

“Without Art, how would we know each other?” Postcolonial Francophone Literature in Canada

Michael Henderson

Juniata College Bookend Seminar, January 18, 2012

Michael Henderson is Associate Professor of French at Juniata College.

First, allow me to explain the source of the quotation in the title of this talk, “Without Art, how would we know each other?” As much as I would like to take credit for this eloquent statement, it is in fact from the work of Canada’s most well-known francophone author, Gabrielle Roy. The quotation plays an iconic role in contemporary Canadian culture since it appears on the back of the twenty-dollar bill, in both the original French and an English translation, along with images of Inuit art. The quotation seems to remind Canadians that even though their country is deeply divided by different languages, histories, and cultures, art provides a means to create national solidarity and cross-cultural understanding.

Second, I would like to define how I will be using the two theoretical terms in the subtitle: “postcolonial” and “francophone.” It is important to do so not because the terms have no fixed meaning or because scholars cannot agree on what the words mean, but because they are part of ongoing academic dialogues that are ideologically, historically, and culturally complex. “Postcolonial” is probably the most widely discussed, disputed, and sometimes misused of the two terms in contemporary critical discourse. Postcolonial studies is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship that developed out of Commonwealth studies in the 1980s as a reaction to Edward Saïd’s seminal work, which exposed the Orientalism that permeated British and American academic institutions in studies and representations of the Middle East. In short, the colonial experience constructed a cultural paradigm that placed the metropolitan centers of the colonizers (such as Paris, London, or Berlin) as the centers of civilization and culture, while the colonized (such as African, Asian, Indian, or Caribbean) inhabited the distant periphery of cultural production.

The colonial metaphor of center and periphery is indeed spatial, and the philosophical justification of the “civilizing missions” of the colonizers was often articulated as the responsibility to bring the peripheral “savages” closer to the civilized centers, at least in terms of customs, education, language, and technology. As Frantz Fanon points out, this creates a psychological inferiority complex in the colonized subject, especially in regards to his or her indigenous culture, history, and language.¹ As many postcolonial writers have pointed out, perhaps the most effective form of colonization that the colonizers practiced was not of political institutions, but of the mind.

The Kenyan writer N’Gugi Wa Thiongo argues, for example, in his radically anti-colonial essay *Decolonising the Mind*, that writers from formerly colonized cultures should refuse to write in the language of the colonizers, producing works only in their native African languages. N’Gugi makes this argument despite the extremely limited number of people who can actually read those languages or the virtual non-existence of publishers who can produce and disseminate those works.² For N’Gugi, writing in the language of the colonizer is intrinsically complicit with the colonial enterprise, placing the writer and his or her indigenous culture in a position of inferiority.

Likewise, the task of the postcolonial scholar is to expose and dismantle the inequalities, misrepresentations, racism, and gender bias that began as part of the colonial experience and that still inform institutions and cultural production. Postcolonial theorists propose a reinterpretation of literature, history, and the social sciences that places the colonial experience and its aftermath at the center of understanding how the contemporary world has been shaped.

Postcolonial theory is, of course, not without its critics. In fact, some of the most fervent critics work within the academic discipline itself. For example, Richard Serrano begins his 2005 book *Against the Postcolonial: ‘Francophone’ Writers at the Ends of the French Empire* by stating, “Since becoming a specialist in francophone literature, whatever that might mean, my experiences attempting to navigate creoles in Haiti, Guadeloupe, and Mauritius; Wolof and Serer in Senegal; and Malagasy in Madagascar have made me acutely aware that Francophone Studies is mostly a mirage while Postcolonial Studies is mostly a delusion.”³ For Serrano, the problem with postcolonial theories is their tendency to create monolithic systems that force vastly different cultures into universal narratives. In its insistence on the power relationship between center and periphery: “Postcolonial Studies seems bent on making every author tell the same story.”⁴ Postcolonial readings of African, Caribbean, or Asian literature often efface the cultural specificity of individual authors and their works. In short, with its insistence on uncovering intrinsic colonial power structures, postcolonial studies risks covering up all other forms of cultural difference.

Although Serrano uses the terms almost as if they were synonymous, the development of francophone studies preceded postcolonial studies and evolved independently. A French geographer, Onésime Reclus, first coined the term *la Francophonie* in 1886. Reclus was attempting to re-define the map of the French colonial empire, not as a representation of distant land and territory, but in terms of cultural identity. He proposed that the one thing that could unite all the distant lands and disparate cultures represented on the map would be the French language itself. Reclus’s concept of a linguistically united colonial empire has had a profound and lasting effect on institutions and cultural identity within most of the former French colonies. Today, *L’Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* (International Organization of *Francophonie*, or OIF), which currently consists of seventy-five member

states and nations, actively cultivates and promotes the notion of a global francophone identity. France is especially interested in supporting the OIF, and for good reason. According to the OIF's website, there are currently about 220 million people who speak French as a primary language or use it in their daily lives, yet only 65 million of them actually live in France. Although France will always be regarded as the linguistic source, the actual future evolution of the language now depends in large part on speakers who live outside the metropolitan center.

