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Troubled and Troubling Texts: Writing Absence in Martine Delvaux's *Blanc dehors* and *Toi* (Amy Coquaz)

Amy Coquaz

Abstract

This article combines theory, analysis and creative writing to explore what it means to write absence. The two novels discussed, Martine Delvaux's *Blanc dehors* (2015) and my own, *Toi* (unpublished), deal with absent fathers, but their true concern is absence itself, and the result is a troubled, perforated narrative. Drawing on feminist definitions of what it means to trouble, as well as on translation theory and discussions of translingual writing, the article explores the sense of fragmentation that comes from a layered self and narrative, and the resulting investigative mode the narrators of these novels live in. Through a discussion of the techniques used to create a sense of the underlying narrative of absence, the article argues that the process of bringing two opposites – narrative and non-narrative – 'on a single surface' highlights the need for both (Simon, 2006, 219). Troubled texts remind us of our plurality; they deconstruct it, study it, celebrate it. In the case of these two novels, the acceptance of plurality is closely linked to the mothers, who share in the narrative of absence. The narrators' ultimate acceptance of absence as a narrative in its own right heals the divisions they imposed on themselves and allows them to reconnect to the mothers' narratives.

Keywords: Troubled texts, troubling, feminism, translation theory, translingual writing, narratives, absence, creative writing, mother-daughter relationships

Trouble

Time and again, I encounter haunted texts; haunted by actual ghosts, as in Anne Hébert's *Les fous de Bassan*;[1] by absent parents, as in Marie-Sissi Labrèche's *Borderline*[2] and Heather O'Neill's *The Girl Who Was Saturday Night*;[3] by things not quite so palpable, as in Nicole Brossard's *Le Désert Mauve*.[4] And all of them, in one way or another, haunted by language. Is it any surprise that I find myself conjuring up ghosts in my own writing? To disrupt and trouble has long been the hallmark of feminist texts, both creative and academic, and indeed of any strand of theory that seeks to question norms. In 'A cyborg manifesto: science, technology and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth-century', Donna Haraway, using the image of the cyborg, 'a hybrid of machine and organism' argues 'for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries'.[5] Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, advocates for the subversion of gender binaries, arguing that '"reality" is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be'.[6] Haraway and Butler show us that there is power in disturbance: a political and even revolutionary power. In September 2016, I interviewed Sherry Simon, and the notion of troubling was at the core of our discussion: troubled languages, troubled categories, troubled narrators, etc. She argued for the illuminating power of this troubling.[7] When boundaries are blurred, when opposites meet, when differences share a space, light is shone. As Haraway argues, '[s]ingle vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters'.[8] Thus, troubling allows us to see more clearly.

In *Translating Montréal: Episodes in the Life of a Divided City*, Simon said of the juxtaposition of classical and contemporary thinkers that when '[b]rought together on a single surface, each gains focus through the other'.[9] This article is concerned with what is brought together on a single surface, with layered texts. More specifically, the focus will be on texts haunted by absence. The novels discussed, Martine Delvaux's *Blanc dehors*[10] and my own, *Toi*,[11] are both set in Québec and written by bilingual authors. As such, they share similar themes and concerns, and having read and studied *Blanc dehors* while writing my novel, intertextuality is inevitable. The core of my comparison in this article is that they both deal with absent fathers. The absence that underlies the text is not quite so straightforward, however: the father himself is no ghostly figure, but rather the narrative is haunted by an absence of narrative, the silence surrounding the father. This article will explore what it means to write absence and what light is shone through this troubling, with an analytical but also a

practical slant, discussing the implications of an investigative narrator and the techniques used to create a sense of haunting, as well as offering extracts from my novel as creative illustrations of the ideas explored.

The layers I see in these two novels are not dissimilar to linguistic layers in other novels I have studied, unsurprisingly if we consider creative writing practices. It is a long-understood principle of creative writers that what is *not* said is as important as what *is* said: the absence of words is in itself a communicative tool, a language of sorts. Just as when languages come into contact, these two communication modes of creative writing suggest that there is more than one way to say something: plurality belies singularity. In line with Butler and Haraway, Barbara Johnson, a translation theorist, argues that 'the plurality of languages and the plurality of sexes are alike in that they both make the "one" impossible'.[12] Michael Cronin corroborates this idea: 'The scandal of translation is to show that the origin is fragmented.'[13] In *Blanc dehors* and in my own novel, silence, weaved in among the writing, denotes the fragmented narratives of the characters.

