

## REWRITING INTERCULTURALISM IN QUÉBEC SOME LITERARY EXAMPLES

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**Abstract:** *The social and cultural fabric of Québec has been profoundly transformed for about twenty years. Québec, and in particular Montréal, have now become increasingly plural. In the younger generation, as in the previous ones, identities are still only defined by starting from a pre-established cultural and family background, perhaps Québécoise, but perhaps also Haitian, Algerian, Chinese, or Polish. In an almost irreversible way, the borders move or are reduced. Marco Micone, Jean Jonassaint, Régine Robin, and Dany Laferrière, all write from a space which is at the same time both within, and peripheral to, Quebec society. Their marginality is expressed both explicitly in the thematic material of their writing and textually through choices of language and form.*

**Keywords:** *interculturalism; Québec; integration; transgression*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The social and cultural fabric of Québec has been profoundly transformed for about twenty years. Québec, and in particular Montréal, have now become increasingly plural. Law 101, which requires compulsory attendance at French language schools for immigrant children or those born to immigrants, has produced a real and unexpected exchange. On the one hand, immigrant children have learned French and have become more familiar with the French-speaking culture of Québec, on the other, some Francophone children have demystified their rigid and preconceived image of the foreigner and thus feel less fear; they have learned about differences directly and not through the intermediation of family and social prejudices. Certainly, in the younger generation, as in the previous ones, identities are still only defined by starting from a pre-established cultural and family background, perhaps Québécoise, but perhaps also Haitian, Algerian, Chinese, or Polish. In an almost irreversible way, the borders move or are reduced. It is necessary to remember that integration is created slowly, like stratifications that are layered one on top of the other.

The immigrant, be s/he man or woman, becomes "illiterate" again, forced to learn new codes in all fields. This recurring image highlights the difficulty of the immigrant who has to rapidly decode a new culture: sometimes it means his survival. The narrator of *Soigne ta chute* by Flora

Balzano remembers this, in an ironic and acerbic style:

On n'est plus sûr de rien. C'est le grand questionnement. On n'est sûr que d'une chose, va falloir s'adapter, on ne sait pas trop comment, on veut apprendre, vite, vite, on sent qu'il faut se grouiller, on ne comprend pas tout, c'est dur pour l'orgueil, on rougit, on se dandine, on s'entortille, on s'excuse, on a de nouveaux six ans, on entre en première année. Tous les immigrants sont des écoliers. Les écoliers c'est l'avenir. Donc, les immigrants, c'est l'avenir (Balzano, 1980:36).

The two words *immigrant* and *emigrant* are very fascinating because of the gestures implicit in their prefixes, a leaving something behind and an entering into something new. The old-world nostalgia of the *émigré* must colour the notion of an emigrant imagination because I think of that imagination as rooted, bound up in, the place left, the "old country", "home", and preoccupied with recreating that place, whether out of nostalgia or fury. The immigrant imagination seems to me to embrace the new place it enters. The situation of being such an immigrant is a perfect seedbed for the writing sensibility. If you don't belong, you can imagine you belong and you can construct in writing a world where you do belong. You can write your way into the world you want to be a part of, even as, from outside it, you witness its specific characteristics. The sensation of having your world turned upside down or inverted also leads to a

sense of the relativity of both language and reality, as much as it leads to a curiosity about other people's realities. It leads to an interest in and curiosity about language, a sense of how language shapes the reality you live in, an understanding of how language is both idiosyncratic (private) and shared (public), and the essential duplicity of language, its capacity to mean several things at once, its figurative or transformational powers.

There is a sensation of living in this place with its real people and things, of being contained in it, but knowing that somewhere else there exists that place, with its real people and things which you can no longer go back to, the sense that the *you* you were in that place is not the same *you* as the *you* you are in this place, though the two overlap. This produces a desire to knit the two places, the two (at least) selves, somehow.

The question of the place of texts written by the Other (whether that odd metaphorical negation of the European is defined as African, Arabic, Chinese, Latin American, Yiddish, or female authors), in the proper study of literature, "Western literature", or "comparative literature" has, until recently, remained an unasked question, suspended or silenced by a discourse in which the canonical and the noncanonical stand as the ultimate opposition.

