

Migrant literature in Quebec

The background of the slide is a light green gradient. On the right side, there are several overlapping, semi-transparent geometric shapes in various shades of green, including dark green, medium green, and light green, creating a modern, abstract design.

Daniel Chartier's *Dictionnaire des écrivains émigrés au Québec* contains 628 names for the period 1800-1999, including over four hundred for the second half of the 20th century. Alongside authors writing in French, there are also those who have chosen English (approximately one-third) or their language of origin (Yiddish, Spanish, German, etc.). Their situation within French-Canadian and Quebec literature has been addressed by Clément Moisan and Renate Hildebrand. The title of their book *Ces étrangers du dedans* (2001) aptly describes the crux of the problem, namely the integration of the difference that foreigners represent.

Statistics

For several decades now, for Canada more than 200,000 people a year. Immigration is therefore part of the country's political and cultural horizon.

The scale and importance of the phenomenon is reflected in legislation and government activities. In 1971, multiculturalism was established as a principle of federal policy, expressed in the **Multiculturalism Act** of 1988. The modification of this concept is **Quebec pluriculturalism**, introduced after the Charter of the French Language (Bill 101, 1977) secured the dominant position of French in the province.

The terminology dispute between the federal and Quebec authorities needs to be seen in its historical context.

- 1) Francophones, particularly those in Quebec, felt that multiculturalism meant the abandonment of the policy of biculturalism and bilingualism, which they had only just managed to obtain through pressure. Multiculturalism, in their view, represented a threat to French and the French-speaking minority, as it placed them on a par with other minority languages and cultures - Chinese, Ukrainian, etc. - in terms of cultural diversity.
- 2) the major problem was the **anglicization** of immigrants. Until the 1960s, the high birth rate among French-Canadians kept the proportion of Francophones more or less stable. However, the declining birth rate and the **increasing "English" option** among immigrants weakened the situation of French-Canadians at the very time when the concept of multiculturalism was being promoted by the Ottawa government. In 1971, the proportion of immigrant children in Montreal's French-speaking schools was **just 10%**.
- 3) French risked becoming a minority language, even in Quebec where it had until then been the language of the majority. **Multiculturalism was therefore perceived as a threat to identity**, and this was so until language laws, including that of 1977, ensured the francization of immigrants to Quebec, mainly through **compulsory schooling in French-language schools**, but also through other measures - francization of the public space, the workplace, etc.
- 4) The distinction between federal multiculturalism and Quebec pluriculturalism lies mainly in the hierarchy of the Quebec approach, which institutes the promotion of French as the basis of general cultural communication.

Clément Moisan and Renate Hildebrand's study *Ces étrangers du dedans* examines the influence of immigrant authors on French-Canadian and Québécois literature between 1937 and 1997.

They distinguish four phases in the penetration of otherness: **unicultural** (1939-1959), **pluricultural** (1960-1974; the term is used here without the political context, to designate a configuration of the literary situation), **intercultural** (1976-1985) and **transcultural** (after 1985).

Objections can certainly be raised, including that of the strict segmentation of the stages, which is too clear-cut to admit an approach that would take account of the returns and variations of the phenomena and offer a less "unidirectional" vision of the general evolution. The latter, however, is clearly indicated by the defining terms that show the dynamics of identity: the essentialist conception based on fixed characteristics of the collectivity (nation) and the individual gives way to the non-essentialist, composite identity of the postmodern and post-national period.

The presence of the foreigner, as subject and object of writing, has multiple implications. It's not just a question of the interaction between "local" Quebec writers and the immigrants who have made Canada their new home. It's also about **worldviews**, the relationship between **cultures**, feelings of **strangeness** or **alienation**.

For we must take into account the diversity (social, political, of opinion or individual) that the label of common origins conceals. Nor should we forget the subtle and complex **hierarchies** that exist between **immigrants of different origins**, and even between different **waves** or **generations**.