At a recent conference entitled *A New Language—a New Life? Translingual literature by contemporary women writers*, Mary Gallagher identified an identity crisis in translingual expatriates, focusing on Nancy Huston in particular and her practice of writing in her second language and self-translating back into her first language.[14] Gallagher argues that '[u]nlike "monolingues impatriés", translingual expatriates have several selves'.[15] As Johnson and Cronin show us, however, multiplicity is always present and merely betrayed by linguistic layerings. Translingual practices reveal the fragmented nature of identity and narratives and other texts that bring together on a single surface are equally troubling; they blur categories and overthrow notions of singularity and homogeneity. Anne Fleig points out that monolingualism is a recent norm.[16] In this light, the notion of languages haunting texts is especially appropriate: ghosts from the past reminding us that we are plural.

Godela Weiss-Sussex defines translingual writing as a movement: moving from one language to another with bits of the first language infiltrating the target language.[17] This is a form of haunting but here, I am interested in a more intense and static form of coexistence. Anna-Louise Milne argued that translingual implies a vector, but she sees a space, a more static interaction; not a translation (or movement) but a cohabitation.[18] In this article, I will consider these two texts as spaces and I will be concerned with the ways in which the present narrative interacts with the absent narrative within that space.

Investigative Daughters

Martine Delvaux, although primarily a creative writer, is also an active figure in literary criticism, but she has not much been the subject of it. Her work often deals with hauntings – missing girls in *Rose amer*,[19] the notion of another voice speaking inside us in *Ventriloquies*[20] – but never as explicitly as it does in *Blanc dehors*. In this introspective novel, the narrator digs deep into her memories, herself and what people have told her, to weave the incomplete narrative of her father's absence and the events surrounding her birth. In an interview I carried out with Delvaux in 2016, I asked her how she went about writing absence. She thought back on her process and explained:

> I think I work a little like a detective. But there isn't a crime. Or there is one but far, far away from me. There isn't any evidence, there isn't a file, there aren't clues, we won't go to court, there won't be lawyers. But it's the same process. It's like digging in a vacuum. If there's no information to find then I'll try to find the traces of this lack of information.[21]

She has very little information, but she writes anyway, sometimes reflecting on the absence and the various ways it manifests in her life, sometimes building on the few details she does have, sometimes following fantasies – a detective television show with echoes of her own story, an unconscious actress in a hotel room – and sometimes drawing out of her narrative entirely and looking at absence in the world, becoming almost an historian of absence – Marilyn Monroe's own absent father, a communal grave discovered in Ireland where hundreds of babies had been buried, etc.

My novel is more traditionally narrated and plotted, but I also seek to write absence. My main characters, Penelope and her daughter Jane, both grow up without a father. Penelope is born in the 1970s in Cornwall, Ontario, near the Québec border. Her mother is unmarried and both she and Penelope bear the stigma of this. When growing up, Penelope is completely without information about her father; her mother keeps this secret locked up tight. Penelope is set on protecting her own potential children from such an absence but gets swept away into a passionate romance and is abandoned in the early months of her pregnancy. Jane is born in the 1990s in Montréal and unlike Penelope, she is told some details about her father and the events surrounding her birth. However, he

remains absent from their lives and questions are unwelcome, even if they are not forbidden. In the atmosphere of silence and secrecy Penelope and Jane grow up in, they too become detectives.

Such an investigation is necessarily obsessive, for when information is scarce, every detail counts. The daughters in *Blanc dehors* and in my novel obsess over places, objects and language. In *Blanc dehors*, for example, the narrator often comes back to an orphanage in Québec City where she may or may not have been left for a few days by her mother. She was left in an orphanage, but her focus on this particular one is speculative. '"Is this where my mother left me?"' she asks.[22] In my novel, places also stick out: Cornwall as Penelope's hometown, Montréal as the place she moved to with Jane's father, Lyon as the place Jane chooses to put some distance between herself and her mother. Smaller spaces are also loaded: the house of Penelope's grandmother, the studio where she lives when Jane is born. All of these places, big and small, hold secrets; they are haunted places inhabited by silent narratives. Penelope and Jane live for several years in a studio in Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, an anglophone neighbourhood in Montréal. Only when they move out does Jane learn the significance of this studio:

> 'What's wrong?' I asked.
>
> That was what you would ask me if I were crying.
>
> 'I don't know. It's hard, you know. I wanted to leave but I kind of miss it. It felt like leaving your father behind.'
>
> This was the first time I caught onto the fact that my father had also inhabited the studio. I'd never thought to ask and you never pretended he didn't but suddenly I felt cheated and I, too, wanted to go back. I would have memorised it better if I'd known; I'd have explored further.

