

Culture, Creativity, Confluence and Collision

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"The year 1774 was 15 years after the Battle of the Plains of Abraham and two years before the American Revolution. Officers of the British garrison in Montreal were rehearsing Molière's *Tartuffe*, hoping to impress the local ladies with their French skills. Matters were complicated by the Church, however, which had banned theatre productions in Québec since 1694, and was especially loathe to allow a production of the blasphemous play *Tartuffe*. The first theatrical performance by anglophones in Québec was put on by British garrison officers stationed in Montreal. They chose to perform Molière... in French.¹"

Many of the ambiguities imbedded in the relationship between the English-speakers and francophones of Quebec are present in this historical event. The Red Coats were supposed to be brutal oppressors, not entertainers. During the long era of Two Solitudes, the English were not supposed to understand or speak French. And Anglo-Saxons were supposed to be bred for military prowess and trade, not arts and culture. When Marianne Ackerman wrote **L’Affaire Tartuffe: The Garrison Officers Rehearse Molière**, the play was a metaphor for the reversal of stereotypes and a transformation of the relationship between Quebec’s English-speaking community and its francophone majority. This paper

¹ Marianne Ackerman, *L’Affaire Tartuffe: The Garrison Officers Rehearse Molière*, Signature Editions, 1996

will focus on ambiguous Anglo-Franco relationships and the cultural myths that prevailed in the two centuries between 1760 and 1960.

Myths and Urban Legends

At the time of the Conquest, Montreal was a town of about 4,000 souls. An influx of immigrants from Britain, Scotland, Ireland, and the American colonies soon made English-speakers the dominant force in Montreal. However, the two linguistic communities did not immediately retreat into parallel solitudes because the small population made it difficult to provide separate services. The Montreal Gazette (founded 1778), for example, began as a bilingual newspaper, modelling itself on the successful Quebec (City) Gazette (founded 1764).

One of the territorial myths – from a Francophone perspective – is that English-speaking populations have been mainly concentrated in the west side of Montreal, along the Ottawa River toward Ontario, and perhaps in the Eastern Townships. The implication of this myth is that English-speakers dominated vast expanses of Québec by remote control, like absentee landlords. In fact, significant English-speaking populations established themselves in all major settlements from Quebec City (40% of Quebec City was English-speaking in 1870) and Sherbrooke (58% of the Eastern Townships was English-speaking in 1861) to Trois Rivières and Shawinigan Falls, as well as secondary centres such as Victoriaville and Drummondville and in fishing villages along the Gaspé Coast and the Lower North Shore. Two recent biographies document childhoods in Montreal's eastern neighbourhood of Rosemont² and farther east in Pointe-aux-Trembles³. English-speaking communities were not restricted to an urban, west-island phenomenon.

The ambiguous territorial and political relationship between English-speakers and Francophones during the first decades after the Conquest was embodied by Dr. Wolfred Nelson. His family emigrated

² Patricia Bissonnette, *Swinging on a Star: Growing up in Montreal's East End*. Montréal, édition à compte d'auteur, 2011.

³ Peter Leitch, *Off the Books, A Jazz Live*, Véhicule Press, 2013

from England to Canada and established its residence at William-Henry (now Sorel), a city colonized by United Empire Loyalists from the American colonies. They sailed down the Richelieu River in the 1770s and established an industrial centre at its junction with the Saint Lawrence River. Nelson became a doctor who provided medical services to British troops in the War of 1812, and was elected to the legislative assembly in 1827. By 1837 he was a *Patriote* leader who led his militia to victory against British troops at the Battle of Saint-Denis. After a period of exile in Bermuda, Nelson returned home and was elected to the new Parliament of the Province of Canada in 1844, and then was elected mayor of Montreal in 1854. Wolfred Nelson was recognized as a leader by Francophones and by English-speakers. He was equally comfortable as a rebel against the ruling classes and as an elected official among the elite of his day. Nelson's story is gloriously ambiguous; his politics and ethnic allegiances are impossible to pigeon hole.