The growth of the academic field of francophone studies has naturally coincided with the development of a significant body of francophone literature. Francophone studies have transformed French curricula in post-secondary academic institutions throughout the world, becoming one of the fastest-growing and most dynamic specializations within the discipline. Although research in francophone studies addresses many of the same preoccupations of postcolonial studies, and in particular, the power relationship between the colonial center and the colonized periphery, there has, until only recently, been very little cross-fertilization between the two approaches.

The French-speaking citizens of Canada occupy a unique position in *la Francophonie*, having experienced a historical trajectory that differs greatly from the typical postcolonial narrative. For most francophone Africans, Caribbean residents, Asians, or Pacific Islanders, the term postcolonial signifies a chronological marker, designating either their independence or the transformation of their status within the administrative structure of the French Republic after the mid-twentieth century collapse of the colonial empire. Francophone Canadians, however, experienced a different kind of separation from France. "*Je me souviens* (I remember)," the motto of the predominantly francophone province of Quebec, evokes its deep historical specificity as the key element of French-Canadian cultural identity.

In essence, a single monumental event dominates the French-Canadian memory of history: the decisive battle in 1759 led by the French commander Louis-Joseph Montcalm and the English general James Wolfe on the Plains of Abraham, just outside the walls of Quebec City. After Montcalm's defeat, France ceded what remained of its Canadian territories, primarily the Saint Lawrence valley, to England. When the English troops took over Quebec, they made no effort to win the hearts and minds of the province's French-speaking inhabitants. On the contrary, they treated the French speakers with a level of cruelty and disdain that still resonates in contemporary Quebecois attitudes toward anglophones. Moreover, well into the twentieth century, francophones endured an underprivileged status in many aspects of Canadian culture and society.

Of course, francophone Canadians were not limited to Quebec, but scattered throughout Canada with significant French-speaking communities in Saskatchewan, Manitoba, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia. What united all the French speakers was Canada's linguistically segregated educational system, which also largely preserved the language despite the overwhelming English-speaking majority. The

education of the francophone population was exclusively in the hands of the Catholic Church until the 1960s. The Church did much to preserve and promote the use of French in Canada and even actively tried to increase French-speaking populations, especially in rural areas of the country. On the other hand, the church exercised an unusually restrictive censorship of literature and art produced and disseminated in the French-speaking communities of Canada. After World War I, a rapid migration of French speakers from the rural areas to urban centers began. This intensified with the advent of World War II, with Montreal and Quebec becoming the destinations of choice for most francophone Canadians. Consequently, although this migration essentially devastated French-speaking communities in other parts of Canada, Quebec became the center of francophone cultural life, even declaring itself “*la capitale de la Francophonie*.”

As the francophone population of Quebec gained political power and wealth in the 1960s, the “Quiet Revolution” rapidly and dramatically changed culture and politics. The Church lost its exclusive hold on the francophone education system. Quebecois artists began to explore topics that would have been completely silenced by Church censorship. Consequently, most scholars divide French Canadian literature into two major eras: before 1960 and after 1960.⁵

The Quiet Revolution set out not just to assert a francophone cultural identity, but to correct social and economic inequalities as well. Prior to 1960, for example, Montreal was a segregated city where most of the wealth was concentrated in the hands of the city’s English-speaking minority. In 1959, three-quarters of Quebec’s financial institutions were in non-Quebecois hands. Quebecois owned only 6.5% of the huge mining sector. Although francophones comprised roughly eighty percent of the Quebecois population, they were systematically excluded from economic power. The newly elected francophone government of the Quiet Revolution sought to correct these inequalities by nationalizing private industries, and developing Quebec’s rich natural resources. Hydro-Québec became the new economic engine of the province with the development of huge hydroelectric and fresh water resources in the northern areas of the province. Cultural spending by the Quebecois government increased exponentially as well. In 1957, for example, Quebec allocated about \$5.9 million dollars to funding literature and the arts. The figure increased to \$24.6 million in 1967, then \$197.4 million in 1977. By 1981, Québec was spending \$428.2 million on cultivating the arts, and all this for a population of just under six million people.⁶