Here, Jane loses a connection without ever knowing she had it. Places become sacred but stand out almost as cemeteries: the narratives are buried, unreachable. The following is an extract in which Penelope explores her grandmother's house, and more specifically her mother's old room:

> Her room was the smallest and the most tucked away. Her name, Camilla, was carved into the door. She hated that name—she went by Millie instead.
>
> The room was sparse, maybe because she'd taken everything with her when she left. The furniture was matching and a thick layer

of dust covered everything. The colours of the bedspread were faded. It was dark but the light coming in through the slits of the blind was enough to see by. The only real objects in the room were a bible, on the nightstand, and a photo frame lying face down on the dresser. The dust around it stirred when I picked it up, clumps falling to the floor.

The photo was of my mother. Although her hair was much longer and thicker and her waist much thinner than I'd ever seen, her dark eyes and strong jaw were unmistakable. She was smiling and was surrounded by friends, mostly male friends. There were five men in that photo and one of them was touching shoulders with her. I scrutinised his face but recognised nothing. They seemed to be near the river; there were bikes in the background but they were all leaning against a truck.

I turned the frame over and opened it. I didn't want to fold the photo so I placed it in the bible. I shut the frame and put it back how I found it.

As we see here, objects are similarly valued, cherished almost, as potential clues. In the following extract, Penelope snoops through her mother's belongings hoping to find information about her father.

She kept mementos; trinkets that I assumed held some significance. But objects don't talk.

In the draw of her nightstand, right at the back, there was a broken music box. It was very simple; the mechanism encased in cheap, see-through plastic. When I turned the crank, only the first note sounded. There was no indication anywhere of what the tune was.

Stowed beneath a pile of bank statements, in the living room cabinet, was a half-full photo album that only contained landscapes.

Harvested wheat fields. Endless bike paths. A river; it could have been the Saint-Lawrence, the other bank seemed unreachable across the wide expanse. Smaller rivers, water trickling over stones and rocks, dark wooden bridges. Bright-coloured trees; forests made of jewels: gold, ruby, emerald. Anonymous landscapes. Nothing that couldn't be found in a tourism brochure.

The only other thing the album contained was a date: 1970. This was the year before I was born. One afternoon, I took out all of the photos, one by one, and checked their backs. There was no other information.

These objects, although revered for their potential significance, only really call out the absence of significance. Penelope does not hold the pieces that might allow her to place any meaning in the music box or the photos. The narrator of *Blanc dehors*, for her part, searches archives and indulges in fantasies of an imaginary file. She consults the records of an orphanage but cannot find anything related to her year of birth.[23] She dreams of a 'document holder' and of 'turning the pages, writing down the places and the dates, memorising the names on the dotted lines, following the investigation step-by-step, the transcripts, the photos, the confession and the charges'.[24] She grasps for but finds no concrete evidence. On the other hand, the novel begins with an object: a letter written by the narrator when very young and revisited years later, a preamble to this text. Here, the focus is not on the hollowness of clues but on their very absence and on what she does have: her own words.

Finally, language is perhaps the biggest source of obsession for each narrator: the words spoken, the words held back, the terms chosen or imposed. Language is a source of information. As Penelope pointed out in the extract, objects do not talk; but people do. And in the case of these characters, people do not. In *Blanc dehors*, Delvaux speaks of 'absent, lost, transparent, forbidden words'.[25] These narrators investigate because there is something hidden: an identity, but not just that, the story around the absence, the words that tell that story. There are also unspeakable words, ones they know but are not allowed to speak: their experience of absence, their own story. In my novel and in *Blanc dehors*, absence is lived but not spoken: the people around the narrator are silent and they are themselves pushed into silence. The narrator of *Blanc dehors* describes herself as stuttering when she tries to break this silence later in life, to put words to the absence she knows so well.[26]

Language is an obstacle, but it is also the source of the narrative: the father is absent because people said he was. Penelope, Jane and the narrator of *Blanc dehors* are all labelled as 'bastards' and this becomes their narrative. If the vocabulary used had been one of empowered single motherhood, absence would not have been the focus. In our interview, Delvaux explained: 'the issue isn't that you're born illegitimate, it's that they stick it to your skin. They said, "You are illegitimate."'[27] An identity, and therefore a narrative, is imposed. They are defined by others, including by their mothers and family, by their fathers' absence. Being branded as a bastard has an equally powerful effect on my narrators and the narrator in *Blanc dehors*. In her novel, Delvaux describes it as 'a word served up every which way and which, every time I hear it, suffocates me'.[28] In the following extract, Penelope learns what the children at school mean when

they call her a 'bastard'. She had heard the word before but without knowing what it meant.

