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Reimagining the American Road Trip in Nicole Brossard's *Le désert mauve*

Ania Wroblewski

Since its publication in 1987, Nicole Brossard's *Le désert mauve* has come to be considered an important feminist and postmodern work that presents a complex vision of lesbian utopia in three self-reflexive parts. The first, which bears the same title as the novel, is a short text written in French by the fictional author Laure Angstelle and published by Les Éditions de L'Arroyo.[1] It tells the story of Mélanie, a fifteen-year-old girl who lives in Tucson, Arizona, in the late 1960s at the Mauve Motel, owned and run by her mother, Kathy Kerouac. In a gesture of teenage rebellion, Mélanie frequently drives off into the desert without telling Kathy where she is going or when she will return. "J'avais le pouvoir sur ma mère de lui prendre son auto au moment le plus inattendu," Mélanie claims (Brossard 38). Her narrative is interrupted eight times by short chapters that describe the actions of a man referred to as Longman, who, according to Karen Gould and Carolina Ferrer, strikingly resembles Robert Oppenheimer, head of the Los Alamos Laboratory and the Manhattan Project. It is heavily implied at the end of the story that Longman shoots Angela Parkins, a surveyor in her early forties and Mélanie's love interest, thereby symbolically and violently reaffirming man's destructive hold over society and putting an abrupt end to Mélanie's quest for a meaningful connection. Part 2 of Brossard's novel, "Un livre à traduire," introduces Maude Laures, a teacher living in Montreal. Laures finds *Le désert mauve* by Angstelle at a used bookstore, reads it, falls in love with the story, and decides to translate it. Part 3 is her translation — also in French — of Angstelle's *Le désert mauve*, which Laures retitles *Mauve, l'horizon* and publishes at Les Éditions de l'Angle. As Katherine Conley eloquently describes it, Part 2 "separates and binds" Angstelle's story and Laures's translation: "The central section functions as the frontier between the other two, which mirror each other inexactly like the night desert and sky on either side of the horizon" (144). It is also a sort of instruction manual for understanding the story of Mélanie because, in her attempt to pen-

etrate Angstelle's mysterious text, Laures is forced to fill in the blanks and write a backstory.

Although Mélanie is the daughter of Kathy Kerouac, little commentary exists on the novel's points of contact with Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). Brossard's reference to America's road novelist par excellence is most often considered by scholars to be a playful nod or even a humorous intertext, yet a close comparison between Mélanie's travels and those of Sal Paradise, Kerouac's autobiographically inspired alter ego, reveals some stark differences (related to questions of agency and safety) as well as some surprising similarities (notably the possibilities afforded by homosocial and homosexual connection). For both Mélanie and Sal, the road trip is a "life trip" (Holladay ix) linked intimately to the creative process. After situating *Le désert mauve* in relation to the Québécois reception of Kerouac's writing, I draw from Lars Erik Larson's research on post-war highway development in the United States and Ann Brigham's conception of the gendered dynamics of mobility in American road narratives to analyze Brossard's feminist reimagining of the road trip. By placing her teenage heroine in Kerouac's lineage and exploring the liberties that she takes and the boundaries that she transgresses on her cross-desert journeys, Brossard builds upon and complicates *On the Road*'s rejection of post-war capitalism's structures and oppressions. Mélanie proves to be far more radical than Sal and the motley but privileged crew with whom he careens across the continent. Both emancipated from patriarchy thanks to her unconventional lesbian family and confined within the comforts of her mother's motel, Mélanie finds agency through driving; Sal, the young man who circulates freely wherever he wishes to go, is most often a passive passenger in someone else's vehicle. As Mélanie gains independence and builds her sense of self by navigating the desert alone, she becomes more attuned to the urgency of living according to her own ideals and desires. In this way, Brossard stakes a claim for the inherent value of queer adolescent female experience while productively engaging with the discourse related to French Canadian and Québécois identities in America. Through my comparison of Mélanie's drives and Sal's road trips, I question dominant representations of the road and undermine the foundations of conquest, privilege, speed, and destiny upon which this discourse has been built. *Le désert mauve* flirts with the road novel genre's romanticism, recoding it *au féminin* and opening it up to new horizons.