Another of the enduring myths, which produces ambiguity in Anglo-Franco relationships, is that English-speakers are as united in their self-identity as Quebec's francophones. This myth is only made possible by conflating shared language with the presumption of shared religious and political allegiances. As the case of Wolfred Nelson demonstrates, Protestant Anglo-Saxons even fought one another. Non-Protestants and non-Anglo Saxons had little natural affinity for the British Empire. The Protestant faith shared by most Scots and Brits did not eradicate long-standing political conflicts (from *Brave Heart* to the 2014 Scottish independence referendum). Irish Catholics had little reason to bond with the British (they're hanging men and women for the wearing of the green). Each community had its own benevolent societies to care for their indigent: Saint-George, Saint-Andrew, Saint-Patrick, and Saint-Jean-Baptiste. The 'English-speakers' of Quebec were further sub-divided into Black communities, Jewish communities, Chinese, Greeks, Italians etc.

Protestantism was a religion of protest, fragmentation, and fierce independence. Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists and other denominations disagreed on so many points of

doctrine that they could only share a school system by striving for neutrality and tolerance. The old Protestant school system put into practice many of the Quiet Revolution's goals of creating an inclusive, 'secular' society.

Anglo Elites

A final enduring myth worth mentioning is that the English-speakers were all from an elite, wealthy class. By the 1850s, Montreal had become the largest city in British North America. Most of Canada's banks, transportation and industries were controlled by English-speakers. Does that mean all English-speakers were wealthy? Montreal's wealth was concentrated in the Golden Square Mile in the hands of 50 – 100 families, while tens of thousands of other English-speaking families were middle-class merchants or working-class labourers. Working-class Anglos were paid pitiful wages like their francophone neighbours, and lived in adjacent slums⁴. It is a mystery how poor Francophones could have lived and worked in close proximity to poor Anglophones and yet have bought into the myth that all Anglos were rich - and wicked.

Part of the answer can be found in Quebec's literary history. Journalist William Johnson published a book in 1991 entitled **Anglophobie Made in Québec**⁵. Johnson showed how the evil Anglo boss is a recurring leitmotif in French Québec's literature. Sometimes the bad boss is also Jewish. Similar examples can be found in radio, film and television scripts. The foreigner is often a dangerous threat who must be expelled or quarantined. The Catholic Church's solution was to restrict foreign money, religion and language to the large industrial centres, while *pure-laine* Francophones were confined to the land. Story after story in the *romans du terroir* tradition equate leaving the land and migrating to the city with everything evil. William Johnson's literary samples highlight the Catholic Church's role in creating and perpetuating the Two Solitudes. A more objective observer, closer to the historical source,

⁴ Herbert Brown Ames, *The City Below the Hill*, a sociological study of a portion of the city of Montreal, 1897

⁵ William Johnson, *Anglophobie Made in Québec*, William Johnson: Éditions Stanké, 1991

can be found in Everett-Cherrington Hughes, an American sociologist who lived in Quebec and taught at McGill from 1927-38. In his 1943 book, **French Canada in Transition**, in the chapter entitled '*Quebec Seeks a Villain*' Hughes, describes the prevailing anti-foreigner sentiment. "Political groups, dominated by students and young professional men, attacked, in the same breath, the evils of capitalism, British imperialists, Jewish plotters, and American and Canadian financiers, whom they held responsible for the troubles of French Canada."⁶

Was Anglo Montreal evil as the Church and the nationalists painted it? Margaret Westley, in her book on Montreal's Anglo-Protestant elite, documents its extraordinary concentration of power and wealth. "About fifty men, mostly English and Scottish Protestants in Montreal, either owned or controlled more than one-third of all the railways, banks, factories, mines, and other properties and resources which constituted Canada's economic wealth at the time"⁷.

The Golden Square Millionaires were indeed the wicked 1% of their day. They earned their reputation as *les méchants Anglais* by creating a city where "wages were lower than in other comparable cities" and whose "slums were regarded among the worst in the world... Low wages for white collar workers, like low wages for manual workers, were one of the personal policies of Montreal Businessman... People in those days never seemed to learn that they ought to pay people a living wage. It was always their idea to get labour, like materials, at the cheapest price possible."⁸

Westley's book describes how the Two Solitudes began to develop in Quebec on the Anglos' side. "Not only did the Protestant elite prefer to hire British workers (rather than francophones), in general they preferred to shop at stores owned and operated by fellow Scots and Englishmen... and to patronize doctors, lawyers, accountants and other professionals of their own linguistic and religious background." Once a critical mass of English-speakers had established residence in Montreal (and in

⁶ Everett Hughes, *French Canada in Transition*, University of Chicago Press, 1943

⁷ Margaret W. Westley, *Remembrance of Grandeur*, Libre Expression, 1990

⁸ *ibid*

other cities), the Francophone population could be largely ignored and it was unnecessary for English-speakers to learn French. Anglos stayed inside a linguistically gated community which cut them off from their francophone neighbours, while the Catholic Church fomented resentment against capitalism and foreigners, represented by Montreal's Golden Square Mile.