> The next day in school, word had got round that I had a baby sister. One of the girls asked, 'How cute is she?'
>
> 'The cutest,' I said. 'She pouts—like this.'
>
> I imitated Helen's cute pout. Olga watched on, frowning. Amidst several requests to play at my place after school, she spoke up.
>
> 'Yeah, how's the little bastard?'
>
> The word itself is ugly, isn't it? Too many hard sounds.
>
> The other girls went quiet.
>
> 'Don't call her that,' I said.
>
> 'That's what she is.'
>
> The word had never driven me to fight back before but Helen, with her tiny fists and her eyes that barely opened, deserved better.
>
> 'No, you are. You're a bastard.'
>
> A few of the girls giggled and Olga's frown broke into a derisive smile.
>
> 'I have a dad, stupid.'
>
> The feeling was not dissimilar to discovering the truth behind Father Christmas, another piece of information that had been revealed by Olga.
>
> Of course, that's not what it actually means but we were too young for detailed definitions. And at the time, that was often what it meant: no dad in the house, no man. People weren't as uptight about unmarried couples as they used to be by then but for the dad to be completely out of the picture was pushing it too far.
>
> The injustice of it nearly suffocated me. My cheeks burned as I closed the distance between myself and Olga. She stopped smiling and her eyes widened as I raised my arm. I slapped her, hard.

Not all fatherless children are bastards, but in these two stories, these children are. These novels are not about absent fathers, but rather about bastards; not about the absent person, but about absence itself. Once Jane solves the puzzle of her father, she reflects that it does not change anything. Penelope, after learning who her father is, feels no satisfaction either. The sense of secrecy and silence remains; their narratives are unchanged because absence is in itself a narrative. To fill in the blanks would not be a writing, but a rewriting. Their experience of absence cannot be replaced with another experience. In our interview, Delvaux discusses the intentions in *Blanc dehors*: 'It wasn't about finding my father;

the aim of the narrative wasn't to find the absent person but to find how this person was rendered absent.'[29] The characters are not so much investigative as they are haunted: they search, not to uncover a narrative, but because searching has become their narrative mode. And what they find is not any sort of presence, but a better understanding of the narrative that has dominated their lives.

Writing Absence

Formal techniques are used in both novels to create a sense of haunting. For example, structure is used purposefully. In my novel, the story is not told linearly; we start with the blanks, with Jane and her absent father and the secrets her mother keeps. *Blanc dehors* is not a linear narrative either; its path is even more tortuous. Drawing a clear timeline would be difficult, as scenes are constantly revisited and there is no real plot. In our interview, Delvaux explained her process: 'I worked . . . from fragments, from pieces, and I left holes in the text; I kept the blanks. So I didn't try to fill in where I didn't have words. Where I didn't have information, I subtracted information.'[30] She describes it herself as a perforated text; it bears the formal marks of absence with blanks lurking around the writing. She uses line spaces generously, which means that full pages of uninterrupted text are rare.

Delvaux also makes purposeful use of pronouns: the narrator mostly uses the first person, but sometimes the third as well, when referring to herself. This doubling reinforces the sense of haunting, of a layered text, but it is also a more overt silencing of the I, the narrator, as well as a questioning of her ownership of the story. Split, doubled, mirrored figures are a hallmark of gothic literature and of haunted texts to this day, a symbol of the troubled identities these texts explore. In *Ventriloquies*, Delvaux, alongside Catherine Mavrikakis, stages a similar kind of doubled voice to *Blanc dehors*: a presence within her that speaks without her lips moving. In *Les fous de Bassan*, the two murdered cousins, Nora and Olivia, often seem indistinguishable, while in *Le Désert Mauve*, translator and author coexist on the page, the overtness of the translating process making it impossible to forget the 'original' and its writer. In *Blanc dehors*, the mother also stands as a split figure: a 'fille-mère'.[31] Both young girl (maiden) and mother, she is trapped between these two identities: she is both, but under this derogatory term, these two words pushed together, she is reduced to neither. In my own novel, there is a doubling in the narration as well as in the narrators' position: Penelope and Jane speak in turn as mothers and

as daughters, dipping in and out of these roles, and this back and forth blurs the boundary between their individual experiences.