Writing/Riding with Kerouac

On the Road starts with Sal Paradise getting rushed out of the house by his friend Dean Moriarty, based upon Beat Generation figure Neal Cassady. Kerouac writes that "He leaned over my shoulder as I typed rapidly away and said, 'Come on man, those girls won't wait, make it fast.' I said, 'Hold on just a minute, I'll be right with you as soon as I finish this chapter,' and it was one of the best chapters in the book. Then I dressed and off we flew to New York to meet some girls" (4). The book has become the hallmark of the road novel genre precisely because of how it wraps writing, driving, and the possibility of sex into one thrilling, breathtaking adventure across America's vast expanses. It is a novel about male bravado, friendships, and the quest for the kind of creative self-expression that can be achieved only through travel. In recent years, with the discovery and publication of manuscripts by Kerouac written entirely in French (see Cloutier), much has been said not only about the debt that Kerouac owes to his French Canadian heritage but also about Quebec's uneasy relationship with the famous novelist. According to Susan Pinette, these newly published writings "reactivated . . . a paradox . . . that has always marked the Quebecois reception of Kerouac" (131), one in which national pride and his Franco-American identity are held in tension: "Kerouac embodies the assimilation of French Canadians and serves as a warning for Quebecois of what might await them if they are not vigilant. The ambivalent reception of his works in Quebec stems from the fact that Kerouac represents the all too familiar prospect of loss" (130). Both the sense of loss and the paradox that Pinette evokes perhaps were best articulated by Victor-Lévy Beaulieu in his 1972 essay *Jack Kérouac: Essai-poulet*. In it, Beaulieu deplores Kerouac for being "le romancier québécois dans toutes ses misères" (188) and considers him guilty of claiming his belonging to French Canada, which already, at that time, no longer existed as such, while also famously calling for his inclusion in Quebec's literary canon: "Jack est le meilleur romancier canadien-français de l'Impuissance, et voilà pourquoi il est important que nous annexions son œuvre" (214). In her article on Kerouac's *québécitude* published some thirty years later, Carole Allamand echoes Beaulieu when she reminds readers that, though Kerouac seems to be an all-American man whose "traversée en jeans sur la plate-forme d'un *pick-up truck*" (132) of the United States is the all-American rite of passage, the French Canadian sensibility that permeates his writing shapes

him and his characters into figures outside the "moule anglophone," tying him to Quebec's desire "de faire du français, source d'aliénation économique, un lieu de rédemption mystique" (139). As Pierre Anctil puts it in the preface to the now-canonical volume *Un Homme Grand: Jack Kerouac at the Crossroads of Many Cultures* — which includes texts by Josée Yvon and Denis Vanier as well as Allen Ginsberg, Carolyn Cassady, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti — Kerouac simultaneously "bears witness to the mind-blowing enormity, the virtually limitless possibility of life in America, as well as to the desperate introspection and confinement of the French-Canadian diaspora" (xviii). Continued discussions among critics about Kerouac's cultural and literary belonging reveal the ongoing relevance and cross-border resonance of his writing.

Perhaps because of its broad and bicultural appeal, Québécois authors frequently have found inspiration in Kerouac's writing, specifically in *On the Road*, using the premise and the characters as points of creative departure. Jacques Poulin's well-loved *Volkswagen Blues* (1984), which imagines middle-aged writer Jack Waterman as he travels from Gaspé to San Francisco alongside a young Métisse woman named Pitsémine, is arguably the best-known Québécois road novel, but this genre also includes works such as Gilles Archambault's *Voyageur distrait* (1981), Alain Poissant's *Vendredi-Friday* (1988), Guillaume Vigneault's *Chercher le vent* (2001), Louis Lefebvre's *Table rase* (2004), and Michel Vézina's *Asphalte et vodka* (2005), among others. As Karen Skinazi explains, "By rewriting *On the Road*, Francophone Canadian writers expand Kerouac's 'America,' recognizing the English and French, American and Canadian histories of the land to all be a part of the complex and multi-layered 'American' continent" (54). Likewise, Heather McFarlane describes Quebec's fascination with Kerouac in political terms. According to her, the road trip narratives inspired by *On the Road* published in Quebec "have been employed to express national sentiment, both positive and negative" (148). The protagonists imagined by writers such as Poulin and Archambault "turn to the United States — and Jack Kerouac," she claims, "in the hopes of awakening themselves, and their province, from a period of stagnation" (148).

Notably absent from this conversation are Québécois road narratives authored by female and female-identifying authors such as Brossard, whose "trilogie USA" (Chassay 127), which includes *Le désert mauve* along with *French Kiss* (1974) and *Picture Theory* (1982), nevertheless has been studied by scholars interested in representations of the United

States in Québécois fiction, a phenomenon often described using the words *américanité* and *américanisation*. For example, in *L'ambiguité américaine: Le roman québécois face aux États-Unis*, Jean-François Chassay deems Kerouac to be a virus, stating with some irony that "nombreux sont ceux qui prennent plaisir à l'attraper" (91). In a footnote about *Le désert mauve*, Chassay glosses over the significance of Kathy Kerouac's name as follows: "Le fait qu'il s'agisse, peut-on croire, d'une Franco-Américaine, vient atténuer la distance culturelle qui sépare la narratrice québécoise d'un univers culturel américain" (146). In his view, the name Kerouac is but a narrative device that Brossard uses to make her story more believable. "Décidément, le poids de ce nom n'est pas négligeable dans la culture québécoise . . . ," he adds (146; ellipsis in the original). Larry Steele describes the connection with some derision, drawing from the opposition between nomadism and sedentariness (which first emerged with the rise of the French Canadian *roman du terroir*) to laugh at Brossard's choice: "L'Amérique de Jack Kerouac, le Québécois dont le roman *Sur la route* a nourri ce mythe des États-Unis comme vaste lieu de liberté sauvage, s'oppose à la sédentarité de la mère de Mélanie, dont le nom est, quelle parodie ! Kathy Kerouac" (71). Marie Carrière acknowledges the validity of this *rapprochement* but stops short of exploring its significance because it is outside the scope of her study. "In her quest," Carrière writes, "Mélanie emulates Kerouac's own narrator in *On the Road*" (199).

