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Faculté des lettres et sciences humaines
Université de Sherbrooke

PIERRE NEPVEU, TRANSCULTURALISM AND NEO-QUÉBÉCOIS TEXTS

PIERRE NEPVEU, LE TRANSCULTURALISME ET QUELQUES TEXTES NÉO-QUÉBÉCOIS

par

Daniel Lewis

- 1975

Mémoire présenté en vue de l’obtention de la Maîtrise ès arts

Littérature canadienne comparée

Sherbrooke
Décembre 2001
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Composition du Jury

Pierre Nepveu, Transculturalism and Neo-Québécois Texts
Pierre Nepveu, le transculturalisme et quelques textes néo-québécois

par

Daniel Lewis

Ce mémoire a été évalué par un jury composé des personnes suivantes:

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Abstract

Pierre Nepveu, Transculturalism and Neo-Québécois Texts
by Daniel Lewis

Probably no Quebec critic argues more passionately and convincingly for the transcultural aspects of postmodernism than Pierre Nepveu in *L’Écologie du réel: mort et naissance de la littérature québécoise contemporaine* (1988). Nepveu says that the distinct Québécois literature sparked by the Quiet Revolution emerged into a solidly postmodern era marked by the death of history, distinct genres, fixed ideologies, and master narratives, including nationalism. Nepveu argues for a *post-québécois* literature, a position representing a radical shift in the perception of canon formation and literary criticism in Quebec, one calling for an abandoning of the canon as a pre-conditioner of the social system, and a rereading of the canon using a more descriptive or phenomenological approach more closely allied with contemporary Quebec reality — Nepveu’s “écologie du réel”. Nepveu emphasises the ecological nature of Québécois cultural reality as an ongoing sustainable system continuously transformed through a process of creation and destruction, or restructuring and destructuring, where the destruction is not necessarily a negative. Quebec’s transcultural reality forms an intrinsic part of Nepveu’s theories.

This work relates Nepveu’s theories of postmodernism and transculturalism in Québécois literature to Ying Chen’s *L’Ingratitude* and *Les Lettres chinoises*, and Dany Laferrière’s *Érosshima* and *L’Odeur du café*, stressing the similarities between *néo-québécois* (or immigrant) and *nouveau québécois* (spawned by the Quiet Revolution) works. References are included to other Québécois texts, including Simon Harel’s *Le Voleur de parcours*, which discusses cosmopolitanism and identity in Québécois literature.

The four primary texts are explored with respect to 1) the postmodern concepts of the death of history, distinct genres, fixed ideologies, and master narratives, and the themes of catastrophe, alterity, parody and pluralism; 2) the transcultural realities of deculturalization and reculturalization, or of mutual contamination; 3) the themes of exile and *la passion de retour*; 4) the New World experience as a voyage into inner space; and 5) Nepveu’s three major themes found in *néo-québécois* texts, i.e.: alienation and loss of identity, nostalgia, and continual rebirth. An Appendix contains a transcript of an interview with Pierre Nepveu conducted in August 2001, focusing on the evolution in his thinking since publishing *L’Écologie* and what trends he predicts.
Sommaire de
«Pierre Nepveu, le transculturalisme et les textes néo-québécois»
par Daniel Lewis

Il n’y a probablement aucun critique littéraire québécois qui lutte aussi passionnément et de façon aussi convaincante pour les aspects transculturels du postmodernisme que Pierre Nepveu, qui publia en 1988 *L’Écologie du réel: mort et naissance de la littérature québécoise contemporaine*. Nepveu prétend qu’il existe une littérature post-québécoise, parce qu’il affirme que la littérature québécoise distincte créée au cours de la Révolution tranquille en est arrivée à une époque solidement postmoderne, époque caractérisée par la fin de l’histoire, des genres distincts et des idéologies fixes, y compris le nationalisme. Le point de vue de Nepveu représente un déplacement radical en ce qui concerne sa perception de la formation du canon et de la critique littéraire au Québec. Cela signale l’abandon du canon à titre de pré-conditionnement du système social, et l’adoption d’une approche plus descriptive ou phénoménologique, qui est liée davantage à la réalité contemporaine du Québec, c’est-à-dire à ce que Nepveu a baptisé l’écologie du réel. La réalité transculturelle du Québec forme une partie intrinsèque des théories de Nepveu.

Le présent mémoire fait un lien entre les théories de Nepveu touchant le postmodernisme et le transculturalisme dans la littérature québécoise à *L'Ingratitude* et à *Les Lettres chinoises* de Ying Chen, ainsi qu’à Éroshima et à *L'Odeur du café* de Dany Laferrière. Dans toute le mémoire, des allusions sont faites à d’autres textes écrits par des écrivains néo-québécois et à d’autres textes qui sont considérés d’habitude comme faisant partie du canon québécois. Pour des fins d’équilibre, les théories de Simon Harel touchant le cosmopolitisme et l’identité dans la littérature québécoise, telles que présentées dans *Le Voleur de parcours*, ainsi que des commentaires de plusieurs autres critiques québécois, sont présentés en contraste avec les théories de Nepveu.