Two francophone authors whose work best reflects these rapid social, cultural, and economic upheavals are Gabrielle Roy, who I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, and Michel Tremblay. Gabrielle Roy is the first author who openly challenged Church censorship. Born in Manitoba in 1909, Roy lived in France from 1937 until 1939 to pursue a career as an actor. Although she was unsuccessful, she began to write while living in France. When she returned to Canada, she relocated to Montreal where

she published her first and best-known novel *Bonheur d'occasion* (Second Hand Happiness) in 1945, translated into English as *The Tin Flute* in 1947. The sprawling novel chronicles the economic and social hardships endured by various members of the Lacasse family, who live in an impoverished francophone ghetto of Montreal during the build-up to World War II. The Catholic Church condemned the novel primarily for its starkly realistic depiction of women who are ruined physically, economically, and emotionally because of their inability to use birth control. The Church accused Roy of being a French outsider trying to stir up unrest in francophone Canadian communities. Most critics, however, now credit Gabrielle Roy with having laid the foundations for the Quiet Revolution.

Along with its depictions of the misery of Montreal's francophone underclass, the novel also provides keen insight into French Canadian cultural identity. The characters often reveal how they envision themselves as francophones, outsiders in their own nation, long separated from the metropolitan center that still defines them culturally. For example, in a scene where several male characters are debating whether or not to enlist in the army, Azarius, the Lacasse patriarch, tries to convince the other men that they should join the fight in order to save France. Azarius describes France in mythical terms as the life-giving source at the center of francophone existence. He explicitly compares the relationship of France to French Canadians to that of the sun to the Earth:

“France!” he murmured again. And the word on his lips had both a familiar and a magical sound, evocative of certainty in common things and wonder at something rare and strange.

“Such a beautiful country.”

“How do you know it's so beautiful?” interposed the usher from the Cartier Theater. “Were you ever there?”....

“How do I know France is beautiful?” answered Azarius, in a rich low voice, not at all angry. “How do you know that the sun does you good? . . . How do you know anything about the stars?” “France,” he said, “is like the sun or the stars. We may be far away, we may never have seen it, we Frenchmen, Frenchmen of France but gone from France, we don't know just what France means, we Canadians. No more than we know what the sun is or the stars, except that they give us light by night and day. Night and day,” he repeated.

If France should perish,” he declared, “it would be just as bad for the world as if the sun dropped out of the sky.”⁷

Roy's characters also often express their dislike for and distrust of Canadian anglophones. In a later scene from the novel, as Emmanuel, another francophone enlistee with the idealistic notion that he is going to war to save his beloved France, an anonymous voice reveals that the anglophone soldiers among the troops have a completely different motivation. Emmanuel's inner monologue expresses his sense of betrayal and disgust when he realizes that, from the anglophone soldiers' perspective, they are in fact leaving to fight for England, and, by extension, to maintain the status quo in Canada:

Soudain, Emmanuel entendit dans la foule une voix aux accents métalliques et impérieux: -We'll fight to the last man for the British Empire.

<<L'Empire!>> songea Emmanuel. <<Pour qu'un territoire garde ses limites! Pour que la richesse reste d'un côté plutôt que de l'autre!>>

Maintenant un groupe tout entier chantait:-There'll always be an England.

<<Oui, mais moi, mais Pitou, mais Azarius!>> pensa Emmanuel. <<Est-ce pour merry England, est-ce pour l'Empire que nous allons nous battre?>>⁸

Suddenly, Emmanuel heard a metallic, imperious voice rise from the crowd: "We'll fight to the last man for the British Empire."

"The Empire!" wondered Emmanuel. "So that borders remain the same! So that wealth remains on one side and not the other!"

Then an entire group was singing: "There'll always be an England."

"Yes, but me, Pitou, and Azarius!" thought Emmanuel. "Is it for 'merry England,' is it for the Empire that we are going to fight?" (My translation)

There has never been, unfortunately, an adequate English translation of *Bonheur d'Occasion*.

Although the novel played a vital role in creating the modern francophone Canadian identity, anglophone readers who know the work only through translation have never really been able to grasp its full cultural significance. For example, the 1947 translation of the above passage reveals a shocking lack of historical and cultural understanding, which would explain why Emmanuel feels such outrage and betrayal when he realizes that he and the other francophones might have been duped into fighting for England:

Suddenly, Emmanuel heard rising above the uproar a metallic arrogant voice in English: "We'll fight to the last man for the British Empire!"