Encounters are not only between Canadians and "foreigners", but also between the "foreigners" themselves, as critic Pierre Nepveu shows in his *Écologie du réel* (1999). He shows that Quebec literature, with its themes of the *uncertain country* (**Jacques Ferron**) or *Littérature à l'imparfait* (*non-achieved literature*) (**Laurent Mailhot**), still in the making or in never ending progress, **creates a space conducive to welcoming immigrant authors**.

Number of immigrant authors grew, particularly from 1960 onwards, when **Montreal became a major publishing center**, attracting immigrant intellectuals in the same way as Paris had done in the past.

Of the 628 entries in Daniel Chartier's *Dictionnaire des écrivains émigrés au Québec 1800-1999*,

400 belong to authors of the second half of the 20th century.

Some of them - the Russian **Jean Bazile** or the Iraqi **Naïm Kattan** - have been active in Quebec since the 1960s. But the main wave came in the 1980s. Brazilian **Sergio Kokis**, Chinese **Ying Chen**, Serbian **Négovan Rajic**, Haitians **Émile Ollivier**, **Gérard Étienne** and **Dany Laferrière**, Lebanese **Wajdi Mouawad** and **Abla Farhoud**, French **Régine Robin** and **Elisabeth Vonaburg**, Chileans **Miguel Retamal** and **Alberto Kurapel**, Italians **Fulvio Caccia** and **Antonio d'Alfonso**, and so on.

The massive entry of these authors into the Quebec literary field generated tensions and controversies, including the distinction made at the time between Quebec writers and "neo-Quebecers", and the acrimonious debate surrounding **Monique LaRue's** academic conference and essay, *L'Arpenteur et le navigateur* (*The Surveyor and the Navigator*, 1996).

In her reflection on Quebec literature, the author revived the archetypal dichotomy of inhabitant/pioneer trapper, coureur des bois identity in Quebec literature, highlighting the tension between the sedentary, conservative inwardness associated with a 19th-century tradition and the new openness stemming, among other things, from the migratory wave. Monique LaRue has been wrongly accused of xenophobia. In fact, she shares the views of Haitian migrant **Émile Ollivier** (Ollivier, 2001), especially as it was migrant authors who largely introduced the redefinition of migration and immigration, which went from being ethnic and testimonial literature to existential reflection.

We should mention the theoretical contributions of **Italo-Québécois and Haitian immigrants** in the magazines *Dérives* (1975-1987; **Jean Jonassaint**), *Quaderni culturali* (1980-1982; Lamberto Tassinari) and *Vice Versa* (1983-1996; **Lamberto Tassinari, Fulvio Caccia**), where **Berrouët-Oriol** published the famous article „L'Effet d'exil“.

The Haitian **Émile Ollivier** who redefined the relationship between the nomadic and the sedentary in favor of the former (*Repérages*, 2001), while his compatriot **Jean-Claude Charles** theorized the notion of "**enracinerrance**" (**roaming-rooting**)

Joël Des Rosiers, another Haitian, spoke of "postexilic" writing. The critical force of these notions is influencing Quebecois authors of origin.

“Could this be a sign that Quebecois territorialization and anchoring, still strongly present in the modernism and postmodernism of the Quiet Revolution, have entered a new phase? Could this be a sign of a transformation and a different axiological arrangement of identity-based spatiality? Can we expect a reassessment of the opposition between here and elsewhere, in a kind of denationalized exterritoriality moving towards a kind of transnationality? Are we dealing with a specific narrative semiosis, notably in the relationship to characters, action and narration? No doubt a historical overview would be useful to see that the present is situated in a continuity of past elements.”

Topical spatial openness of Quebec literature

Joseph-Patrice-Truillier Lacombe: *La Terre paternelle* (1846)

Antoine Gérin-Lajoie: *Jean Rivard, le défricheur* (1862) et *Jean Rivard, économiste* (1864)

Louis Hémon *Maria Chapdelaine* (1916)

Germaine Guèvremont: *Le Survenant* (1945)

Yves Thériault: *Le Montreur d'ours* (1951)

Yves Thériault: *Aaaron* (1954)

Gabrielle Roy: *Bonheur d'occasion* (1945), *Rue Deschambault* (1955), *La Rivière sans repos* (1970)

Jacques Ferron: *Le Ciel de Québec* (1969)