This use of doubled narrators also hints at a different type of haunting, a further troubling in these texts: of the opposition between fiction and autobiography. As we have seen, troubled texts challenge binary thinking. According to Weiss-Sussex, in translingual writing this goes further than the contact between languages: she thinks of these texts as 'transcending genre'.[32] In *Histoires de fantômes. Spectralité et témoignage dans les récits de femmes contemporains*, Delvaux looks at contemporary women writers and comes to this conclusion: '[i]ntimate, troubling, catastrophic texts, these recent writings by women are important because they break away from the classic oppositions between lies and truth, fiction and autobiography, presence and absence'.[33] A blurring occurs; borders weaken. Delvaux openly plays with genre categories in her work, both academic and creative. In our interview, she explained: 'I've always tried to explore the link between the abstract, the political, the literary and the narrative of self.'[34] In the novels discussed here, Delvaux's and my own, the author haunts the work. The novels contain, to different extents, autobiographical elements but they are not autobiographies: they resist categorization.

Other than narrative details, a major way in which the authors haunt their work is via language. Both Delvaux and I are bilingual and have an emotional history with our languages. This inevitably comes through in our writing: considering how important words are to these narrators, it is not surprising to find, alongside the unspoken, the spoken differently. In the words of Lori Saint-Martin, herself multilingual: '[e]verytime I write . . . I'm aware that it could be said differently'.[35] In our interview, Delvaux explained that '[a]n author of Palestinian origin told me, after she read *Blanc dehors* that she felt as though I wasn't writing in French, as though I was writing in another language. I think I also have this feeling'.[36] This feeling is partly found in the syntax, the anglophone structure of some of the sentences, such as 'Peut-être que je n'ai jamais fait que ça, mettre des mots à l'endroit des blancs' – 'Maybe that's all I've ever done, write words where there are blanks.' The other quotes used in this article were just as easily translated into English. A few English words actually appear, in italics, and some French words are also italicized, almost always to signify that someone else is speaking them: '*[b]âtarde*' (bastard) is one of those words.[37] The presence of English and the link being drawn here – words imposed – is the result of Delvaux feeling marginalized in her forming years for an incorrect use of both French and English. She explained: 'I was kind of without language. That is to say that I spoke

French wrong and I didn't know English very well.'[38] This feeling of marginalization echoes her experience of being labelled a 'bastard'. What is said, what is not, what can and what cannot, is of such vital importance to these investigative daughters that Delvaux's linguistic struggles are understandably inseparable from her experience of absence.

For my part, I adopted English as my primary language when I was eighteen and it felt incredibly liberating. I could say things I'd never been able to say before. Anne Fleig, when discussing the writer Yoko Tawada, argued that turning to another language, from Japanese to German, was for her 'a form of emancipation'.[39] But silence was still ever present because I was saying these words in a language my family, and my mother in particular, could not understand, or not fully. In my novel, the roles are reversed: French is the liberating but unsatisfying language for Jane. French actually appears on the page, and the two languages interact, but French lurks: it is hidden in plain sight. French works hand in hand with silence and, to Jane, they become almost synonymous. The following extract takes place in Grand-Mère, the Québec town where Jane's father lives, although unknown to her at the time of this visit. It is important to understand that at this point, Jane's French vocabulary is extremely limited; she does not understand the conversation. She is writing this years later so she is making educated guesses about what might have been said.

> You ushered me in and we huddled in the small space, my hip pressed against the cold of the plastic panel. Next to the booth was a wooden shack selling corn and strawberries.
>
> You put in change and ignored me when I asked if I could do it. There was a number written on your hand; I hadn't noticed it before. You held up your hand and dialled the number. I watched the woman in the wooden shack; she sat behind the counter, one elbow resting on it and her chin resting in her palm.
>
> 'Est-ce que Monsieur Masau est là?'
>
> You waited a while then started talking again.
>
> 'Je suis ici.'
>
> Further on, there was a gas station. A big white car pulled in and a man got out. He took hold of a pump and inserted it into the car then stood very still.
>
> 'Ce n'est pas la peine de te mettre en colère. Je ne cherche pas á t'attirer des ennuis.'
>
> Someone had drawn a heart on the plastic panel and there were two letters in it: P + P.

'Oui, elle est avec moi.'

A woman walked past the booth, a pushchair ahead of her.

'Je voudrais juste te voir.'

The woman waited for the crossing light.

'Tu me dois bien ça.'

The child in the pushchair threw their dummy on the floor. The woman picked it up and put it in her mouth, before handing it back to the child.