In *Le désert mauve*, Brossard reveals Kathy Kerouac's name in a way that makes it obvious that she is doing more than simply winking at the famous author. Mélanie's mother is not named in the novel's primary story (told twice, first by Laure Angstelle in the original *Le désert mauve*, then by Maude Laures in her translation, *Mauve, l'horizon*). In both versions, Mélanie refers to her mother simply as "ma mère." Her name appears only in Maude Laures's writing notes, which make up most of Part 2, "Un livre à traduire." In other words, the name Kathy Kerouac is bracketed out of the principal narrative, appearing only in what is presented as the work's liminal zone composed of the translator's drafts, thoughts, and ideas. Within Brossard's fiction, Laures, a Québécois teacher working at her home in Montreal, translates an American story apparently written in English (but presented in French) into French. In the process, she intentionally gives Mélanie's mother the last name of the famous Franco-American author, thereby linking Mélanie's cross-desert drives to those of Kerouac's autobiographically inspired heroes

and making Québécois a story that was ostensibly only American. This is not a coincidence. According to Alice Parker, Brossard was deeply troubled by the Americanization of Québécois culture. Thanks to the pivotal role of translation in *Le désert mauve*, the novel has been read by many as a reaction to "Brossard's perception that her 'native' language and culture are gravely threatened by *anglophonie* at home and by constant encroachments from the U.S." (Parker 110-11). Patricia Godbout explains that Brossard's *mise en scène* of intralingual translation "permet . . . de dépasser l'habituelle tension entre l'anglais et le français" to bring out "la multiplicité des paroles féminines" present within the text (172). However, by recoding the American Southwest in French through the process of naming, Laures also indirectly claims an unlikely place for the francophone diaspora in the Sonoran Desert, thereby writing, in the space between the two versions of *Le désert mauve*, a new, imagined history for the Québécois. As a comparison of *Le désert mauve* and *On the Road* reveals, this is arguably a gesture of both feminist and linguistic resistance that warrants further critical attention and exploration.

Agency on America's Highways

Kerouac's and Brossard's works are situated at a transitional time in the history of American highways. During the 1940s and 1950s, American politicians, auto corporations, engineers, and popular magazine editors, among others, worked to sell — and fund — the idea of a national system of interstate highways that would "connect by routes, as direct as practicable, the principal metropolitan areas, cities and industrial centers, to serve the national defense, and to connect at suitable border points with routes of continental importance" (Texas Highway Department; qtd. in Erlichman 193). Lars Erik Larson notes that wartime industry and investment "led to enormous spending power, enticing many to use the roads for recreation" (37). This led, in turn, to the franchising boom of services such as motels, diners, and gas stations in the early 1950s (37), which made road trip tourism comfortable and desirable for American families. Kathy Kerouac must have been attuned to what Mark H. Rose and Raymond A. Mohl call "interstate excitement" (ix) when she purchased and renovated a well-situated motel in 1950, located just off the road from Tucson to Phoenix.[2] As Laures describes in her notes, "c'est le premier motel sur la gauche avec un toit métallique qui aveugle un instant et un néon MOTEL *Mauve* qui fait

penser à un oiseau sur le point de s'envoler" (Brossard 93). Such convenient locations, which grew in clusters around highway exits as new interstates were built across the United States, slowly made obsolete the exhilarating practice of "zoom[ing] through small crossroads towns smack out of the darkness" celebrated in *On the Road* (Kerouac 27). Although it was not until 1956 that Dwight Eisenhower's National Defense Highway System was approved by Congress and construction officially began, conversations on and plans for a new generation of controlled-access roads inspired debates and dreams in the post-war period. "Pitched as a means of urban evacuation," writes Larson (55), the massive interstate project finally approved by Congress "satisfied a competing desire for homogenizing stability and security" in the early years of the Cold War, framing within set paths and authorized roads the apparent limitless freedom of automobility conveyed by American car culture. In other words, looming on the horizon of Sal Paradise's late-1940s, freewheeling, hitchhiking road trips were the commercialization, expansion, and defensive reorganization of travel in America. Thanks to a shift in modes and habits of travel, Mélanie describes her childhood as defined by the noise and commotion of the busy motel, "un espace achalandé, rempli de clients, de vendeurs, le bruit continu de l'aspirateur" (Brossard 218), increasingly frequented by "Texans, 'oiseaux pâles' du Wisconsin et du Minnesota. Beaucoup de vieux et de vieilles" (226), conventional tourists who replaced roaming adventurers like Sal on American roads over the course of the 1950s.

It is important to note that, when fifteen-year-old Mélanie regularly starts taking Kathy's Mercury Meteor out for joyrides of her own in the late 1960s, she likely uses roads different from those featured in Kerouac's novel. For example, the I-10 and I-25 junction at which Mélanie has an unpleasant encounter with a biker girl, who "[lui] fait un *fuck* violent du doigt et puis du coude" (Brossard 54), did not exist when Sal and his friends passed through Las Cruces, New Mexico, years earlier on their way to Tucson to borrow five dollars from Sal's friend Hal Hingham. Most likely they were "roaring through Las Cruces," as Kerouac puts it (111), on the soon-to-be-decommissioned parts of US Route 80, which joined at that time with the now-unsigned route of US 85 through New Mexico. Sal's journey to Tucson via Benson is idyllic — "We were in the mountains: there was a heaven of sunrise, cool purple airs, red mountainsides, emerald pastures in valleys, dew, and transmuting clouds of gold; on the ground gopher holes, cactus,