"The Empire!" thought Emmanuel. "Are we fighting to hold on to territory? To keep the world's wealth for ourselves and bar the others out?"⁹

The Quebecois author who probably best represents the first wave of post-1960 writers is Michel Tremblay. Born in Montreal in 1942, Tremblay became quickly celebrated in Quebec for his plays and novels, which offer especially rich depictions of life in Montreal's working-class francophone neighborhood of the Plateau Mont-Royal. His cycle of six novels published together as *Chroniques du Plateau Mont-Royal*, which follows several generations of a single family from 1942 to 1963, secured Tremblay's reputation as the Quebecois version of Balzac. Openly gay during his entire professional career, Tremblay's novels and plays often explore in depth the inner lives and struggles of women, gays, and transgendered characters in Quebecois society. A staunch defender of the French language and the Quebecois independence movement, Tremblay has sometimes been reluctant to allow his work to be translated into English. Nevertheless, Tremblay is one of the first Quebecois authors to write his characters' dialogues in Joual, the heavily accented and unique version of French spoken in the working-class neighborhoods of Montreal.

Tremblay's characters often question what it means to be a francophone living outside France. As in Gabrielle Roy's work, they sometimes have an idealized conception of France as the long-lost cultural center of their identity. They are often disillusioned, however, when they actually meet French people in often plausible, yet fantastically improbable encounters. For example, in the 1982 novel *La Duchessee et le roturier* (The Duchess and the Vagabond), set in 1948, the bawdy vaudeville performer Rose Ouellette, better known as "*la Poune*" is visited backstage by a distinguished French gentleman, who turns out to be

none other than Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, the future president of the French republic. Their brief exchange infuriates *la Poune* when she suspects that the Frenchman is in fact treating her and the other Canadians with subtle condescension:

<<Je tenais à vous saluer, madame, la chose est faite.>> Il se retira discrètement (comme il avait tout fait, d'ailleurs) et la Poune se passa la tête dans la porte. <<C'est quoi votre nom, donc, vous, que je mette ça dans mes trophées de chasse?>> Il s'éloignait, très droit, distribuant ici et là de petits sourires aux artistes qu'il reconnaissait et qui s'effaçaient devant lui. <<Valéry Giscard d'Estaing.>> Il avait laissé tomber le nom comme on aurait autrefois déposé une carte de visite dans un plateau d'argent. La Poune fronça les sourcils et éleva la voix. <<J'veus ai pas demandé le nom de votre fille, j'veus ai demandé vot'nom à vous!>> Furieuse, elle rentra dans la loge. <<Valérie! Y veut tu rire de nous autres, lui?>>¹⁰

“I was eager to greet you, Madame, and that’s that.” He went out discretely (as he had done everything, by the way) and *la Poune* stuck her head out the door. “Hey, what’s your name, so I can add it to my trophies?” He was heading straight out, offering a smile here and there to the artists that he thanked as they made way for him. “Valéry Giscard d’Estaing.” He had dropped the name the way people used to plunk a calling card down on a silver platter. *La Poune* raised her eyebrows and said loudly “I didn’t ask ya’ for your daughter’s name, I asked ya’ your name.” Infuriated, she went back into the theater. “Valérie! Is he makin’ fun of us?” (My translation)

The encounter with the francophone cultural center represented by France is the entire subject of Tremblay’s 1984 novel *Des Nouvelles d’Edouard* (News from Edward). Edward, an obese cross-dresser, leaves Montreal in 1950 for Paris upon receiving a modest inheritance after the death of his mother. He leaves with the illusion of finally finding acceptance in Paris and conquering the city’s gay community with his drag act. The narration is in the form of a single lengthy letter that Edward writes to his best friend in Montreal, chronicling his trip and adventures in Paris, which end up lasting only twenty-four hours. Before actually arriving in Paris, Edward’s letter is filled with the joyful anticipation of returning to the source. Once he is actually in Paris, however, almost every encounter that Edward has with real Parisians results in his humiliation. He quickly discovers that he really does not understand much about French culture, and that the Parisians treat him with derision and scorn specifically because of his Canadian origin. In the novel’s climactic scene at the end of a frustrating night spent wandering aimlessly through Paris, Edward finds himself unwittingly sitting in the *Café de Flore* at a table next to one occupied by none other than Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and their existentialist entourage. In one last cry of despair, Edward seems to ask the Frenchman who is mocking him a fundamental question of Quebecois existence:

...le waiter a demandé si j'étais canadien. Je lui ai répondu, en prenant l'accent de la ville de Québec: <<Oui, de Québec, viargette!>> Simone a franchement ri . . . Quelqu'un du groupe qui n'avait pas encore parlé et dont j'ignore le nom a murmuré entre ses dents: <<Je déteste l'accent canadien.>> Les larmes me sont immédiatement montées aux yeux et je lui ai répondu, rien que sur une pinotte: “Me laissez-vous au moins le droit de vivre?>> ... Simone a étiré le bras, posé la main sur la mienne. <<Ne l'écoutez pas monsieur, il est souû!>>¹¹

