QUEBEC'S ENGLISH-SPEAKING ARTISTS: REINVENTING A CULTURAL LANDSCAPE

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ABSTRACT

Montreal was Canada's (English-language) cultural capital in the 40s. After decades of decline, Quebec is once again home to a vibrant English-language cultural scene consisting of thousands of artists. Many English-language artists have been reluctant to self-identify with the "Anglophone" minority and their efforts to integrate with the Francophone majority have not always been reciprocated. The first decade of the 21st century has seen a remarkable transformation of Quebec's cultural landscape.

Montreal, at mid 20th century, was Canada's cultural capital according to William Weintraub in his book *City Unique*. "In the 1940s and 1950s, the best novels, poems and short stories that had ever been written in Canada were being written by Montreal writers" (Weintraub 1996). Weintraub's Montreal was almost exclusively English-speaking. This paper will briefly revisit the pre-1976 era of two solitudes, the 1976-1995 years of exodus and lamentations, and then examine questions of immigration, integration and belonging among Quebec's English-speaking artists in the post-1995 era.

PRE-1976: TWO SOLITUDES

Once upon a time, Montreal—English Montreal—was an island that produced extraordinary cultural wealth. "Beginning with *Earth and High Heaven* by Gwethalyn Graham in 1944 and *Two Solitudes* by Hugh MacLennan in 1945, English Montreal fostered a rich and varied literary scene—from Morley Calaghan, Louis Dudek, F.R. Scott, A.M. Klein and Irving Layton to Mavis Gallant, Brian Moore, Mordecai Richler and Leonard Cohen. All 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" (Simon 2006).

Bilingual Montrealers inhabited a larger, more diverse city. Noted poet and constitutional lawyer F.R. Scott regularly travelled across town to attend 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" (Simon 2006).

1976-1995: EXODUS AND LAMENTATIONS

An exodus of artists started long before the political and economic upheavals of the 70s. Mavis Gallant migrated to Paris, Mordecai Richler to London, while Leonard Cohen, Christopher Plummer and William Shatner pursued their careers in the US. By the mid 80s, the economic and cultural wealth of Quebec's English-speaking community was greatly depleted, yet the impression of Anglo dominance persisted. "It was a long-standing and openly stated belief at the old Ministry of Culture—pre *Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec* (CALQ), established in 1993—that English-speaking artists were less dependent on government grants than francophone artists because unlimited sponsorship funding was available to them from the wealthy anglophone business community in Westmount. The opposite was in fact true. Businesses owned or controlled by English-speakers were extremely reluctant to associate publicly with any activity perceived to exclude the francophone majority" (Rodgers, Needles, and Garber 2008).

Not only did government and business in Quebec marginalize English-language culture, English-speaking artists were reluctant to self-identify with the Anglophone community, as Linda Leith discovered while researching *Quebec Fiction in English during the 1980s: A Case Study in Marginality*. "Most of the twelve writers I consulted during May 1989 object more or less strenuously to being described as 'anglophone writers.' They have different reasons for objecting. Some feel it 'compartmentalizes' them too much: 'there's a presumption of ghettoization,' 'it's pigeonholing,' and 'anglophone' makes you feel more and more marginalized.' Some find this too political a designation and a few dislike the word 'anglophone' because 'it's an ugly word'" (Leith 1989).

Quebec's Francophone culture flourished during the '70s and '80s. This was in part because French-speaking artists could not easily slide across the border to make a career in Ontario or the US, and France continues to be a difficult market to penetrate. As a linguistic island, Québec developed its own star system for the music, theatre and dance scenes, and a thriving film and television industry, which is the envy of English Canada. Many francophone Québécois artists toured the world and became international celebrities (Robert Lepage, le Cirque du Soleil, Céline Dion).

Social tension in Quebec climaxed in 1995. Most of the Francophone community, after two unsuccessful attempts to put an end to minority status within Canada, was ready to accept its role as the majority within Quebec and to negotiate a new social contract to include minorities. Most of the English-speaking minority was ready for a new deal. This was particularly true in the arts community.