mesquite" — and calls for some inventive, economical driving: "[We] went down the mountain with the clutch in and the motor off to save gas" (164). Mélanie speeds away from danger on the interstate highway without making note of nearby towns. "La peur, ça ne fait rien quand on accélère ; la peur disparaît comme un point sombre dans le rétroviseur" (Brossard 54), she claims, focused on her destination. Sal and Mélanie travel across the same terrain on different roads, and this difference can be read as a metaphor for their contrasting attitudes while travelling and driving. Sal is carefree and directionless, more often a passenger than a driver. He performs what Larson sees as the highway's "capacity for the Dionysian (liberatory motion and unprecedented speeds)" (36). While on the first of four road trips recounted in *On the Road*, Sal experiences the dizzying joy of superhuman, eagle-eye vision while hitchhiking with truckers:

> I was in another big high cab, all set to go hundreds of miles across the night, and was I happy! And the new truckdriver was as crazy as the other and yelled just as much, and all I had to do was lean back and roll on. Now I could see Denver looming ahead of me like the Promised Land, way out there beneath the stars, across the prairie of Iowa and the plains of Nebraska, and I could see the greater vision of San Francisco beyond, like jewels in the night. (Kerouac 14)

Sal lets himself be driven around by both strangers and friends. He relinquishes control of his itinerary; he is not concerned about his personal safety. He abandons himself, essentially, to the journey. At many points in *On the Road*, he makes note of this almost hedonistic lack of control, asking himself, "What am I doing?" "Where am I going?" Even "Who am I?" As Ann Brigham writes, this is in keeping with the tradition of the all-American and all-male road trip: "For many male travelers, the road represents a place where not caring about the outcome — or geographically, the destination — is the goal and the point" (112). In an oft-quoted passage in *On the Road*, Sal wakes up in Des Moines, Iowa, on a "strange red afternoon" and thinks of himself as a stranger, a ghost, caught somewhere between "the East of [his] youth and the West of [his] future" (Kerouac 15). He meditates briefly on the meaning of life and then presses onward to new discoveries and pleasures: "But I had to get going and stop moaning, so I picked up my bag, said so long to the old hotelkeeper sitting by his spittoon, and went to eat" (15). His

journeys are often interpreted as defiance of what Kristin Ross, reading Henri Lefebvre, in her study *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* (1996) calls the "slow, steady, 'rational' modernization of American society that transpired throughout the twentieth century" (4), a modernization defined by "the fantasy of timeless, even, and limitless development" (10). As Sal makes his way from east to west and back again, he "explor[es] this new America . . . , navigating media images and mythologies as well as highways and mountains" (Leland 16), and he finds most of his ideals overturned. What matters more to him, however, than understanding the post-war consumer society in which he exists is the experience of "fum[ing] and scream[ing]" into the night sky with his travelling companions, "mad drunken Americans in the mighty land" (Kerouac 55).

Mélanie, conversely, navigates the road in a way that taps into what Larson calls the "Apollonian capitulation to control (cold war defensiveness, national uniformity, and social isolation)" (36). The vocabulary that Mélanie uses to describe her driving is that of precision and expertise. "J'étais experte au volant . . . j'étais capable dans le noir d'avancer," she declares (Brossard 34). "Je roulais, parfaite au bord de la solitude," she adds (59). There is no reason for doubt, no need for maps, because she knows where she is going. "Je connaissais bien le désert, ses petits sentiers et les grandes routes au loin" (210), she explains. She is confident, sure of herself, and knows how to handle emergencies such as dust storms: "Je ne panique jamais dans le désert" (38). Mélanie measures the risks that she takes carefully. When she ventures into the desert without water, she does so with full premeditation: "Je m'étais juré de ne rien boire pendant les cinq premières heures du trajet. Je voulais la chaleur et la soif entières, excessives" (52). Although her vehicular prowess is remarkable simply (but not only) because she is young, her subject position affords her unique possibilities for self-definition. Whereas Sal lets go and lets the road define him, Mélanie takes control and defines herself through her mastery of the newly paved interstates, the meandering local roads, and the desert trails (all of which, technically, she is still too young to drive). "Dans le sombre de la poussière, je sais exister," she states (38). Mélanie, who always drives alone, also knows how to use the gun that sits in the glove compartment of her mother's Meteor: "Je connais bien le plomb, le cuivre, les douilles et toutes les armes. Je connais les armes. Toute fille du désert apprend très jeune à tenir une arme et à conduire une auto" (41). Mélanie's boldness is not coded in the discourse of naïveté that often accompanies accounts of young women