Dans le présent mémoire, l’expression «écrivains néo-québécois» est utilisée afin de décrire des écrivains récemment arrivés au Québec et écrivant en français, puisque les expressions «écrivains immigrants» ou «littérature immigrante» semblent suggérer un étiquetage qui va à l’encontre de l’esprit de cet ouvrage, et que l’expression «nouveau Québécois» fait allusion d’habitude à la nouvelle école d’intellectuels et d’écrivains créées par la Révolution tranquille. Le
présent mémoire souligne les points semblables dans les textes néo-quÉbécois et nouveaux québécois.

Lorsqu’on examine la critique culturelle d’une société qui évolue aussi rapidement que la société québécoise, il faut toujours tenir compte du contexte historique. La réalité et la perspective historique offertes à Nepveu au moment où il écrivait *L’Écologie du réel* au cours des années 80 étaient tout à fait différentes de la réalité culturelle et politique du Québec qui avait engendré la Révolution tranquille des années 60. De même, en considérant *L’Écologie du réel* et les autres ouvrages théoriques de Nepveu, il faut prendre garde de juger ce matériel à la lumière de la réalité culturelle et politique actuelle du Québec. En fait, l’œuvre de Nepveu a contribué en partie à façonner cette réalité.

Il est important de comprendre, dans ce contexte, le choix de termes utilisés par Nepveu. Il revendique non seulement une réévaluation de la littérature et de la culture québécoises dans le cadre de la réalité postmoderne, mais il souligne aussi l’écologie de cette réalité, ce qui signifie qu’elle doit être vue comme un système durable et permanent. Sa croyance en *l’écologie du réel* implique qu’elle renferme ses propres freins et contrepoids en matière de développement, même si ceux-ci ne sont pas toujours évidents en soi. Il est aussi important de remarquer que le concept de Nepveu d’une réalité écologique signifie que celle-ci est continuellement transformée par un processus sans fin de création et de destruction, et que la destruction n’est pas nécessairement un fait négatif. En raison de la re-crÉation impliquée, il s’agit plutôt de destruction dans le sens de déstructuration, un processus de dissolution et de résolution dans lequel les éléments essentiels sont reformés.

Selon Caroline Bayard, dans la tradition du québec, la critique littéraire était l’apanage de clercs tels que l’Abbé Henri-Raymond Casgrain (1831-1904) et Monseigneur Camille Roy (1870-1943), qui la concevaient comme un véhicule essentiellement prescriptif visant à préserver l’ordre social tout en favorisant la cause de la littérature canadienne-française. Depuis la Révolution tranquille, la production et la critique québécoises ont avancé rapidement. Alors que des critiques comme Gilles Marcotte et Jean-Charles Falardeau prétendaient que la critique littéraire du Québec
n'avait pas les qualités barthésiennes d’«un langage personnel et une vision du monde», la montée du nationalisme québécois a promu davantage le mouvement visant une littérature québécoise distincte dans une ambiance caractérisée par plus de liberté intellectuelle et de sécularisme.

Au fur et à mesure que le Québec s’est affranchi de sa condition coloniale, la critique avait tendance à conserver un rôle essentiellement prescriptif et de jouer le rôle d’agent définitisseur de la communauté imaginée par les nationalistes, au moment où les politiques de la formation de canons étaient de plus en plus critiquées ailleurs. Selon Nepveu, le moment de l’émergence post-coloniale du Québec coïncidait avec la montée du postmodernisme, du pluralisme culturel et du concept de village global (en même temps que d’autres nationalismes post-coloniaux, sans oublier la sensibilisation aux communautés culturelles noires, féministes et gaiès).

Un jour, *L’Écologie du réel* pourrait fort bien être reconnu comme un texte source quant à la définition de la critique littéraire québécoise. Plus récemment encore, il y a eu de plus en plus de revendications de la reconnaissance des réalités postmodernes et essentiellement multi-ethniques de la société québécoise contemporaine. Dans *Le Trafic des langues*, Sherry Simon affirme que le Québec sera bientôt une société tout à fait pluraliste, un fait que reflète le nombre soudainement croissant de textes québécois écrits en français par des écrivains immigrants. Selon Simon, ce qui est marqué par la nouvelle réalité québécoise est non l’existence de groupes ethniques séparés, mais le fait que l’individu participe à des expériences multi-ethniques, par exemple dans des œuvres telles que *La Québécoite de Régine Robin, Copies conformes* de Monique LaRue, et *Babel, prise deux*, de Francine Noël.