## 2. FOUR QUÉBÉCOIS LITERARY EXAMPLES

As countries of immigration, Canada and the United States have established and recognized traditions of immigrant and minority literature. But for Canada this tradition has been mainly if not exclusively expressed in English. The historical context of Québécois literature, reflecting the close association between the French language and a single cultural community, made the inclusion of minority voices within the framework of the Québécois literary institution impossible until recently. In the context of contemporary Québécois writing, the choice of French is a significant decision because for the immigrant writers of the past generation English was the principal language of integration into Canadian society.

As Québécois literature begins to look forward by undertaking exploratory journeys to "foreign" lands, difference at home has become the province of minority writers. Marco Micone, Jean Jonassaint, Régine Robin, and Dany Laferrière, all write from a space which is at the same time both within, and peripheral to, Québécois society. Their marginality is expressed both explicitly in the

*thematic* material of their writing and *textually* through choices of language and form.

The provocative blend of continuity and difference, affiliation and dissidence expressed in the work of these writers, as well as the importance they give to language, mark this writing as a significant development in Québécois literature.

The question of language, almost always associated with the difficulties of integration and acceptance, is found throughout migrant writing. In any case, in spite of the recurrence of the conflictual dimension of the meeting of languages, some writers also explore the issue of integration, a creator of hybridity and the unprecedented. Language then becomes a symbol of enrichment and transculturalism. It is clear that the theme of language embraces two levels: on the one hand, it testifies to the often conflicting passage from one language to another, as the need to find an appropriate language; on the other, it symbolizes the interior and multidirectional readaptation that the immigrant must go through when he moves from one culture to another.

Polylinguism, according to Bakhtin, is the essential condition of the novel form; it implies a resistance to an overall monologic conception of meaning. This polylinguism can refer as much to the mixture of languages within one national culture as to textual indicators of relationships towards "foreign" languages. The confrontational nature of the encounter of languages becomes more explicit in contexts where the political and social dimensions of language are prominent and where there is a conflict of cultural traditions. For certain writers, in fact, entry into a national tradition is complicated precisely by factors of polylinguism. Antoine Berman has noted the important similarities between what he calls "la catégorie du français étranger" and translation effects:

Dans un cas on a des étrangers écrivant en français et donc imprimant le sceau de leur étrangeté à notre langue ; dans l'autre, on a des œuvres étrangères réécrites en français, venant habiter notre langue et donc la marquer, elle aussi, de leur étrangeté. Beckett est l'illustration la plus frappante de cette proximité de deux français (Berman, 1984:180).

Translation thus becomes a privileged figure of minority writing, not necessarily as the indication of a transfer from one language to another or as the transfer of a pre-existent cultural reality into a new context, but primarily as the operation through which literary traditions are challenged or reinforced through the encounter between two or

several modes of textualization. Literary language is not a “given” but always an expression of affiliation or transgression.

Marco Micone writes plays dominated by political and collective perspectives. He is of Italian origin and dedicates his theatre to an exploration of what he calls “immigrant culture”. For Micone, language differences are problematic. Immigrant culture is a culture of transition between languages. Micone has written extensively on the explicitly political motives which led him to choose French rather than English as a language of expression. In his plays immigrants and children of immigrants speak a French occasionally punctuated by English or Italian words. Their language is not only or even primarily, however, a “realistic” language; it is often highly theatrical, giving his plays, along with songs, symbolic characters and stylized acting, an additional element of distancing.

In addition to its dramatic function, Micone’s language also has an important thematic role. Micone’s plays are filled with references to language and its impact on the characters. The immigrant has no language of his or her own: this is the sober reality which the immigrant must face. In replacement of the myth of immigration as the passage to paradise, Micone suggests the tragedy of loss: this loss is first and foremost that of language.

Micone’s first two plays explore the multiple relationships between language and power: within couples, within the family, within society. The very abundance of language, the tendency to speechify, the characters’ need to articulate explicitly all the various frustrations which language represents for them. This hyperconsciousness towards language makes Micone’s plays an essential representation of the immigrant experience in Québec.

Interestingly, Micone’s play *Biblico* shows a significant reversal of attitude. Centred specifically on the question of origin and personal identity, rejecting political and collective ideals, concentrating on emotional intensity rather than on verbal abundance, the play places much less emphasis on language issues. In distinct contradiction with the theorization of the “transcultural” as developed by the review *Vice Versa*, Micone clearly rejects the joy of cultural mixtures for the tragedy of lost origins and unrequited love. The fact that Micone’s theatrical language becomes more spare, less avid and all-encompassing, is significant: the evacuation of

language issues signals a different understanding of which political problems are central.