'On est en centre-ville.'

The crossing light came on and the woman pushed the child along.

'Oui, je le vois.'

When she got to the pavement, she stopped and waited for the other light.

'D'accord, on t'attendra là-bas.'

You hung up the phone and looked down at me.

'Are you hungry?'

I shrugged.

'Who were you talking to?' I asked.

'No one.'

So here, we have a dialogue on the page but to Jane, it is just like blanks. Presented with riddles, Jane believes that learning French is the key to her search. She writes:

> I began to see it not as a school requirement but as a tool that I could use. It was like learning a secret code. Maybe I thought it would reveal other secrets, beyond the content of conversations; that it would lift the cloud of mystery that seemed to hang about us.

But the kinship she develops with French has the opposite effect. Her broken-hearted mother being averse to that language, because Jane's father was francophone, communication between them becomes even more strained, silence even more dominant. Jane reflects on this break in their relationship:

> The sense that French was forbidden, which had always been present, grew into a tangible law. This language that we now both knew became just another unspoken thing, a shadow we were both aware of but pretended not to see.

It becomes highly significant that Jane is writing in English. While French is the language of emancipation, English is the language of communication: literally the mother tongue.

Searching for the Mother

Since these novels are about the experience of absence, about writing silence, they must inevitably converge towards the gatekeeper of information, the mute interlocutor: the mother. It goes even further back: both novels reflect on the grandparents' role in silencing narratives – silence is a family affair. Although there is conflict in these novels, blame is overwhelmingly absent. While it may be an initial instinct, the movement of these stories is one of understanding and sharing. Grandparents and mother are not enemies but companions: the narrative of absence is a shared one. Weiss-Sussex argues that '[t]he process of translation is essential to understanding the other and their viewpoint'.[40] Let us think again of silence as a language, in which case the work of the narrators in these novels may be considered a translating one, producing a text, not out of an existing original, but out of this non-existent one. In *Re-Belle et Infidèle: La Traduction Comme Pratique de Réécriture au Féminin/The Body Bilingual: Translation as a Rewriting in the Feminine*, Susanne De Lotbiniére-Harwood argues of translation that it is '*never neutral* . . . . The *I* who translates inscribes their knowledge, their choices, their intentions, their convictions in the text being rewritten'.[41] When Delvaux imagines scenes before and after her birth, scenes she herself has no concrete claim to, she nonetheless invades, floats above them like a ghost, lurks in the shadow. The 'I' haunts the untold narrative, and although these scenes may or may not have taken place, they are full of meaning, they are the narrator's reading, her interpretation. And in this speculative translation work, her intentions are revealed: she is looking, not for her father, but for her mother. She writes: 'There are no photos of my mother pregnant with me. No way to find this distraught, desperate young woman, the young woman who doubted when it came to deciding whether to have me or not.'[42] It is this young woman that the narrator looks for in her speculations. The same search for the mother occurs in my novel, from the very first line. Jane writes: 'I thought I saw you on the métro today.'

Because of the way *Blanc dehors* is structured, the mother's experiences, whether real or invented, intertwine with the daughter's, so much so that they become a single narrative. The novel concludes on the narrator's

statement that she is all the women she has written; she is her mother. *Blanc dehors* is not in the second person, but it nonetheless seems addressed to the mother and, although it is haunted by silence, it is also an offering of words, a reflection on a shared narrative and a reaching out. In my novel, we see a similar reaching out in Jane's return to English. There is a split in her movement towards French, a writing out of the mother, because although she might feel freer to speak absence, the experience is no longer shared. Her return to English is a return to shared narrative.

Cohabitation

I established earlier that troubled texts challenge the notion of singularity. These characters' narratives are not in one piece. However, a lack of singularity does not mean that unity is impossible, that these characters are condemned to an inescapable sense of fragmentation and an irreconcilable narrative. In *Des langues en partage? Cohabitation du français et de l'anglais en littérature contemporaine*, Catherine Leclerc reflects on the ways in which languages cohabit. She argues that '[t]oday . . . it becomes possible to contemplate linguistic cohabitations that result from a movement of openness rather than denunciation'.[43] Another word for haunting is cohabitation, two 'opposite' things – living and dead – inhabiting the same plane. Cohabitation is a space happily shared, an embrace of multiplicity. To be cohabited is to be positively haunted, not split or troubled, but plural. Rather than dreading fragmentation, and the ones who make it apparent – the foreign language, the silencing parent – there is an openness to the impossibility of singularity. The told and the untold cohabit, not in order to blame or denounce, but in order to understand, to open. Haraway offers yet another word for it: irony, which she argues is 'about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes . . . about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true'.[44] The two novels studied here do not seek to 'resolve into a larger whole' but offer the narratives in all their fragmentation; they offer irony and cohabitation. While accusations and tensions do underpin the writing, the movement is ultimately one of acceptance. The told and the untold cohabit because the narrators are made up of both.