POST 1995: IMMIGRATION

Quebec's thriving cultural scene was an attraction for English-speaking artists. Another important factor was the low cost of living during the decades of economic stagnation. This was as true for writers—"The difficult 1980s and 1990s attracted English-language writers from other Canadian cities to a cheap and artist-friendly city" (Simon 2006)—as for musicians, "Montreal has become such a cultural magnet that some Americans are relocating there. From a cultural and economic perspective, it makes perfect sense. It is a cheap place to do business and to live" (Perez 2006).

Barry Lazar, documenting the embryonic resurgence of English-speaking artists in 2001, discovered that virtually nobody was attracted to Quebec because of its Anglophone community. "No artist whom we have interviewed sees themselves as an Anglo artist with a capital 'A'. Does this means there is no such thing as anglo culture? No, it means that anglo culture is in metamorphosis. Clearly, the Anglo-Québécois community is only recently emerging from a generation of destructive depression, one in which little vitality was evident and growth was deemed impossible. A new change of leadership was necessary for the community to grow. That leadership is evident throughout the English-speaking community today, particularly at the level of culture" (Lazar 2001).

Cultural leadership was concentrated around key institutions, most of which were relatively recent creations: the Quebec Drama Federation (created in 1989 from the older Quebec Drama Festival), the Quebec Writers' Federation (created in 1996 from a merger of the Quebec Society for the Promotion of English Language Literature (1987) with the Federation of English-language Writers of Quebec (1993), and the Blue Metropolis Foundation (1999), as well as 'older' institutions like Playwrights' Workshop Montreal (1963), Centaur Theatre (1969) and the Montreal Fringe Festival (1991). The necessary conditions were in place for artists to stay in Montreal or emigrate there.

POST 1995: INTEGRATION

Minority artists have encountered mixed responses from the majority community in their efforts to integrate. Shortly after the 1995 referendum, author Neil Bissoondath appeared on a cultural television program in France

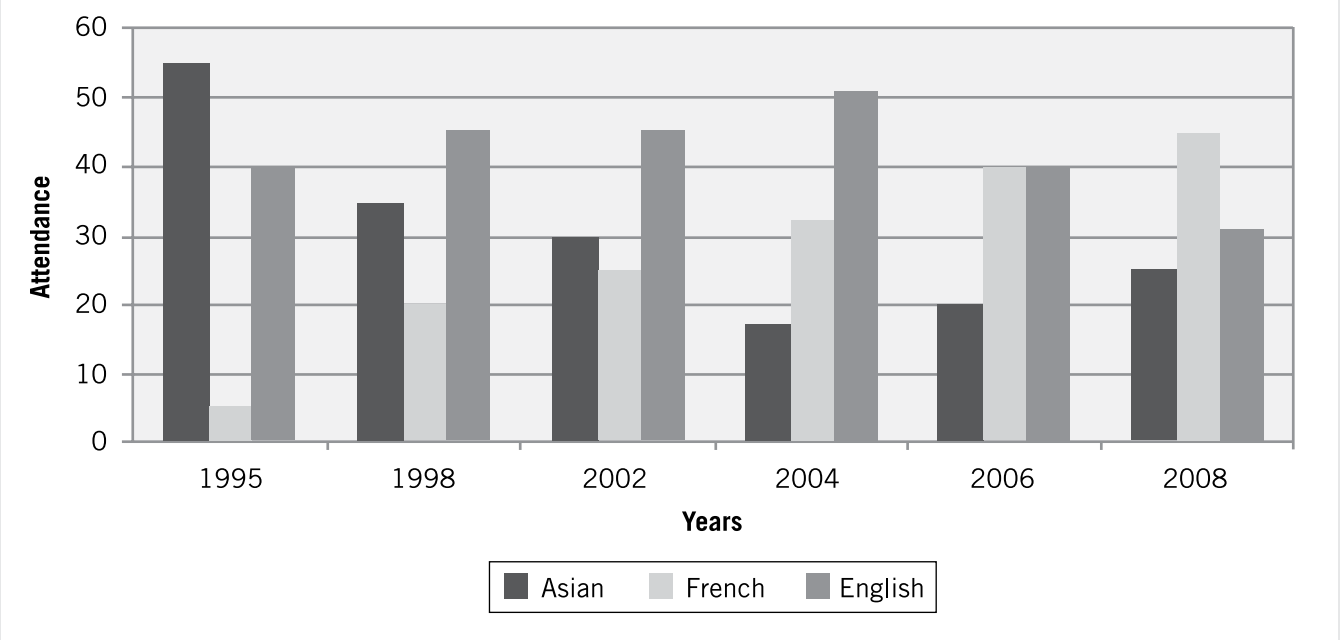
and defined a Québécois as "someone like me". "At a conference, in the spring of 97, on English literature and culture in Quebec, distinguished Québécois literary scholar Gillles Marcotte delivered a paper entitled 'Neil Bissoondath disait…' (alluding to Bissoondath's comments on *Bouillon de culture*). In his presentation, Professor Marcotte was categorical that 'Citoyen québécois, Neil Bissoondath, n'est pas un écrivain québécois' on the basis that 'Il n'existe évidemment pas telle chose qu'une littérature anglo-québécois…'" (Reid 1998).