In fiction we can see more elaborate textual strategies to signify interculturalism. The most important and thorough attempt to use language as a formal and a thematic device for exploring perceptions of identity in Québec, the most explicit example of a minority voice in Québécois fiction, is a novel by Régine Robin, *La Québécoise*. Robin is an academic of French-Jewish origin: her novel draws an explicit link between the experience of the social outsider and the experience of marginality due to language. Robin’s evocation of marginality clearly goes beyond the individual and the autobiographical to describe a generalizable experience:

Quelle angoisse certains après-midi – Québécoisité – québécoisitude – je suis autre. Je n’appartiens pas à ce Nous si fréquemment utilisé ici – Nous-autres, Vous-autres. Faut se parler. On est bien chez nous...L’incontournable étrangeté...Autre, à part, en quarantaine...à la recherche d’un langage, de simples mots pour représenter l’ailleurs, l’épaisseur de l’étrangeté, de simples mots, défaits, rompus, brisés, désémantisés (Robin, 1983:52).

The novel tells the story of three possible integrations of an immigrant into Montréal society. The narrative is presented as a kind of exercise in memory and linguistic free association, a journal of personal, historical, geographical fragmentation which includes notes for a university course on medieval Jewish messianic movements. It is a demonstration that language is not necessarily the cement which holds together our perceptions or guarantees our political and social identity; language becomes the very agent of dispersion: “il n’y aura pas de récit/tout juste voix plurielle/ une voix carrefour/ la parole immigrante” (Robin, 1983:88). The experience of the immigrant proves again to be a disappropriation of language, even if it is not necessarily a change of language. Language is revealed to be not an instrument of thought, but the very substance of experience. With its broken syntax, its refusal of linearity, its definition of identity and history as disorder, the narrative structure of *La Québécoise* becomes congruent with the fragmented social structure of Montréal. Against the myth of origin and belonging, *La Québécoise* opposes an infinite past and identities so multiple as to be uncountable.

Another example of the rewriting of interculturalism in Québec is *La déchirure du (corps) texte et autres brèches*, in which Jean Jonassaint, a writer of Haitian origin, adopts a

strategy similar to Robin's in proposing a fragmented, non-linear text with resonances which are at once autobiographical and impersonal. Much more than in the case of Robin, this short text declares itself to be unconditionally disjunctive and opaque. The "I" who speaks exists both in the past and in the present; he is the "nègre" traded like a possession and the writer who tells of his impossible integration into Québec. Finding himself refused, he determines that he will adopt the point of view of difference, following in the path of writers as diverse as the Québécois Gauvreau, Joyce, and the Surrealists. Like the writer with whom he shares his initials, Jonassaint delights in Joycian plays on words and considers exile to be his true home. "Mot-dites-farces... Je ne suis point de la tribu" (Jonassaint, 1984:46). The text becomes something of a *manifesto* as Jonassaint declares himself to be one of those "migrants" who must forge his own language:

Voilà quoi motive, active ma démarche d'écriture dans ce Québec que je souhaiterais par rien que québécois-métis, comme moi scribing une langue qui m'engage, à assassiner sûrement comme Gauvreau un exemple (Jonassaint, 1984:29).

It is evident that Robin and Jonassaint are both authors of works in which the main theme revolves around the question of *marginality* as it relates to the Québécois majority. Both propose autobiographical texts, neither respects the conventional structures of the story in order to create a link between collective experience and individual experience.

A very different example of the inscription of interculturalism into Québécois literature is provided by the novel *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer* by Dany Laferrière. This is the first novel explicitly declaring its colour to have been a popular success in Québec. The novel is written in an irreverent, self-deprecating and laid-back style unusual in Québécois literature. The narrator very clearly identifies himself as Black and of non-Québécois origin, but never defines the precise nature of this origin. In fact, the book plays with the enigma of origin, suggesting a wide range of popular prejudices towards the "primitiveness" of Blacks. Much more than the perspective of a Black on White culture, however, the book proposes the perspective of a Black looking at himself with what he supposes are White eyes. The central activity and metaphor of the book is the "fatal attraction" of White (and always English) females for Black males and vice-

versa. The fact that the women in Laferrière's novel are all "English" suggests a ludic rereading of Hubert Aquin's and Pierre Vallières's use of post-colonial thought to interpret Québec culture. The political intertext of the novel is not used to convey a new perspective on Québec society but rather to enlist the allegiance of the reader through the complicity of a shared code.

