on the wall is the mark of the beginning of war (*Men* 4-5). Woolf speculates on the nature of the mark, imagining multiple possibilities — that it is an absence (a hole), a scuff mark, or even a presence, as it seems “to cast a perceptible shadow” (qtd. in *Men* 6). The idea of the double mark, the visual paradox in which two things are visible at once, also closes the book in an “Appendix to Ordinary Time” (*Men* 165-67). Carson, as scholar-poet, often constructs her texts to “foam” into appendices and cross-references. The excess here is arrested on the brink of Aetna, as the appendix records the death of the poet’s mother during the completion of the book. Quotations of erasures from Woolf’s manuscripts recapitulate Barthes’s implicit argument about death as *punctum*, as the excessive moment that pierces the image. Carson returns to the documentary imperative in addressing the fact of her mother’s death, employing a documentary practice that negotiates between visible and invisible excess:

Here is an epitaph for my mother I found on p. 19 of the Fitzwilliam Manuscript of Virginia Woolf’s *Women and Fiction*:

*such*  
*abandon* Obviously it is impossible, I thought, looking into those  
*ment* foaming waters, to  
*such* compare the living with the dead make any comparison  
*rapture* between them (166)

Woolf’s marginalia mark the excess of documentary, that is also the excess of death, in the enjambment of “abandon / ment,” which encom-

passes desire and the terror of lack. Woolf's self-erasing, "abandon[ed]" theory forms a visual image of thinking. Carson catches Woolf "looking into those foaming waters" that will later cross her out.

On the facing page is a snapshot of a woman and child sitting on a dock that has no markers of place, date, or identity. The text below the photograph reads, "Margaret Carson / 1913-1997 / / *Eclipsis est pro dolore*" (167). Margaret is, as the preceding prose poem details, the poet's mother, who "died the autumn [the poet] was writing this" (165). The Latin epitaph reads, "It (she) is crossed out in the face of / because of / from / on behalf of sorrow / pain" [my translation], condensing the poem's excursus through Virginia Woolf's crossed-out words, and the conflation of Woolf (who is dead/crossed out) and the poet's mother. Its epitaphic position suggests that it is the poet's mother that has been crossed out. But she is there: smiling in the photograph. The reference is to death itself, the great crosser-out — eclipsed by photography, as the line survives underneath the crossing through, as the daughter also depicted survives the mother.

The photographic space is that which opens up through the crossing-out, a formal difference that marks Woolf's (and Carson's) reflexive writing practice as one in which the female-female gaze is constituted by looking away/again. As Brossard describes it: "Peut-être s'agit-il surtout de prendre un espace et de l'occuper. D'avoir l'œil ouvert sur ce qui se passe et qui souvent nous dépasse faute d'interrogations, faute d'informations" (Brossard, "E muet" 65).<sup>16</sup> In her article on the mute "e" that marks the feminine gender of many French words, and the changes wrought to it by feminist literary practices, Brossard draws a syntactic parallel between "prendre un espace" and "avoir l'œil ouvert." To have one's eye open in active and political occupation is to both incorporate and go beyond that physicality. An open eye is able to see "[ce] qui souvent nous dépasse," that which is often beyond us.

### **Un question de cadrage: Framing the Question**

Insisting on sight, Brossard advocates a vigilance that produces, as well as witnesses, lesbian desire. Outlawed desire becomes a form of CCTV, always switched on by the visible world, watching because watched, observing space for difference, drawing correspondence between figures on the surface and an internal, utopic vision. Carson's "visions," which elide physical and metaphysical sight, turn this heightened (and gen-

dered) awareness onto and into the self. The final Nude, # 13, arrives “when [she] was not watching for it,” and strips the body down to a basic visual signifier beyond gender (38):

It could have been just a pole with some old cloth attached,  
 but as I came closer  
 I saw it was a human body  
  
 trying to stand against winds so terrible that the flesh was blowing  
 off the bones.  
 And there was no pain.  
 The wind  
  
 was cleansing the bones.  
 They stood forth silver and necessary,  
 It was not my body, not a woman's body, it was the body of us all.  
 It walked out of the light. (38)

The body “walked out of the light,” the first time that one of the Nudes has moved against the wind and towards the viewer. “Out of the light” suggests both that the body is stepping *away from* the light, and that it is made of light; the poem ends on this cinematic ambiguity. Memory, and the body, are like film stock: silver and necessary. As Brossard concludes: “Tout est question de cadrage dans le paysage du réel, de montage et de fondu enchaîné dans la mémoire, lorsqu'une vue de l'esprit se transforme en une image précise de femme en train d'écrire” (*Journal* 63).<sup>17</sup> Feminist intertextuality — particularly the alienation device of foregrounding ekphrases of visual representations — calls attention to the frame, and thus enables the reader to resist suture, not replicate it, in order for poetic texts to ‘read’ film against the frame, returning the body “de femme en train d'écrire” to the flayed woman.