En 1989, Simon Harel publiait *Le Voleur de parcours: Identité et cosmopolitisme dans la littérature québécoise contemporaine*, dans lequel il étudie le cosmopolitisme au Québec et le rôle de l’étranger dans la littérature et la culture québécoises. Le point de vue de Harel ressemble de bien des façons à celui de Nepveu; toutefois, la vision de Nepveu d’une écologie du réel semble célébrer davantage les processus en question. Il n’est pas surprenant que Nepveu et Harel partagent bien des opinions, et ces opinions ont été publiées vers la même époque. Pour paraphraser Nepveu dans l’interview comprise dans le présent mémoire, il s’agissait d’idées dont le temps était arrivé.
Plutôt que de concevoir le postmodernisme comme le fait de présenter un monde sans centre, la vision de Nepveu voit la littérature non comme une solution ou une consolation pour la perte du centre, mais comme la force ultime de l’équilibre dans la réitération constante du nombre illimité de centres.

Selon Nepveu, la réalité postmoderne signifie que les œuvres des écrivains néo-québécois tombent assez bien dans la tradition littéraire québécoise. Par contraste, l’approche de Harel semble suggérer une espèce d’appropriation à l’inverse. Harel voit les œuvres d’écrivains néo-québécois tels que Dany Laferrière, Marco Miconé et d’autres comme un défi présenté à la littérature québécoise d’abandonner son écorce protectrice utilisée pour stéréotyper les étrangers et d’embrasser plutôt l’étrangeté en soi. Les arguments de Nepveu et de Harel en faveur de la reconnaissance de la société québécoise comme étant intrinsèquement multi-ethnique remontent à l’essai célèbre de Ernest Renan, «Qu’est-ce qu’une nation» (1882). Dans le même esprit, au tout début de la Révolution tranquille, dans «La Fatigue culturelle au Canada français», Hubert Aquin parlait d’une culture globale québécoise qui reconnaissait la nature intrinsèquement poly-ethnique de la société québécoise tout en englobant tous les francophones du Québec.

Dans Le Buffet: dialogue sur le Québec à l’an 2000, une série d’essais publiés récemment qui composent un dialogue, Jacques Godbout et Richard Martineau essayaient de détruire le concept qu’un sens d’identité culturelle doit être basé sur le nationalisme, encore un autre joug post-colonial. Martineau contredit l’impératif nationaliste politique et adopte le point de vue de «celui qui a toujours refusé d’être embouteillé, qui a toujours fui les étiquettes, qui n’a cessé de se chercher, de tourner la page, de jongler avec les identités, de sauter les barrières».

Le concept de Nepveu du transculturalisme à titre d’équilibre entre une célébration des différences culturelles par opposition à l’assimilation est reflété dans Addolorata et Déjà l’agonie de Marco Miconé, et dans Sous le Signe du Phénix: Entretiens avec 15 créateurs italo-québécois, de Fulvio Caccia. Caccia a tiré le titre du fait que les immigrants, dans le processus d’adaptation à la vie dans une société en pleine évolution, font face à un processus sans fin d’auto-recréation.
Cette renaissance continuelle est mise en contraste avec le désir dominant d’être simplement accepté, que symbolise le caméléon.

Simon Harel voit la nature cosmopolite du transculturalisme dans la littérature québécoise dans l’optique d’une tentative ironique de décolonisation, d’un refus des conditions de l’ethnicité imposées par l’opresseur colonial, ainsi que d’une volonté de redéfinir ces conditions. En fin de compte, toutefois, Nepveu et Harel sont d’accord pour conclure que la culture peut se mesurer à la capacité de changement et de métaissage d’une société.

Selon Nepveu, des textes tels que Volkswagen Blues de Jacques Poulin ont servi à amorcer le transculturalisme, comme étant central à la redéfinition de l’expérience québécoise. Le danger d’enfermer la littérature immigrante dans un ghetto sous prétexte qu’elle forme un genre distinct est opposé par la forte présence ethnique authentique et par les multiples personnalités culturelles dans la littérature québécoise majoritaire depuis les années 80.

Dans «La Passion du retour: écritures italiennes au Québec», Nepveu sonde le fait que les liens littéraires entre les Italo-québécois et les Québécois comprennent un sens d’exil partagé, le thème du retour, ainsi qu’un sentiment de nostalgie avec son sens révisionniste du passé. Les thèmes communs de l’exil et de la nostalgie d’un passé perdu sont des signes d’une convergence importante entre les textes d’écrivains «nouveau québécois» et néo-québécois.