It was Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine who made the implicit explicit by postulating "race, moment, and milieu" as positivistic criteria through which any work could be read and which, by definition, any work reflected. Taine's *History of English Literature*, was the great foundation upon which subsequent 19<sup>th</sup> century notions of "national literatures" would be constructed. In race, Taine concludes, was predetermined "a particularity inseparable from all the motions of his intellect and his heart. Here lie the grand causes, for they are the universal and permanent causes..., indestructible, and finally infallibly supreme". Poetries, as Taine puts it, and all other forms of social expression, "are, in fact, only the imprints stamped by their seal" (Taine, 1970:503-504). Taine's originality lay not in his ideas about the nature and role of race but rather in their almost "scientific" application to the history of literature.

Race has become a trope of ultimate, irreducible difference between cultures, linguistic groups, or adherents to specific belief systems. Language is not only the medium of this often insidious tendency: it is its sign. Blacks and other people of colour could not write. Writing, many Europeans argued, stood alone among the fine arts as the most salient repository of "genius", the visible sign of reason itself.

We must not ask "the reader to understand Africa by embedding it in European culture", says Appiah (1984:146), we must understand how certain forms of difference and the languages we employ to define those supposed differences not only reinforce each other, but tend to create and maintain each other.

The language of Laferrière's novel, curiously enough, is neutral, international French, there are almost no cultural markers. The combination of this neutral language and the eclectic nature of the cultural-geographic references suggests that the "culture" represented is less that of Québec than that of the "Nègre métropolitain", whose existence is hinted at in the novel. Unlike *La Québécoise*, that is, the *Nègre* is not a reading of cultural difference, but rather the opening of a neutral, almost a negative, cultural space. Laferrière's book seems like a cry of rage.

A great deal of this negative energy is directed toward the numerous white females in *Comment faire l'amour avec un Nègre sans se fatiguer*. Obviously, on the level of story the treatment of women in this novel is shocking. They are only good for "fucking", not even lovemaking. Even when the narrator uses the word "love" he is doing it "at the edge of an abyss" (Laferrière, 1985:48). In fact, we are told that "in the sexual act, hatred is more effective than love" (Laferrière, 1985:49). And there are few if any indications of either sensitivity or tenderness on the part of writer or characters in the performance of sexual encounters. The audience is told "There are no individuals". Thus, the blacks and the women function as types; in the case of the women we might even say allegorical figures. None of them have any significant individuality. Like many postmodern novels this episodic, almost storyless book full of nihilism works *à rebours*, using humour from time to time to rise above the garbage that functions as an image of contemporary civilization. But the humour is black, an "effective weapon", more absurd than funny. If this book does have a morality, it is the morality of words, for this is writing about writing. Laferrière is at times making love to his words, at times "fucking" them, at times drunk on them.

In their probing introduction to *The Postmodern Scene* (1986) Arthur Kroker and David Cook characterize the postmodern condition by using Foucault's manifestation of "transgression" as the

lightning flash which illuminates the sky for an instant only to reveal the immensity of the darkness within: *absence* as the disappearing sign of the limitlessness of the void within and without... (Lenoski, 1989:236).

Such definition is a useful touchstone in any attempt to deal meaningfully with Dany Laferrière's first novel, only perhaps, in this case, since the author is black and a Haitian refugee, a negative of Foucault's lightening image would be more appropriate. Like much postmodern literature, this is life seen from below, by those who live on the edges of genre and of what is normally social and moral in our society. For the author, though, and for his narrator, who he suggests lives in a similar physical and mental space, that means that a good deal of the nothingness is white. Accordingly, they are more

voided than the void itself and this book which traces the "cruising" of two blacks in contemporary Montréal is full of rage and sexual violence.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, from this examination, albeit short, we can deduce that Robin, Micone, Jonassaint, and Laferrière, are among the few writers who, starting from very different origins, propose not so much a look at the majority culture, but an expression of their marginal positions. In their works, we do not read about those who are at the center of culture, rather we move around the edges of society. By challenging the norms of literary language and affirming their positions on the margins of society, these writers are currently trying to create a new cultural space within the Québécois society and thus rewrite the concept of interculturality within Québécois literature. Will the opening of this space mark the beginning of a new pluralism within Québécois literature?

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