Carson's and Brossard's poetry records literal embodied reactions to visual stimuli, such as the Nudes, that are modelled on the cinema; these reactions perform a critique of cinema (particularly its gender politics) *as* cinematicity re-embodies clichés of romantic and erotic language and, simultaneously, suggest new visual forms that might flower from their textual analogies. They follow the experimental poetics of Woolf, Stein, and H.D. in their negotiations with the feminization of the visual field in order to remobilize the *cliché*, the punning click of the photographic that detemporalizes and immortalizes an image. Investigating the cinematic in the photographic, Carson and Brossard discover ways of moving on from clichés of the male gaze, and of re-energizing poetry

through the trace of the cinematic. These traces denote “foam”: not only formal excess and boundary crossing, but a “foam” of intimacy as a radical form of representing female subjectivity that is at once autobiographical and intertextual, emotional and critical. Deneuve [the new thing] is at once a front, a surface — a screen — and alchemical glass, while the camera is both microscope and volcano, and each of these tropes is reconceived as a model of (embodied) intimacy that erases the solitude pictured in Duane Michaels’s speechless conversation. Writing in light, each poet identifies female-female intimacy as the *punctum* that a cinematic poetics can electrify.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See O’ Rourke.

<sup>2</sup> “like a grey winter sequence, then slowly I make my way forward toward the vacant lots in Pasolini’s *Mama Roma*” (*Intimate Journal*, trans. Godard 34).

<sup>3</sup> “Disappeared how? Mystery at the National Film Board. Travelling shot in the corridors, in the cafeteria. No zoom in prospect. Yesterday, a little while ago, soon no history” (*Intimate*, trans. Godard 67).

<sup>4</sup> The use of English words in French cinematography points to the dominance of American cinema; conversely, English film writing is indebted to French theorists who originated terms such as “film noir.”

<sup>5</sup> “with desire crushed terribly in a vision of an immense round mad sun advancing toward the pupil violently diameter streaming with lava, molten, flow molds itself to the mold: ambient sex” (Forsyth 344).

<sup>6</sup> “in the threshold’s extreme immediacy” (*Installations*, trans. Mouré and Mazjels 11), at the “threshold of consciousness” (41), and “of the senses ultra, infra, threshold” (91).

<sup>7</sup> Other serial poems include *Suite logique*, *Langues obscures: poésie*, and “Musée de l’os et l’eau” in *Musée de l’os et l’eau*, as well as *Typhon Dru* in the same collection.

<sup>8</sup> “In each of the five [prose] sections of the journal, one notes a perpetual movement towards poetry” [my translation].

<sup>9</sup> “Listening to her, it was in images of Saturday nights at the Elysée or at the Verdi, Visconti, Fellini, Antonioni, l’indépendance du Québec, Pink Floyd. It was Montréal Paesano, Vito, Saint-Léonard . . . fireworks” (*Picture*, trans. Godard 79).

<sup>10</sup> Italian neo-realism was associated with Italy’s recovery from its wartime fascism, while French New Wave filmmakers such as Jean-Luc Godard — and cinema itself, as Bernardo Bertolucci’s recent film *The Dreamers* (2004) illuminates — were instrumental in the events of 1968.

<sup>11</sup> “At the end of patriarchal night the body anticipates on the horizon I have in front of me on the screen of skin, mine, whose resonance endures in what weaves the text/ure t/issue *the light* when under my mouth the reason of the world streams down” (*Picture*, trans. Godard 150).

<sup>12</sup> “It is an axiom of ancient Greek and Roman medical theory and anatomical discussion that a woman has two mouths. . . . Both mouths provide access to a hollow cavity which is guarded by lips that are best kept closed” (Carson, “Gender” 131).

<sup>13</sup> “Here on the carpet, intertwined women. Visible . . . She added: ‘The instant is rough and senseless.’ In relief, I tell its intensity, the vital force like a cliché: click, photo, repercussion” (*Picture*, trans. Godard 20).

<sup>14</sup> “the Idea, everything that manages to metamorphize mental space. . . . The white scene is the relay that persists as writing while the body dictates its clichés, closes its eyes on the mouths that open to repetition. . . . Faced with what is offered: the extravagance of surfaces, transparency of the holographed scene” (*Picture*, trans. Godard 23).

<sup>15</sup> “Sometimes the words stayed in place (no slippage) filtering the suffering making no concession until there remained only a vague memory of it that, following its metamorphosis, took the form of pleasure, even desire. Screen of selection” (*Picture*, trans. Godard 112).

<sup>16</sup> “Perhaps above all it is a matter of taking a space and occupying it. Of keeping an eye on what is happening and on what is often beyond us because of a lack of inquiry, a lack of information” (trans. Forsyth 334).

<sup>17</sup> “Everything’s a question of framing in the landscape of the real, of montage and dissolve in memory, when a mental frame is transformed into a precise image of a woman in the process of writing” (*Intimate*, trans. Godard 77).

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