Jacques Poulain: *Volkswagen Blues* (1984)

Noël Audet: *Frontières ou Tableaux d'Amérique* (1995)

In Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* (1914 in print, 1916 in book form), the native/foreign dichotomy characterizes the cast of characters. Of the beautiful Maria's three suitors, two represent the elsewhere, the faraway place that attracts and invites departure. While François Paradis embodies the Canadian far-off - the adventure and wild life of the *coureurs des bois*, Lorenzo Surprenant is the one who let himself be drawn to the urban civilization of the United States - by "[...] *the mirage of beautiful distant cities and the life it offered, rich with unknown wonders*". The two suitors were pitted against the sedentary settler Eutrope Gagnon. After François dies in a snowstorm, Marie must choose between the sedentary Canadian countryside and the American city. The country of her birth wins out - at the end of an internal struggle. For Marie was drawn to the American elsewhere before "*the voice of the land of Quebec*" presented her with the decisive argument: "*Over there, it was foreign: people of a different race talking about a different thing in a different language, singing different songs... Here...*". The two universes exclude each other, and the exclusion is reinforced by the collective *nous* that the voice of the country of Quebec adopts to enunciate itself:

„We came three hundred years ago, and we stayed...[...] Around us came foreigners, whom we like to call barbarians; they took almost all the power; they acquired almost all the money; but in the land of Quebec nothing has changed. Nothing will change, because we are a testimony.“

Gabrielle Roy's eighteen stories in *Rue Deschambault* (1955; *Street of Richies*) are set in her native Saint-Boniface and on the Manitoba prairie. Some - "Les deux nègres", "Le puits de Dunrea", "L'Italienne", "Wilhelm" - develop the theme of the foreigner or immigrant.

"Les deux nègres" ("The Two Negroes"): Christine - the narrator - is split between her adult situation and that of the child she once was. The child's view, not yet burdened by prejudice, is told from a distance and filtered through the adult's ironic yet understanding approach. The plot, as the title suggests, is built around the presence of two black tenants, Canadian Pacific Railway employees, in the narrator's family and neighbor's home. The story's protagonists are the two rival mothers, each of whom boasts of housing **"the better of the two Negroes"**. Narrative distance not only produces an ironic effect, but also brings intellection and understanding through interposed comments. What's more, it helps to establish an appearance of objectivity by placing French-Canadians and foreigners at the same distance.

"I could have rented my room a hundred times, two hundred times to someone white," says my mother. There's no shortage of white people here.... But I understood that it was more humane, more Christian, if you like, to take this poor Negro whom some people, do you understand, would refuse to treat as one of their own."

Yves Thériault's novel *Aaron*. The perspective is that of immigrants, confronted with the society into which they are integrating, and the uprooting that is the consequence. The world of the "home Quebecers" is observed through the eyes of the foreigner, the other. This reversal of perspective is diversified : while grandfather Moishe holds fast to Jewish orthodoxy and tradition, grandson Aaron Cashin dreams of succeeding by integrating into modernity. These are two contrasting, conflicting visions.

The story of grandfather and grandson is set against the backdrop of the catastrophes of the 20th century. Allusions to the concentration camps and the internment recounted by Viedna, a young Jewish girl with whom Aaron falls in love, situate the beginning of the action in the early 1950s. Montreal, an apparent haven of peace, is not immune to racism either. Aaron is confronted with it in the street, on his way to school:

„Under a lamppost, Marie Lemieux, her brother and the Pole were waiting.

The stinking Jew!" declared Marie. He won't come out..."

He always goes in early anyway," said the Pole sarcastically. He's a sissy!"

I can't smell him!" declared the little girl. He's not finished with the rest of us..."

"Dirty little Jew," spat the Pole. He ain't through yet!"

And he added, in even worse French, out of indulgence for Marie: "C't'une maudite Juif, c'est toute! ""

Aaron, raised by his grandfather, tries to come to terms with tradition. He sees the strength of roots that could provide him with a rich and solid identity. But he also wants to live with others, to have a modern life, to succeed. Hence his revolt, which is also expressed through his linguistic identity. When his grandfather forbids him, in Yiddish, to go out with his friends, he attacks him in English:

“Why do you speak Yiddish to me? Isn't English good enough? Why don't you speak white, like everybody around here?”