If you ask contemporary Montrealers where the Golden Square Mile was located, they will guess somewhere in Westmount, probably on the slopes of the mountain. In fact, the Golden Square Mile stretched along Ste. Catherine and Sherbrooke streets, starting in the east at University Street. The few blocks further east serviced the Golden Square Mile with churches (Saint James Methodist and the Christ Church Anglican Cathedral), retail emporia (Morgan's department store, and Birks jewelry store), and most importantly for the purposes of this paper, it was the hub of Anglo arts and culture.

The ground floor of the Jacob's Building (460 Ste Catherine west, and ELAN's current home) was home to Montreal's first swanky night club, the St-Regis Cabaret in 1906. A few doors further west, the Princess Theatre (where a McGill student would administer a punch to the stomach of Harry Houdini, who would die a few days later from complications) opened in 1908. Across the street was the Bennett Theatre (1908), subsequently renamed the Orpheum, and briefly known as the Becman, when francophone Golden Square millionaire Jean C. Lallemand funded the troop of Belgian expat Edgar Becman to perform there. On the corner facing Morgan's department store (now the Hudson's Bay) stood the Gaiety theatre (1909). The early theatres were vaudeville houses which gradually evolved into project moving pictures. At the north-east corner of Phillips Square stood the home of Art Association of Montreal gallery, which would move further west along Sherbrooke Street in 1912 to become the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Despite divisive forces working to perpetuate linguistic solitudes, artists often took pleasure in defying the social conventions of their day by fraternizing with 'the enemy.'

Dysfunctional Solitudes

Around the turn of the twentieth century, from 1879 to 1941, lived one of the first great poets to emerge from this complex and ambiguous society: Émile Nelligan. His mother was *francophone de souche* while his father was an Irish immigrant. David Nelligan shared the linguistic background of Montreal's elite although, like many Irish, he would have had a conflicted relationship with the language that the Conqueror imposed on his Celtic ancestors. David Nelligan was doomed to be a double villain in Quebec: too Catholic for the Anglo-Protestants and too English for the Franco-Catholics; unlovable and unloved.

Émile Nelligan was a child of "mixed roots" in a deeply divided society, but he wrote exclusively in French and was considered to be French in the same way that Barack Obama is considered to be black in the racially conflicted nation to our south. During the depths of Two Solitudes it was deemed impossible for someone to live in both worlds without losing their soul or their sanity. Émile Nelligan's extraordinary two-year explosion of creativity was followed by a life sentence behind the bars of an insane asylum. The debilitating trauma which silenced the 20-year old genius is often blamed on his Anglo/Irish father.

A good example of this is found in André Gagnon's *Nelligan* opera, for which Michel Tremblay wrote the libretto in 1990, about 50 years after Nelligan's death. In Tremblay's interpretation of the story, Nelligan's father David is a perfectly detestable villain who declares, in English: "I don't want this son of mine to destroy everything I have worked hard for all my life. A poet! For God's sake. Why not a murderer? Why not Jack the Ripper?"⁹ Later in the opera, Nelligan's mother Émilie explains to her husband, en français, why the gods have cursed their family: «*Un père anglais. Une mère française. Des enfants forcés à choisir entre le père et la mère. Une famille coupée en deux dès le départ, vouée à l'échec.*»

⁹ Michel Tremblay, *Nelligan*, Leméac 1990.

Michel Tremblay may have been investing the Nelligan myth with his own generation's views about linguistic miscegenation, but he was also portraying the religious conflicts of Nelligan's generation. Most of the novels from the late 19th early 20th century were *romans du terroir* set in rural locations, but one popular novel of the period shared many parallels with the Nelligans. The characters were urban, affluent, cultivated and Catholic: the mother Anglophone, the father Francophone. The novel, written by Abbé Lionel Groulx and published under a pseudonym in 1922, was entitled *l'Appel de la race*¹⁰.