The waiter asked if I was Canadian. I responded by taking on the accent of Quebec City: “Yes, from Quebec dammit!” Simone laughed out loud Somebody from the group who had not yet spoken to me and whose name I don’t know mumbled under his breath, “I hate the Canadian accent.” Tears immediately came to my eyes and I responded with disdain: “Do you at least grant me the right to exist?” . . . Simone stretched out her arm and put her hand on mine “Don’t listen to him *Monsieur*, he’s drunk.”

After this embarrassment, Edward experiences an existential crisis, which in many ways sums up the feeling of inferiority that results from the idealistic notion of placing France at the center of francophone culture or Quebecois identity. Once actually in the metropolitan cultural center, Edward is made to feel like an unwanted intruder, an outsider with no identity of his own. In the end, Edward embodies the unresolved dilemma at the heart of the notion of *la Francophonie* for the French Canadian. Clinging to a linguistic and historical connection to France to differentiate themselves from the anglophones who marginalized them, French Canadians often still find themselves alienated by the French as well:

Et naturellement, je me suis senti comme un intrus, un indésirable qu'on n'a pas invité et qui s'installe quand même chez vous comme si tout lui était dû. Quelque chose qui resesemblait à de la gêne mêlée de peur m'a froissé les tripes. La tête me tournait. J'ai regardé autour de moi, le boulevard Saint-Germain, la terrasse du Café de Flore, les passants chic ou pouilleux, Simone, et Jean-Paul, et Albert et Toutoune, et les autres... et je me suis senti tellement mais tellement... déplacé! Et indigne! Pas même de faire partie de ce que je voyais mais juste d'être là! J'étais enragé noir, aussi, de ne pas pouvoir me dire tout simplement: <<Un ver dans une pomme, ça se sent pas coupable!>>¹²

Naturally, I felt like an intruder, an unwanted visitor who hasn't been invited but who moves into your house as if everything was owed to him. I had a feeling in my gut of something like embarrassment mixed with fear. My head was spinning. I looked around me: the Boulevard Saint-Germain, the Café de Fore's terrace, the well-dressed and shabby passers-by, Simone, Jean-Paul, Albert, Toutone, and the others And I felt so incredibly displaced! And unworthy! Not from not being part of what I saw, but just for being there! I was red with rage as well for not being able simply to say to myself: “A worm in an apple doesn't have to feel guilty about it!” (My translation)

In conclusion, regardless of the critical debates surrounding francophone or postcolonial studies, what has struck me most in all my readings of African, Caribbean, or Canadian francophone authors is their overwhelming belief that reconstructing, reclaiming, or defining identity to overcome the cultural inferiority complex of the postcolonial experience requires the creation of art and literature. Postcolonial or francophone writers do not view literature and artistic production as a luxury, or merely a form of entertainment. Literature and art serve to define a culture. On the other hand, artistic production is the primary means of communicating a cultural identity to those who are outside the culture. Although they may argue about how to go about producing or analyzing it, francophone and postcolonial authors all see

literature as necessary for cross-cultural dialogue, which brings me back to the quote from Gabrielle Roy that opened this talk: “Without Art, how would we know each other?”

NOTES:

1. Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Editions du sud, 1957), p. 11.
2. N’Gugi Wa Thiongo, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: Heinemann, 1986), pp. 29-30.
3. Richard Serrano, *Against the Postcolonial: “Francophone” Writers at the Ends of the French Empire*. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005), p. 1.
4. Ibid, p. 3
5. Éloïse Brière, “Quebec and France: *La Francophonie* in a Comparative Postcolonial Frame,” in *Postcolonial Theory and Francophone Literary Studies*, H. Adlai Murdoch and Anne Donadey, eds. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), p. 152.
6. Taras Grescoe, *Sacré Blues: An Unsentimental Journey through Quebec* (Toronto: Macfarlane, Walter and Ross, 2000), pp. 1-11.
7. Gabrielle Roy, *The Tin Flute*, Hannah Josephsen, trans. (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1947), pp. 242-243.
8. Gabrielle Roy, *Bonheur d’occasion* (Montreal: Boréal, 1945), p. 399.
9. Roy, *The Tin Flute*, Josephsen, trans., p. 270.
10. Michel Tremblay, *Chroniques du Plateau Mont-Royal* (Montreal: Leméac, 2000), p. 434.
11. Ibid., p. 766.
12. Ibid., p. 767.