The key expression "speak white" refers to the language of power, that which constitutes the norm and "normality". Aaron's violent reaction reminds him, with a backlash, that by excluding his grandfather's language, he risks not only losing the richness of Jewish tradition, but also denying himself and losing his identity by submitting to the other. The in-between situation reinforces the effects of exclusion and inclusion. Aaron is constantly confronted with exclusion - from both sides: from non-Jews and from his Orthodox grandfather.

As Viedna shows Aaron that Canadians will never accept his inclusive attitude: *"Canadian Jew! You have to say: 'Canadian Jew', always a Jew,,* He decides to change his name and leave his grandfather after he had been disowned and chased out of the house: *"Get out! Take your books, everything, go away! There's no more room for you in my house! [...] Go away, I don't know you anymore, I don't know your name..."*..

Progressive trends

Identity essentialism - particularly that which characterizes "pure wool" ethnicity - was an obstacle to the integration of New Quebecers in the 1980s and 1990s, at a time when language laws and the Charter of the French Language (1977) proposed an open, civic conception of Quebecity. This was a gradual process, as the abandonment of the essentialist conception necessitated the re-evaluation, or at least relativization, of identity references - history, language, literature, ethnicity and so on. This trend characterizes, among other things, the historical novel and prose that fictionalizes history.

Several stages can be discerned in the cultural and axiological integration of neo-Quebec writers.

- **The first is marked by the sometimes traumatic experiences of their countries of origin:** the war in Lebanon, Brazilian or Chilean prisons, Polish or Yugoslav totalitarianism, etc. The works of immigrant authors enrich Canadian culture with their testimonies, broadening its horizons.
- **The second phase underscores the confrontation between the old and the new,** between the culture of origin and the Canadian culture, which hold up a mirror to each other. Witness **Ying Chen's** *Les Lettres chinoises* (1993), **Dany Laferrière's** *Comment faire l'amour avec un nègre sans se fatiguer* (1985) and **Régine Robin's** *La Québécoise* (1983).
- **The third stage** consists of axiological interaction and interpenetration - of the culture of origin, of the immigrant milieu, of Canadian or Quebec society - reflecting the complexity of the immigrant condition. Such is the case of **Marco Micone** and his trilogy *Gens du silence* (1982), *Addolorata* (1984), *Déjà l'agonie* (1988).

Émile Ollivier's evocatively titled novel *Passages* (1991) combines the three phases of identity interaction. The action takes place in three places, three complementary environments:

- (1) Haiti, where the exile-immigrants place their roots and which is the image of social cohesion;
- (2) (2) Montreal, one of the places of the Haitian diaspora, where their community cohesion is polarized and progressively decomposed under the influence of the Canadian environment; and
- (3) (3) Miami, which, more than Montreal, represents globalization - its composite and fragmentary character at once, its frustrations and superficial contacts between individuals who rub shoulders without meeting

Haitian emigration is represented in two thematic threads. The first tells the story of the inhabitants of Port-à-l'Écu, impoverished and terrorized by the dictatorial regime, who decide to build a boat - La Caminante - to cross the sea and seek a better fate in the United States. The boat sinks in a storm: twenty of the sixty-seven castaways are washed up alive on the Florida coast and interned in a camp for illegal immigrants. The second strand focuses on the biography of **Normand Malavy**, a Haitian intellectual who emigrated to Canada for political reasons. As a child, he had witnessed the torture and death of his father, and this trauma made him a stubborn and persistent opponent of the Haitian dictatorial regime. After twenty years of activism, he felt worn and burnt out. His last commitment, shortly before his death, was to help the shipwrecked crew of La Caminante in Miami. He obtained their release. He also recorded the story of one of them, **Brigitte Kadmon**. This recording was made just as Jean-Claude Duvalier's regime was overthrown. In the novel, this testimony is partially included in the dialogue between **Leyda** and **Amparo**, Normand Malavy's widow and lover respectively, as Amparo, who witnessed Normand's death, visits her friend's wife in Montreal. The rest of the story is told by one of Normand's friends, **Régis**, who, as character-narrator, forms the cornerstone of the narrative structure.