travelling. In *Thelma, Louise & moi*, for example, Martine Delvaux describes a young woman's backpacking trip with the suffocating anxiety of impending doom: "La jeune femme a pris l'avion, le train, le bus, le metro, le taxi, le bateau . . . sur fond d'océan, de montagnes, de forêt, de vignes, de champs, de mer Méditerranée. Elle a marché, fait du stop, suivi des étrangers, accepté qu'on paye l'essence, le café. . . . Elle a couru tous les risques et il ne lui est rien arrivé" (117). According to Delvaux, her eventless trip, during which she was not attacked, raped, taken advantage of, or murdered, is "quelque chose comme une parenthèse dorée" (117), a gift, an anomaly. These risks do not concern Mélanie. Unlike other young female travellers "qui avancent en retenant leur souffle" (117), she chooses to face the visible and invisible dangers that surround her head on, armed, alone. What is more, in *Le désert mauve*, her automobility presents a direct contrast to the stasis experienced by Longman, who, as Julie Gerk Hernandez observes, "seems to be losing his mind in an unidentified hotel room and obsessing about equations, numbers, and explosions" (256). While Mélanie circulates freely, from Tucson to Albuquerque and back, through the Sonoran Desert, among the fossils of the petrified forest, Longman paces around his room at the Red Arrow Motel. Until *Le désert mauve*'s last pages, Brossard's incarnation of danger is enclosed, contained, waiting to emerge as if to underscore better Mélanie's freedom.

Whereas the ambitions and expected outcomes of Mélanie's solitary journeys and Sal's raucous freeway experiences diverge considerably, there is nothing accidental about how the act of driving contributes to her growing sense of agency. As Sidonie Smith writes in her study *Moving Lives: Twentieth-Century Women's Travel Writing*, historically "women used automobiles as vehicles of resistance to conventional gender roles and the strictures of a normative femininity" (175). Armed with skills, rational thinking, and a deadly weapon, Mélanie comes across not only as far more competent, self-sufficient, and self-realized than Kerouac's ambling, adventure-seeking hero but also as exceeding the accepted use of "mobility in service of homemaking" (175) that became prevalent "during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s as the expansion of automobile ownership made the automobile a necessity of everyday life" (174-75). Her teenage flights through the desert say more about her desire for self-definition than her relation to domesticity. As if driving were akin to knowing, she states that "Je conduis lentement vers la certitude simple" (Brossard 53). Furthermore, unlike many of the male

protagonists in road novels, Mélanie is not "seduced by the myth of mobility as a mode of freedom" (Brigham 111). In fact, she rejects such romantic notions entirely when she declares that "Je ne voulais d'aucun mythe. Que du vrai, de la sueur, de la soif" (Brossard 52). There is a sense of practicality to her drives, which transport her from point A to point B in the desert and allow her to accomplish her goals. Outside the standard teenage longing for independence, this has nothing to do with a symbolic quest for freedom. As she plans future trips in the Meteor, Mélanie acknowledges the fact that fear is not an obstacle for her. "Je ne m'évanouirais pas devant la réalité" (63), she declares in Angstelle's *Le désert mauve*. "Je reprendrais le volant. Tout ce temps, ma pensée serait attirée vers ailleurs, précise et froide. Tout ce temps, je veillerais," she elaborates in Laures's translation (238). By showing how "travel functions as a defining arena of agency" (Smith ix) for an under-aged female driver in *Le désert mauve*, Brossard updates Kerouac's mythological and romantic road trip model to account for newer roads and unexpected ways of being.

The Quest for a Spark

Despite these telling differences, both *Le désert mauve* and *On the Road* investigate how mobility leads to creative expression. As is the case in many (but not all) road narratives, Mélanie and Sal are writers, searching for inspiration on their journeys. For Sal, writing, in some ways, is a means to an end, a way to fund the next leg of his trip, to "straighten . . . out [his] aunt with rent for the rest of the year" (Kerouac 249) so that he can continue living a bohemian life. According to Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, this mirrors Kerouac's own modus operandi: "Tous ses livres sont écrits selon le même scénario: un été à courir la galipote, à philosopher et à cuiter avec les vieux tchommes d'habitude, suivi d'un hiver à écrire cet été, *sous le regard bienveillant de Mémère*" (115). In *The American Road Trip and American Political Thought*, Susan McWilliams Barndt notes the deep loneliness that emerges paradoxically from *On the Road* despite the drinking, exploring, and carousing that make up much of the story. "Kerouac's underlying argument looks like this," McWilliams Barndt writes, "America is a lonely place. His Americans go on the road to try to feel at home in America, propelled by a vision of and desire for belonging. That underlying yearning — the yearning to seek and connect and belong — is unavoidable" (11). When Sal meets Dean

Moriarty, he follows him across the United States to gain, or be given, the perspective, companionship, and wheels necessary for writing: "I was a young writer and I wanted to take off. Somewhere along the line I knew there'd be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me" (Kerouac 8). Driving is undoubtedly a key mechanism in Sal's creative journey.