In Tremblay's opera script, David Nelligan and his daughter Eva mostly speak mostly English, while mother Émilie and son Émile mostly speak French. The family is not divided by a language barrier per se but by a deeper failure to communicate. In Groulx's novel, two of the children shape their identity around the English language and culture of their mother; the other son and daughter shape their identity around the French language and culture of their father. This is a problem because the Francophone son was named Wolfred. He may have been named in honour of the *Patriote* leader Dr. Wolfred Nelson, but the name is foreign. To truly answer the call of the race, the young man has to rid himself of every trace of impurity. On the final page of the book he renounces Wolfred and assumes the *pure-laine* name of André.

This gesture can only provide the cathartic climax intended if we share Groulx's conviction that three factors were essential to preserve the French-Canadian nation: language, religion, and race. Young Wolfred was French-speaking and Catholic but his name was foreign. «*Mais il serait donc vrai le désordre mental, le dédoublement psychologique des races mêlées! Il se rappelait aussi une parole terrible du Père Fabien, un jour que tous deux discutaient le problème des mariages mixtes... Le premier effet des croisements entre des races différentes est de détruire l'âme de ces races, c'est-à-dire cet ensemble d'idées et de sentiments communs qui font la force des peuples et sans lesquels il n'y a ni*

¹⁰ Lionel Groulx (pseudonyme: Aloné de Lestres), *L'appel de la race*: L'Action française, 1922

nation ni patrie... C'est donc avec raison que tous les peuples arrivés à un haut degré de civilisation ont soigneusement évité de se mêler à des étrangers.¹¹»

Nelligan's madness provided a powerful object lesson to support Lionel Groulx's cautionary tale about the disastrous consequences of mixing 'races.' However, there was a clear contradiction between the diagnoses in the Nelligan and Groulx cases. Was the root problem the mixing of language or race? This is an important distinction. The Catholic Church of Abbé Groulx's era (1878-1967) decided to take no risks. The best way to maintain the mental and physical health of their flock was to keep it quarantined from foreign influences. For many decades, the Catholic Church spared no effort to keep the 'flock' and foreigners separate.

As I wrote in an article for TicArtToc magazine¹² and in the preface to a History of English Language Culture in Quebec¹³, the Catholic (French) school system systematically excluded students who were not *pur-laine* members of the flock. Most non-Christians, non-Roman Catholics, and non-Caucasians were shunted off to the Protestant (English) system. This policy of maintaining religious and ethnic purity would later produce dire demographic effects on the French language, which would need to be corrected by a complete reversal of policy in Bill 101, the Charter of the French Language.

Creative Collaboration

Émile Nelligan's complex French-English world is now understood to have been a broader phenomenon than the myths and clichés would have it. In 2011 the English Language Arts Network (ELAN) commissioned a number of essays that reviewed the history of English-language artists in Quebec from the earliest period of professional arts, through the Quiet Revolution, and on to contemporary times. This collection of essays, later published by Guernica Editions as *Minority Report*:

¹¹ Lionel Groulx, *L'appel de la race*, chapitre 3, Échec et tristesse

¹² TicArtToc, Spring 2015, *Made au Québec*, published by Diversité Artistique Montréal.

¹³ *Minority Report: An Alternative History of English Language Arts in Quebec*, Guernica Essay Series, 2011

An Alternative History of English-Language Arts in Quebec, shows there was a significant amount of mixing between the language/culture groups in artistic circles during the depths of Two Solitudes. There was significant interplay in the Montreal arts scene before the Quiet Revolution and that the arts were less polarized prior to the Quiet Revolution than they would become in the highly politicised and nationalistic decades that followed.

During the final years of Nelligan's life – the first decades of the 20th century – visual artists, dancers and even theatre groups collaborated frequently. It might seem evident that collaboration was easier for artists whose work is not language-based (dancers, musicians, and visual artists), but an exchange of ideas is essential to be able to create work more complex than a jam session. Research for ELAN's Minority Report suggests that many francophone artists were proficient in English and had few political inhibitions about speaking it. Two memoirs by playwright/actor/storyteller Jean-Claude Germain¹⁴ vividly portray the thirst for new ideas among Francophones artists and bohemians, who revelled in the forbidden pleasure of frequenting English night clubs and exchanging ideas with English-Canadian, American, and European artists.