Passages is an existential novel, a novel of the quest for oneself and for others. It has already been indicated that the quest has two poles - collective (migration of the Haitian community) and individual (differentiated situations of intellectuals of the Haitian diaspora in Montreal). In both cases, the existential dimension is accentuated by non-existence - death.

The doubling contributes to the highlighting of cross-perspectives. On the one hand, impoverished Haitians look to the United States and Canada as promised lands. On the other hand, Haitian emigrants long to return to the land of their birth, even if they suspect that their childhood and youth are nothing more than an unreal memory, a kind of dream, and that their myth of roots will shatter on the first confrontation with reality, unless they save the myth by not recognizing reality itself:

„Amparo had just returned from Cuba. She hadn't really come back. She'd come back from Cuba without coming back. In this, she resembled those who, having found Jerusalem, continue to search for it elsewhere, eternally, to the end of the world, to infinity, even beyond.“

Who are these immigrants/emigrants for whom there is no way back, and who meet in Montreal or Miami? How do they see themselves? First and foremost, they're individualists from mixed cultures, with no attachment to one place. **Amparo Doukara**, for example, comes from a Syrian family that first emigrated to Havana, then to the United States. Her parents live in Manhattan, she in Vancouver. Her ex-friend is a Chilean who fled the Pinochet dictatorship and is now leaving Canada to try to return home.

Deprived of fixity, identity can become fluid. **Youyou**, a Haitian and friend of Normand's, seduces women in Montreal bars by fabricating stories about his exotic origins:

„On Monday, we were born on the banks of the Congo River [...]; on Tuesday, we were Malagasy; on Wednesday, pure-bred Peulhs [...]; on Thursday, Ethiopians; on Friday, Zimbabweans; on Saturday, Sudanese from Kartoum; and for you, madam, today, I'm descended from a mother from Martinique, illegitimate daughter of an Oriental fakir. She was brought from Fort-de-France to Port-au-Prince by a Corsican kidnapper with an Italian name, who was fleeing conscription during the last world war. [...] I have the privilege and the disgrace, Madame, of occupying a special place in the West Indian repertoire of métissage and bastardisation.“

Or identity can be multiple. When asked by an immigration official in Miami, *"Where do you come from?"* Normand replies, *"From Canada, but I'm Haitian. The misunderstanding is only cleared up when the employee looks at the Canadian passport: "You're a Canadian, for God's sake! since your passport is Canadian."*

Normand and Régis's awareness of identity is shared by Leyda:

You see, the world is made up of two great races of men: those who take root, who weave themselves a mineral destiny in a dream of stone, and those who think of themselves as pollen.

Phenomenological, existential identity is thus opposed to essentialist identity. The negation of memory leads to a spatialized conception of temporality, reduced to the time of travel or wandering, or to the time of **incessant self-invention**.

Exile is a journey of no return. But exile is also the very image of existence, as indicated by two references in *Passages* to Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*, and through him to the story of the Greek philosopher Heracleitos, whose sentence about the impossibility of entering the same river twice elicits the comment from one of his pupils: "*Master, you can't do it even once*". Which is why, in Kierkegaard's words, "*[i]t is necessary to go beyond*".

The linguistic plurality and plurality of identity that it assumes indicate that French-language can go beyond the national model, both defensive and integrative, and come closer to a post-national, rhizomatic identity. A comparison with Italian-Quebecer **Antonio d'Alfonso** is in order:

Nativo di Montréal

élevé comme Québécois

forced to learn the tongue of power

vivì en México como alternativa

figlio del sole e della campagna

par les francs parleurs aimé

finding thousands like me suffering

me casé y divorcié en tierra fria

nipote di Guglionesi

parlant politique malgré moi

steeled in the school of Old Aquinas

queriendo luchar con mis amigos latinos

Dio where shall I be demain
(trop vif) qué puedo saber yo
spero che la tierra be mine.