Resistance within the francophone community to the re-emergence of anglo-québécois culture came to a head with the creation of the Blue Metropolis Literary Festival in 1999. A paper written by Blue Met founder Linda Leith for the American Council for Quebec Studies describes in excruciating detail the antagonism aroused by the festival among some francophone authors and intellectuals. "Our sin was that we successfully crossed linguistic divides. Our sin was in being big and bold, plus international and multilingual. And still, in part, anglophone" (Leith 2007). A decade after its founding, Blue Metropolis, now a major international festival, still struggled to be fully integrated within the francophone community. In 2009, columnist Lysiane Gagnon wondered why Francophones continue to be absent. "Dès sa naissance, le Metropolis bleu s'était heurté à des tentatives de boycottage de l'Union des écrivains du Québec (…) On en avait également contre le caractère bilingue de Metropolis, une organisation issue du milieu anglo-montréalais, et où il se trouve certainement plus de fédéralistes que de souverainistes. Mais il serait étonnant que cette ancienne querelle influence encore les simples amateurs de livres, d'autant plus que le festival est apolitique, et qu'un souverainiste ouvert sur le monde s'y sentirait parfaitement à l'aise" (Gagnon 2009).

The Montreal Fringe festival also struggled to attract French-speaking participants and audiences. Here, the causes were more practical than political. Francophone theatre artists had access to a sufficiently structured and funded theatre scene so that they did not need to self-produce their plays and rely on a percentage of ticket sales. Nor did they see much benefit in joining the fringe circuit to tour their French-language shows across English Canada. Both these opportunities were highly valued by English-speaking theatre artists. The absence of French-language productions limited the interest for francophone audiences, and so the festival has remained on the fringe of Quebec's theatre scene.

The situation of so-called Allophone artists is both simpler and more complex. Bill 101 obliged children of immigrants to be educated in French. Immigrant families that arrived in Quebec speaking English found themselves divided between languages, generations and cultures. The conflict between English and French is perceived as a vestige of colonialism by many Allophones who decline to take sides.

FIGURE 1. Festival Accès Asie Demographics



Festival Accès Asie, founded in 1995 to present South Asian culture to their French-speaking and English-speaking neighbours, has progressively increased its francophone audience by minimising language-based work (music, dance) and making poetry readings multilingual. Not surprisingly, the festival attracted more Anglophones when programming was in English, and more Francophones when in French. The choice is both strategic and economic.

Language skills are a determining factor in the capacity of artists to cross the linguistic divide and successfully integrate with the majority community. A 2010 study of the English-speaking film and television sector in Quebec revealed that although only 7% of respondents were born into bilingual families, 26% now live in bilingual homes, 35% work bilingually, 60% are fluently bilingual and 97% are bilingual to some degree (ELAN Film and Television Study 2010). This represents a radical increase in linguistic skills within two generations.