Painter Louis Muhlstock, born in Poland and immigrated to Canada with his family in 1911, helped form the Contemporary Arts Society, which sought to promote public awareness of modern art in Montreal. The original 25 members included the likes of Paul-Émile Borduas, Stanley Cosgrove and Goodridge Roberts. "One of the first truly modernist movements in Quebec began in the visual arts with a generation of Montreal painters who were most prominent between 1930 and 1948. Many of these figures were either Jewish or European immigrants. Their neglected stories and artworks have been reintroduced by the prominent Quebecois art historian and current general director of the Musée National des beaux-arts du Québec, Esther Trépanier. She has published numerous books in which she documented the significant contributions of early 20th-century painters, including Polish-born

¹⁴ Jean-Claude Germain, *La Rue Fabre* (2007), *Le Coeur Rouge de la Bohème* (2008), Éditions Hurtubises. Both available in English translation from Vehicule Press.

immigrants such as Jack Beder (1910-1987) and Louis Muhlstock (1904-2001), and other East Europeans like Alexander Bercovitch (1892-1951), Sam Borenstein (1908-1969), Eric Goldberg (1890-1969), Herman Heimlich (1904-1986), Harry Mayerovitch (1910-2004), and Ernst Neumann (1907-1956). Converging on the Montreal arts scene from European enclaves or Jewish-European roots, many of these artists brought with them a deep appreciation of the 19th-century schools of French impressionism and post-impressionism.¹⁵

Music was another realm in which boundaries were porous, particularly during the swinging years of American prohibition (1917-33), which turned Montreal into an entertainment hot spot for locals and American visitors. "The Montreal club scene was one of complex race, class, and language relations, as well as territorial boundaries... In uptown clubs and hotels such as the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, Chez Maurice, and the Kit Kat Club, black musicians were welcomed on stage but not in the audiences. The 'east' end clubs were clustered around St-Laurent Boulevard and Ste-Catherine, Montreal's Red Light District, and attracted more of a French audience. In the Red Light District venues like the Monument National, Chinese Paradise and the Stadium Ballroom, it became trendy at times for whites and blacks to co-mingle in the same venues. However, the downtown clubs along St-Antoine Street presented a much different atmosphere. Of closer proximity to the black community, clubs such as Café St-Michel and Rockhead's Paradise became legendary for their showmanship in large part due to their lax race rules. Here, black and white musicians could perform, dance, and drink together freely. The after-hours nature of a lot of these downtown venues meant that many of the city's black and white musicians would work at well-paying gigs uptown or in the east end earlier in the evening, collect their pay, and then head down to St-Antoine to improvise, jam, and experiment.¹⁶

Bilingual or multilingual Montrealers inhabited a larger, more diverse city than their unilingual compatriots. "Noted poet and constitutional lawyer F.R. Scott regularly travelled across town to

¹⁵Lori Callaghan, *Minority Report*, Visual Arts chapter.

¹⁶Dimitri Nasrallah, *Minority Report*, Roots of Montreal Music chapter

attended book launches by French-language publishers and authors. In the 1960s he organized literary soirées for his English-speaking colleagues and prominent Francophone writers. Bilinguals translated for unilinguals, facilitating cumbersome but lively exchanges of ideas, as Scott recalled with fondness. Later recollections by Micheline Sainte-Marie, Louis Dudek, and others were more critical of these soirées, more conscious of ways in which they were not successful. When asked about the “bilingual evenings” at Scott’s house, Louis Dudek replied, “Sure, we met those guys, but that’s all. Nothing came of it.” What remains is the image of a cultivated, well-intentioned, and polite gentleman-poet who was slightly out of sync with the community he wanted to join”¹⁷