Mélanie comes to writing as she comes to driving: alone. Unlike Sal, she has no peer to act as her guide, no idiosyncratic friend leading her to understanding, and her mother is too busy and stubborn to pay attention to her budding creativity. "Je harcelais ma mère pourqu'elle lise le *peu* que j'avais écrit. Mes fautes! Je voulais qu'elle corrige tout ça," Mélanie complains (Brossard 48-49). In a scene imagined by Laures, Mélanie rudely reproaches her mother for her inattention: "Une mère qui n'instruit pas sa fille mérite d'être oubliée devant son téléviseur. Une mère ingrate est une calamité" (153-54). Although travel is often understood to be an escape from the oppressions of daily life, and as Lorna Myher points out to Kathy when she exclaims, "Elle s'enfuit, ta fille" (159), in *Le désert mauve* (as in *On the Road*), driving is linked intimately to a need for connection. By taking her mother's car and joining the "'drague' vertigineuse qui déferle sur le boulevard Speedway" (98), Mélanie is not simply running away. She is calling for her mother to notice her, to recognize her as the writer whom she would like to be. She is calling for her attention: "En plein soleil, au crépuscule, et même la nuit, je partais pendant que ma mère me criait des mots aigus qui se perdaient dans la poussière du stationnement" (33). This confirms Brigham's observation that mobility "is not a method of freeing oneself from space, society, or identity but instead the opposite — a mode of engagement" (4). Both Mélanie and Sal make themselves seen by vanishing into the horizon "in a big dust cloud over the American Night" (Kerouac 5).

Where *Le désert mauve* truly seems to mirror *On the Road*, however, is in the passages devoted to creative inspiration. In *On the Road*, Dean rants enthusiastically about an immaterial notion that he calls "IT" (207), which he claims is the vector of all knowledge, experience, magic, genius, inspiration, and change. He first notices IT when he hears a man playing the alto sax in Frisco, Texas, and "time stops" (207). He explains his theory to Sal in the car on the way to Colorado. According to Dean, once one gains access to the idea of IT, there is no going back. Not only is there no going back, but also there is no need

for the concerns of everyday living. Other people "have worries, they're counting the miles, they're thinking about where to sleep tonight, how much money for gas, the weather, how we'll get there," Dean claims, but these "urgencies false and otherwise, purely anxious and whiny," have no bearing on those, like *On the Road*'s two energetic travellers, who know IT: "We'll dig Denver together and see what everybody's doing although that matters little to us, the point being that we know what IT is and we know TIME and we know that everything is really FINE" (209). Sal sums up this idea of IT elsewhere as "the moment when you know all and everything is decided forever" (128). This is the reason for travelling; this is the reason for writing. Curiously, Brossard imagines IT in a similar if not parallel way. In both versions of Mélanie's story, the evanescent notion that leads to creativity is literally called *ça*. Mélanie encounters *ça* when she pulls over to examine the glimmering space between the sky and an old saguaro, and this vision summons up a relentless urgency to write. Angstelle's text focuses on the dynamic experience of inspiration — "Alors j'ai écrit sur ça, j'ai écrit *ça et encore ça et plus, ça m'excitait, ça m'a pris comme s'peut pas d'écrire tout ça avec des explosions dans ma tête, de petits sentiers crayeux dans les canyons*" (47) — whereas in Laures's translation the emphasis is on the material conditions necessary for capturing inspiration's spark: "'Du papier!' Je retournai à l'auto, ouvris la boîte à gants, déplaçai le revolver, m'emparai du petit carnet pour écrire tout ça ou à propos de cela, j'en avais une folle envie. Ça éclatait dans ma tête . . . *ça m'excitait, ça se déchaînait, brave bête, épiderme consentant*, la vie multiple" (224). Mélanie hurries in order to get IT down, to capture the fleeting revelation, *ça*, that shows itself to her on the road. As it was for Dean, Mélanie's encounter with *ça* obliterates everything but the certainty of artistic thinking: "Le saguaro, les mots, tous mes reflexes étaient au ralenti et bientôt il n'y eut plus de jour, plus d'aube, plus de route, plus de cactus, à peine l'instinct de penser que les mots ne sont pourtant que des mots" (47).

Both Kerouac and Brossard code these flairs of creative insight with sexual intensity. When Sal and Dean discuss IT in the car on the way to Denver, they get worked up by their conversation. Both are sweating, moaning, exclaiming "Yes! Yes!" (Kerouac 208) and "Oh, man! man! man!" (209), so much so that they disturb the other passengers: "At one point the driver said, 'For God's sakes, you're rocking the boat back there.' Actually we were; the car was swaying as Dean and I both swayed to the rhythm and the IT of our final excited joy" (209). Mary

Paniccia Carden considers this interaction between travelling companions to be indicative of a veiled homoerotic connection; as she notes, Sal and Dean engage in an "intercourse that rocks their car" and "culminates in an ecstatic coming to truth" (87), which allows them to express their authentic selves. This is in direct opposition to the blatant womanizing that makes up much of *On the Road*. As Larson explains, "although Sal and Dean's sexual relation is never explicit, Kerouac has loaded the novel with its signs" (43). They are most transparent in the pages in which the two young men breathlessly take IT's — that is, art's — communion. "We were hot; we were going East; we were excited," Sal recounts (Kerouac 208). Similarly, in *Le désert mauve*, the creative process heightens Mélanie's senses, and Mélanie becomes erotically charged. Immediately upon her return home after examining the dying saguaro, she brings herself to climax, which Brossard renders as follows: "Folle lueur dans ma chambre et mes doigts là, c'est ça, là, *yet* vacille, m'amuse, m'*envas*" (48 in Angstelle's version) and "Folle, folle déception, folle lueur dans ma chambre, vite mes doigts là, c'est ça, *wet*, vacille, m'*envas*" (225 in *Mauve, l'horizon*). Laures's translation is more explicit and direct than Angstelle's original text, but in both versions the word *ça* is repeated, reinforcing the idea that writing and orgasm lead to a similar productive release, which gives Mélanie access to her authentic, lesbian desire. Shortly afterward, she drives to Albuquerque to attempt to seduce her friend Grazie, and later she gathers the courage to dance with the older woman whom she desires, Angela Parkins. It is as if driving and writing reveal to Mélanie her essential, desiring self. As Adriana Jimenez Rodriguez writes, "Patriarchal language, created by and for men, does not leave room for a questioning lesbian teenager" (52). More simply, when Mélanie discovers *ça* and puts it into her own words, she discovers herself as well.