A high degree of bilingualism strengthens integration into the majority community while weakening identification within the minority community. The English-language is a useful tool but Anglo-Saxon history has negative connotations for most French-speakers, many Allophones, and a good number of English-speakers. Linda Leith in 1989 and Barry Lazar in 2001 confirmed that English-speaking artists were reluctant to identify with the Anglophone community. The language wars of the '80 and '90s, fought by a querulous band of Angryphones, convinced many artists that the future lay outside the polarizing antagonisms of language. They preferred to identify with their art form (musician, writer, dancer etc) or their neighbourhood. "Montrealer" was a more comfortable identifier than "Anglophone."

The English Language Arts Network (ELAN) was formed following the Quebec Arts Summit in November 2004 which brought together 100 senior artists from all disciplines. Many of the artists who attended the Summit were apprehensive of any "Anglo" association that would threaten cordial working relationships with francophone colleagues that had taken years to develop. They also questioned the pertinence of a large umbrella association, because the language-based arts (writing, theatre and film) already had their own associations while the non-language based arts (music, dance, visual arts) didn't need one. The resistance relaxed when participants discovered a room full of bilingual fellow artists who shared their experiences, aspirations and challenges. They reluctantly agreed that an English Language Arts Network could be an asset if it helped provide support to artists and build bridges. By 2010, ELAN's membership exceeded 1,800 and visual artists constituted the single largest group of members, demonstrating that the language of the artist is independent from the language of the artist's work.

POST 1995: BELONGING

The 2001 census registered 8,510 English-speaking Quebecers working in arts and entertainment. The combined 2010 membership of ELAN, the Montreal Film Group, the Quebec Writers' Federation, the Quebec Drama Federation, ACTRA, the Quebec chapter of the Directors' Guild of Canada, the Writers' Guild of Canada etc. validate these numbers.

As English-language artists have increased in number and prominence they have been recognized by the French-speaking community in unprecedented ways. In 2004, poet David Solway was awarded the *Grand Prix du livre de Montréal* for his book *Franklin's Passage*. In 2005, Quebec City-based Jeremy Peter Allen was the first "Anglo" filmmaker invited to open the *Rendez-vous du cinéma québécois* with his film *Manners of Dying*, written in English by Francophone Yann Martel and starring fluently bilingual Roy Dupuis. In 2006, author Mavis Gallant was awarded Quebec's prestigious *Prix Athanase-David.* English-speaking artists began to feel they belonged in Quebec. Simultaneously SPIN magazine and the New York Times were reporting that Montreal's indie rock scene was the hippest in North America (Carr 2005 and Perez 2006).

Meanwhile, the English-speaking community was beginning to appreciate the artists in their midst. The QCGN's Greater Montreal Community Development Initiative (GMCDI) identified culture as a key area of community development, alongside education and health. *"Recommendation 7—That a Cultural Resources Task Force be established to design and implement a multi-year strategy for promoting the cultural resources of the English-speaking communities…"*(Report of the GMCDI 2007).

In 2008 Bernard Lord reported to the Canadian government that

> "The arts and culture emerged as a unifying thread of the consultations. Participants mentioned many times that arts and culture serve to build cultural identity, contribute to community vitality and make it possible to bring all clienteles together around common elements. Participants proposed that culture serve as a gateway to the international stage. The arts and culture are useful for attracting and integrating immigrants, as well as strengthening identity and developing a sense of belonging" (Lord 2008).

Also in 2008, the Commissioner of Official Languages recommended "That Canadian Heritage, cooperating with other federal institutions having a role in arts and culture, work with the representatives of Anglophone and Francophone minority communities on developing a new vision of the arts and culture…" (Canada 2008).

By 2010, many of Quebec's English-speaking artists feel a sense of belonging within Quebec society. For some this means integration into francophone culture, for others it involves a new definition of their identity. The larger English-speaking community has begun to invest resources in culture as a tool of social and economic development, both in the greater Montreal area and the outlying regions of Quebec, which are home to significant English-speaking populations. The francophone population is curious to discover English-speaking artists who are reinventing the cultural landscape.

This generally positive vista is marred by a few dark clouds. The resurgence of English-speaking culture in Montreal has begun to ring alarm bells among Francophones who feel their language and culture are threatened when English becomes too prominent on the streets and in the public arena. Whether this is a passing shadow or a growing squall is impossible to predict.

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