The 1940s and 50s were a grand era for writing. "The post-World War II English literary scene in Montreal was also providing Canadian writing with something it had never enjoyed before - respect nationally and recognition internationally. The poetry scene here was vibrant and eclectic. Imagine the likes of A.J. M. Smith, Louis Dudek, P.K. Page, and Miriam Waddington all arguing, all bouncing ideas off each other. Imagine voices ranging from the erudite F.R. Scott to the rambunctious Irving Layton. And imagine a very young Leonard Cohen starting out, soaking it all up. In fiction, MacLennan's 1945 novel, *Two Solitudes*, about language tensions in Quebec, was an instant Canadian bestseller. A year earlier, Gwethlyn Graham's *Earth and High Heaven*, about home-grown anti-Semitism, became the first Canadian novel to make it to number one on *The New York Times* bestseller list."The English-language from Quebec during this period reflects a richly diverse community that lived mostly in isolation from the French-speaking majority. "All (these writers) were intensely connected to Montreal, and yet described a city of closed communities. Theirs was an English-language city where the French-speaking community was largely limited to a role of spectator”¹⁸

By the 1950s, a new political regime under Mayor Jean Drapeau was shutting down Montreal’s Red Light District. Sin City was scrubbed clean with puritanical fervour. The night clubs were also losing

¹⁷Sherry Simon, *Translating Montreal: Episodes in the Life of a Divided City*, McGill Queens University Press. 2006

¹⁸ Ibid.

audiences to new kinds of entertainment – folk music and rock ‘n roll - as well as the new technology television which kept people at home, glued to small screens, rather than venturing out to enjoy live entertainment. The great cultural event of the era was Expo ‘67, which celebrated Canada’s centenary and attracted 50 million visitors to Montreal during a long, lively Summer of Love. Performers, artists, new technologies and new ideas from around the world were intoxicating for Quebec which had recently replaced *la Grande Noirceur* of Maurice Duplessis with the Quiet Revolution of Jean Lesage.

The Quiet Revolution decade from 1960-1970 began in economic and cultural vitality, which reached its crescendo at Expo ‘67. Part of the energy and optimism of Expo was transferred to the FLQ and the rising forces of nationalism and independence within Québec. The violence, fear and polarization generated by nationalist violence is vividly portrayed in Robin Spry’s NFB documentary, *The October Crisis of 1970*¹⁹. A more scholarly examination of the period’s political violence in an anthology of essays edited by Ivan Carel, Robert Comeau, and Jean-Philippe Warren²⁰. Twenty years later, Quebec’s English-speaking community would be decimated by the exodus of 350,000 people and most of its artists would leave Quebec and Canada. English-speaking communities around Quebec would dwindle and disappear.

Post-Script

In the post Quiet Revolution period language became highly politicised and polarized. Bill 22 (1974) made French the official language of Quebec. Bill 101 (1977) made French the official language of government and of the courts in Quebec, as well as making it the normal and habitual language of the workplace, of instruction, of communications, of commerce and of business. An exception was granted for culture, but hardcore nationalists believed English-speaking belonged in English Canada, not Quebec.

¹⁹ Robin Spry, *Action : The October Crisis of 1970*, National Film Board of Canada, 1974 (Available for free screening)

²⁰ Carel, Comeau, Warren, *Violences politiques 1960-1979*, Luc Éditeur, 2013

Linda Leith, in her book **Writing in the Time of Nationalism**²¹ describes the concerted effort by the *Union des écrivain et des écrivaines du Québec* (UNÉQ) to prevent the creation of the bilingual Blue Metropolis Literary Festival in the 1990s.

Major transformations in Quebec's cultural and linguistic dynamics took place in the decades that followed the Quiet Revolution. For example, Anglos started learning French and enrolling their children in immersion programs and French schools. An extraordinary percentage of Anglos (35%-45%) entered into romantic relationships with Francophones, and Anglo-Québécois artists began to regain international notoriety, propelled by the 'Arcade Fire' effect after decades of cultural decline. But all of that takes place after the Quiet Revolution and lies outside the scope of this paper.

Since 1995, a cultural renaissance has taken place among English-speaking artists in Quebec. Many of them are immigrants from other parts of Canada and abroad, who do not feel part of Quebec's traditional English-speaking community. Many have little or no knowledge of the long history of English-language culture in Quebec. They are a novelty to their French-speaking neighbours and an enigma to the traditional English-speaking community. A new generation of ambiguous relationships is emerging.

²¹ Linda Leith, *Writing in the Time of Nationalism, From Two Solitudes to Blue Met*, Signature Editions, 2010