One could argue that in both *On the Road* and *Le désert mauve* the possibilities afforded by homosexual connection fail. Dean and Sal continue to collect and discard women throughout their travels, and in the end they abandon one another; Longman assassinates Parkins, who dies in Mélanie's arms. Patriarchy appears to prevail. Although *On the Road* globally reaffirms the post-war heterosexual status quo, the novel ends with Sal sitting on a broken river pier as night falls, reflecting longingly on his gasoline-propelled experiences. The novel ends wistfully with the following statement: "I think of Dean Moriarty" (307). There is something unresolved in Kerouac's closing lines as Sal accepts that the

future is not his to see. "Nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old," he concedes (307). *Le désert mauve*'s conclusion is no more joyful, yet it offers the sense that Mélanie will continue to achieve self-understanding through writing. "Puis ce fut le mauve de l'aube, le désert et la route comme un profil sanglant. Il y a des mémoires pour creuser les mots sans souiller les tombes. Je ne peux tutoyer personne," she thinks as she stares at the chalk traced around Angela's dead body in Angstelle's original story (75). Laures's translation shifts the locus of danger away from the road, dispersing it into the atmosphere: "Puis ce fut le profil menaçant de toute chose. Puis l'aube, le désert et mauve, l'horizon" (249). Instead of repressing her desires or accepting their demise, Mélanie finds solace in the desert. She remains distant, strong. She might even challenge Longman one day and avenge Angela with her pen from Helljoy garage, her mother's Meteor, and her gun. By ending her novel at dawn rather than dusk, Brossard leaves open the possibility that Mélanie will imagine a more radical lesbian future for herself, breaking free from the boyish romance and complacent nostalgia that *On the Road*'s trips tend to awaken.

(French Canadian) Mothers

Many male-authored road narratives, writes Ann Brigham, "chart a circular route that ends with the male traveler's return home" (113). *On the Road* is no exception. Women's mobility, on the contrary, is often characterized by the female protagonists' inability to escape domesticity. Brigham attributes the way in which home follows women around to the unwavering structures of patriarchal society that exert their force on female travellers even while they are on the move, colouring every interaction, concern, adventure, and stop along the way. Despite the weighty baggage that female travellers are forced to carry, the journey itself is transformative, a revelation, as Sal would say. "In . . . women's road narratives," writes Brigham, "the road makes it clear that there is no going back once what has been hidden comes into view" (114). Although Mélanie lacks the resources and is too young to start a new life for herself in the American Southwest, her journeys into the desert are test drives that connect her to her desires. For example, when she dances with Angela on the fateful night at the Red Arrow Motel, Mélanie gains access to self-knowledge that changes her forever: "Je ne

connais pas vraiment Angela Parkins et voici pourtant nos corps rapprochés un instant, puis distants, lents et longs dans la I'm distance de l'Amérique. Nous sommes inséparables et distantes en pleine éternité. Nous sommes le désert et l'évidence au coucher des ombres" (Brossard 73-74). Her first experience of mutual lesbian attraction is as expansive, stunning, and limitless as the landscape across which she ventured to get there, yet she owes much of it to her mother, whose car she is driving, whose friends she is visiting, who showed her how to love another woman. The way that Brossard envisions maternal debt reveals larger issues of belonging when viewed alongside Kerouac's own grappling with his origins.

As many scholars have noted, Kerouac's mother is an influential presence in his corpus. The 1957 edition of *On the Road* published by Viking Press varies considerably from the so-called original scroll, apparently composed by Kerouac over a three-week period in 1951, and this largely contributes to the book's mythology. One telling difference between the two versions relates directly to the concept of home: the French Canadian matriarch who welcomes Jack with open arms in the scroll version becomes Salvatore Paradise's Italian aunt from New Jersey in the Viking Press publication. This significant change can be read as Kerouac distancing himself and his road novel from his roots. As M.E. Jackson explains, "When examining the characterization of ethnicity in *On the Road* it is beneficial to disregard the novel's 1957 edition and to instead consider the earlier scroll version of the narrative, since in this incarnation of the text Kerouac's auto-fictive signifier notably shares his real life French-Canadian-American background" (282). According to Jackson, Jack's mother functions as a symbol of *la survivance*, pointing directly to Kerouac's Catholic, French Canadian heritage as well as to the accommodations made by French Canadian leaders in the early nineteenth century in order to preserve French identity under English rule (287). Even though she was replaced by Sal's New Jersey aunt, Kerouac scholars consider the woman whom Kerouac refers to in letters as "Mémère" to be an integral part of his identity as a writer. Claire Quintal goes so far as to draw links between the fate of the French language in North America and Kerouac's relationship with his mother: "Cette Gabrielle-Ange, à qui il ressemblait au dire de l'un de ses amis, allait d'ailleurs survivre à son fils — tout comme la culture franco-américaine survivra à la perte de sa langue maternelle, aussi longtemps qu'elle pourra maintenir sa *ma*trie" (401). Complicated

linguistic and political dynamics are inscribed inevitably in the relationship between Sal/Jack and his aunt/mother or, in other words, between the young traveller and the figure to whom he returns, weary, battered, loyal, after each life-changing journey, the figure who best represents home.