In *Histoires de Fantômes*, Delvaux writes: 'The words of these authors weave ghost narratives, produce haunted texts where an absence, a rupture

constantly spectralizes the writing and the one who writes, a void that the author doesn't seek to fill, a breach she doesn't wish to mend but rather inhabit and learn to live with.'[45] Ultimately, *Blanc dehors* and my own novel do not set out to summon the father, in any figurative or concrete way. Absence itself is their subject and both a troubling and necessary force. As Butler argues: 'trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it'.[46] Absence, in these two narratives, is inescapable, and this article has set out how these novels have written and encompassed it: silence and voices come together on the page, blurring the boundaries between the told and the untold. At the start of the article, I introduced the figure of the obsessive investigator. This investigation reveals places and objects to be hollow and unsatisfying, but words invariably stick, for better or worse, because the investigation was nothing more or less than their personal narrative, in all its contradictions, and this is what they each come to write; not the solution to an enigma but the experiences that have shaped them. Although these two novels are narrated very differently, *Blanc dehors* being highly introspective while my own novel sees mother and daughter writing to each other, both embrace absence as a narrative in its own right and, rather than replacing this narrative, the characters learn to share it, thereby breaking the silence between mother and daughter.

Notes

1 Anne Hébert, *Les fous de Bassan* (Paris: Seuil, 1982).
2 Marie-Sissi Labrèche, *Borderline* (Montréal: Boréal, 2000).
3 Heather O'Neill, *The Girl Who Was Saturday Night* (London: Quercus, 2014).
4 Nicole Brossard, *Le Désert Mauve* (Montréal: l'Hexagone, 1987).
5 Donna Haraway, 'A cyborg manifesto: science, technology and socialist-feminism in the late twentieth century', in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David Belle and Barbara M. Kennedy (London: Psychology Press, 2000), 292.
6 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1999), xxv.
7 Sherry Simon, personal interview (unpublished, September 12, 2016).
8 Haraway, 'A cyborg manifesto', 295.
9 Sherry Simon, *Translating Montréal: Episodes in the Life of a Divided City* (Montréal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2006), 219.
10 Martine Delvaux, *Blanc dehors* (Montréal: Héliotrope, 2015).
11 Amy Coquaz, *Toi* (unpublished work, 2018).
12 Barbara Johnson, *Mother Tongues; Sexuality, Trials, Motherhood, Translation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 2003), 25.
13 Michael Cronin, *Across the lines; travel, language, translation* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000), 28.
14 Mary Gallagher, 'Nancy Huston on Othering the Mother-Tongue' (paper presented at *A New Language—a New Life? Translingual literature by contemporary women writers*, London, March 1, 2018).
15 Gallagher, 'Nancy Huston.'
16 Anne Fleig, 'New Language and Female Voice—Heteroglossia in the Writings of Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Yoko Tawada'

(paper presented at *A New Language—a New Life? Translingual literature by contemporary women writers*, London, March 1, 2018).

17 Godela Weiss-Sussex, 'Translingual Creativity and Belonging in Katja Petrowskaja's *Vielleicht Esther* (2014)' (paper presented at *A New Language—a New Life? Translingual literature by contemporary women writers*, London, March 1, 2018).

18 Anna-Louise Milne, 'Plural Subjectivities, or "Writing With"' (paper presented at *A New Language—a New Life? Translingual literature by contemporary women writers*, London, March 1, 2018).

19 Martine Delvaux, *Rose amer* (Montréal: Héliotrope, 2009).

20 Martine Delvaux and Catherine Mavrikakis, *Ventriloquies* (Montréal: Leméac, 2003).

21 Martine Delvaux, personal interview (unpublished, September 8, 2016). [my own translation] Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine. 'Je pense que je procède un peu comme une détective. Mais il n'y a pas de crime. C'est-à-dire qu'il y a un crime très, très loin de moi. Il n'y a pas de preuve, il n'y a pas de dossier, il n'y a pas d'indices, on n'ira pas en cour, il n'y aura pas d'avocats. Mais c'est le même processus. C'est comme creuser du vide. S'il n'y a pas d'information à trouver alors je vais essayer de trouver les marques de l'absence d'information.'