Given *Le désert mauve*'s unique structure as well as Brossard's investment in exploring the possibilities afforded by translation, it is hard not to notice parallels between Mélanie's mother and Kerouac's "mémère." Like Sal, Mélanie refers to this almost universal, unattainable, impressive being simply as "ma mère." "Ma mère faisait toujours semblant de rien quand les choses étaient salies," she scolds (Brossard 33). "Je suis le rire de ma mère quand je blêmis devant la détresse de l'humanité," she observes with awe (39). "Ma mère disait souvent que les hommes étaient libres de faire comme dans les livres," she states (209). Similar truths and life lessons are conveyed to Sal by his aunt. "[My aunt] took one look at Dean and decided that he was a madman," Sal foreshadows (Kerouac 3). "My aunt once said the world would never find peace until men fell at their women's feet and asked forgiveness," he explains (122). Mélanie, like most teenagers, oscillates between rejection and acceptance, distance and nearness, the feeling of freedom and confinement in her interactions with her mother. Kathy, not unlike the maternal figure keeping watch over Sal, is a woman of character, "a respectable woman hung-up in this sad world" (Kerouac 122), who acts competently and without hesitation. When she is first introduced as Kathy Kerouac, Laures imagines her on the phone taking a reservation: "Kathy Kerouac, propriétaire, est au téléphone, le combiné entre l'épaule et l'oreille, les mains occupées à chercher un fichier. Il y a une odeur de savon" (Brossard 94). However, as a lesbian business owner living, working, and thriving in an ostensibly hostile environment, she conveys values to her daughter different from the conservative notions that Sal/Jack is impelled to respect from his aunt/mother (Jackson 287). This is immediately apparent when Mélanie relates her first encounter with Lorna, the woman who would go on to be her mother's life partner. When then-five-year-old Mélanie spills her milk at the dinner table, and it forms the shape of the continent "avec une Floride qui se prolongeait sous la salière" (Brossard 32-33), her mother "épongea l'Amérique" (33) in one sweeping gesture of erasure, symbolically clearing away Sal's post-war America to make room for the roads that her daughter will travel. Karen Gould considers how "Brossard's novel moves us from the

American cultural perspective of Laure Angstelle to the Québécoise cultural horizon of Maude Laures, from the arid topography of Arizona and New Mexico to the December snows of Montreal," to be indicative of her "transcultural outlook" (197). Although this is true, bestowing her teenage, road-tripping protagonist with Kerouac's aura by giving her mother the name Kerouac is also undoubtedly a political and literary choice that entwines Mélanie's brave explorations with Sal's celebrated discoveries. Could this be the annexation of Jack "Kérouac" for which Victor-Lévy Beaulieu was calling? By envisioning lives set in the American desert that resonate with the history of Quebec, Brossard certainly makes a strong but subtle case "dans la langue ancienne qui est la [s]ienne" (147) for the renewal and revision of the American Dream.

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Although Sal Paradise remains the road-tripping hero par excellence and *On the Road* is likely to remain the cornerstone of road narrative scholarship, Mélanie has captured the imaginations of artists and writers since *Le désert mauve*'s publication. In American artist Adriene Jenik's 1997 immersive computer artwork *Mauve Desert: A CD-ROM Translation*, for instance, viewers ride in Kathy's Meteor and navigate the desert alongside Mélanie. They listen to the local radio and rummage around in the glove compartment to find a loaded gun, some maps, and Mélanie's notebook. Jenik invites them into Mélanie's world, which they see through her eyes. More recently still, French video artist Charline Dally and Québécoise sound artist Gabrielle Harnois-Blouin, who make up the collaborative duo le désert mauve, have sought to reproduce the sensory environment described by Mélanie as she drives. Since 2019, they have channelled her experiences of "la lumière [qui] meurtrit la réalité, déchire en tous sens le tissue fin des couleurs, supprime la forme" (Brossard 182), in their contemplative audiovisual soundscapes. These interdisciplinary engagements speak both to the continued cult appeal of Brossard's important novel and to the lesbian teenage traveller's contemporary relevance, marking a shift in the kinds of stories that the road inspires. Many of today's readers cannot help but find Mélanie's quest for self-actualization more meaningful than Sal's carefree joyrides.

Notes

[1] This is the primary story in Brossard's novel. There is the vague implication that we are meant to imagine that the events are happening in English or that the story itself is written in English even though we are reading it in French.

[2] During the Quiet Revolution, French Canadians began referring to themselves as Québécois (see Randall).

[3] Until the I-10 charted a path from west to east in Arizona (with construction beginning in the late 1950s and extending until 1990), Highway 77 was the original road leading from the Miracle Mile in Tucson toward Phoenix and eventually the Pinal Mountains. The Mauve Motel was likely situated somewhere near the Miracle Mile.

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