22 Delvaux, *Blanc*, 71. 'Est-ce que c'est là que ma mère m'a laissée?'

23 Delvaux, *Blanc*, 85.

24 Delvaux, *Blanc*, 99. 'porte-document'; 'que je tourne les pages, que je note les lieux et les dates, que je mémorise les noms sur les lignes, que je suive l'enquête pas à pas, les transcriptions, les photos, les aveux et les accusations'.

25 Delvaux, *Blanc*, 13. 'mots absents, disparus, transparents, interdits'.

26 Delvaux, *Blanc*, 14.

27 Delvaux, interview. 'ce n'est pas d'être né illégitime le problème, c'est qu'on nous a collé ça sur la peau. On a dit, «Tu es illégitime.»'

28 Delvaux, *Blanc*, 77. 'Un mot servi à toutes les sauces et qui, chaque fois que je l'entends, m'empêche de respirer.'

29 Delvaux, interview. 'Il ne s'agissait pas de trouver mon père; ce n'est pas un récit qui avait pour but de trouver la personne absente mais de trouver comment on a rendu cette personne absente.'

30 Delvaux, interview. 'J'ai travaillé [. . .] à partir de fragments, de morceaux, et en laissant, dans le texte, les trous; en laissant le blanc. Donc je n'ai pas essayé de remplir là où je n'avais pas de mots. Là où je n'avais pas d'information, je soustrayais l'information.'

31 Delvaux, *Blanc*, 143.

32 Weiss-Sussex, 'Translingual Creativity'.

33 Martine Delvaux, *Histoires de fantômes. Spectralité et témoignage dans les récits de femmes contemporains* (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2005), 8. 'Textes intimes, troublants, catastrophiques, ces écrits récents de femmes sont importants en ce qu'ils rompent avec les oppositions classiques entre le mensonge et la vérité, la fiction et l'autobiographie, la présence et l'absence.'

34 Delvaux, interview. 'J'ai toujours essayé de creuser ce lien entre la pensée abstraite, politique, littéraire et le récit de soi.'

35 Lori Saint-Martin, personal interview (unpublished, September 10, 2016). 'Chaque fois que j'écris [. . .] je suis consciente du fait que ça pourrait se dire autrement.'

36 Delvaux, interview. 'Une auteure d'origine palestinienne m'a dit après avoir lu *Blanc Dehors* qu'elle avait l'impression que je n'écrivais pas en français, que j'écrivais dans une autre langue. Et je pense que j'ai moi-même un peu cette impression-là.'

37 Delvaux, *Blanc*, 77.

38 Delvaux, interview. 'Au fond, j'étais un peu sans langue. C'est-à-dire que je parlais mal le français et je ne connaissais pas bien l'anglais.'

39 Fleig, 'New Language'.

40 Weiss-Sussex, 'Translingual Creativity'.

41 Susanne De Lotbiniére-Harwood, *Re-Belle et Infidèle: La Traduction Comme Pratique de Réécriture au Féminin/The Body Bilingual: Translation as a Rewriting in the Feminine* (Toronto: Women's Press, 1991), 27. '*Traduire n'est jamais neutre*. [. . .] Le *je* qui traduit inscrit son savoir, ses choix, ses intentions, ses convictions dans le texte qui se réécrit.'

42 Delvaux, *Blanc*, 50. 'Il n'y a aucune photo de ma mère enceinte de moi. Rien ne permet de retrouver la jeune femme désemparée, désespérée, la jeune femme qui a doute quand il était question de décider de m'avoir ou pas.'

43 Catherine Leclerc, *Des langues en partage? Cohabitation du français et de l'anglais en littérature contemporaine* (Montréal: XYZ, 2010), 181. 'Aujourd'hui [. . .] [i]l devient possible d'envisager des formes de cohabitation linguistique qui soient le résultat d'un mouvement d'ouverture plutôt que de dénonciation.'

44 Haraway, 'A cyborg manifesto', 291.

45 Delvaux, *Histoires*, 10. 'Les mots de ces auteurs tissent des récits fantômes, fabriquent des textes hantés ou, toujours, une absence, une rupture, vient spectraliser l'écriture et celle qui écrit, un vide que l'auteure ne cherche pas à combler, une faille qu'elle ne souhaite pas colmater, mais plutôt qu'elle fréquente et avec laquelle elle apprend a vivre.'

46 Butler, *Gender*, xxix.

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Conflict of Interests

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