Gilles Marcotte a retracé la «poésie de l’exil» jusqu’aux années 1850, dans les œuvres de Crémazie, d’Alfred Garneau et de Lozeau. Marcotte prétend que leur poésie de la terreur, du désespoir et de l’aliénation de la vie est un résultat naturel du fait qu’ils ont été sévrés de leurs racines européennes. Nepveu explique que cette poésie de l’exil, la poésie dite “du pays” aura certes joué un rôle essentiel dans la liquidation d’un certain roman familial trop typiquement québécois et dans le retour à cet “orphelinat de la neige” dont a parlé Jacques Brault». Ce sens de l’orphelinat se retrouve sous une forme ou une autre dans les œuvres de Ying Chen et de Dany Laferrière. Les œuvres de Chen exploitent le fait que le sens postmoderne de l’exil fait des immigrants même des gens sédentaires, alors que les œuvres de Laferrière traitent à la fois de nostalgie et de la vie dans le moment présent.
ceux et celles qui restent dans leur pays. *L'Ingratitude*, dont le narrateur est outre-tombe et dont la perspective se déplace sans cesse, produit un climat de rêve et un sens de la confusion, ainsi qu’une fragmentation causée par les déplacements dans le temps et la perspective.

Si Nepveu voit dans la littérature québécoise une émergence de «l’orphelinat de la neige» et si les personnages de Micone sont «les orphelins de l’émigration», alors les personnages de Laferrière peuvent être vus comme les orphelins du soleil. À part la fragmentation et le sens ironique de l’auto-dérision qui caractérisent l’œuvre de Laferrière, il y a une légèreté qui semble quelque peu représenter les éléments les plus optimistes de la vie dans le moment présent dans le cadre de la catastrophe postmoderne. *L'Odeur du café* et *Éroshima* reflètent tous les deux la vision de Nepveu d’une écologie du réel comme une célébration de la vie.

Reflétant le thème de la passion du retour, *L'Odeur du café* est un récit révisionniste idéalisé, presque fantaisiste, d’une enfance passée dans une famille et une société déchirées par la pauvreté. Cependant, il n’y a ici rien de la violence et de l’horreur auxquelles on s’attend généralement d’Haïti. Dans ce retour par la mémoire, l’arôme éphémère du café est un thème perpétuel qui sert à nous rappeler de demeurer ancrés dans le moment présent, dans «l’écologie d’ici».

Dans *Éroshima*, qui sonde le thème de l’holocauste nucléaire comme l’expérience sexuelle ultime, Laferrière présente un narrateur qui vit uniquement dans le moment présent. Le narrateur sans nom est un Haïtien noir narcissiste qui vit, la plupart du temps à Montréal, une vie vouée uniquement à son bon plaisir tandis qu’il attend l’apocalypse nucléaire. Son manque d’un passé ou d’un avenir, ainsi que son hédonisme, font de lui une autre espèce d’orphelin du soleil.

Selon Nepveu, la nature transculturelle comme telle de la société et de la culture québécoises explique pourquoi et les écrivains «nouveau québécois» et néo-québécois partagent un sens de l’aliénation et de la passion du retour. La convergence entre ces groupes d’œuvres explique aussi comment des œuvres par des écrivains néo-québécois sont liées intrinsèquement à l’expérience culturelle québécoise. Que la trame se situe en Haïti, à Shanghai, au Québec ou ailleurs, si la littérature québécoise est définie comme une littérature qui est une expression d’une
culture toujours en évolution et toujours en voie de se redéfinir grâce à ses interactions transculturelles, alors les œuvres écrites par les écrivains néo-quÉbécois méritent certainement d’Être considérées comme faisant partie de la littérature majoritaire.

La présente thèse comprend une Annexe renfermant la transcription d’une entrevue avec Pierre Nepveu menée en août 2001. Dans l’entrevue, Nepveu nous entretient de l’évolution de sa pensée depuis la premiÈre parution de L’Écologie du réel, de sa façon de voir la situation actuelle, et des tendances qui se dessinent, à son avis, à l’avenir. Dans l’entrevue, Nepveu nous explique que la littérature québécoise est maintenant établie parmi les écrivains des Amériques qui travaillent en français, que cette littérature puise sa force dans ses expériences transculturelles et que la littérature québécoise est plus forte que jamais maintenant que le Québec n’est plus seul dans son affirmation de soi.
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la liste des éloges funèbres paraissant interminable), ne peut-on se résoudre à une
clôture de plus, à un autre crépuscule: la fin de la littérature québécoise?

(L'Écologie 14)

The Icon Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought defines postmodernism as:

[. . .] a wide-ranging cultural movement which adopts a sceptical attitude to many
of the principles and assumptions [of modernism] that have underpinned Western
thought and social life for the last few centuries [. . . including] a belief in the
inevitability of progress in all areas of human endeavour, and in the power of
reason, as well as a commitment to originality in both thought and artistic
expression. (Sim 339)

Postmodernism represents a rejection of the modernist optimism in its quest for rational
solutions. Instead, postmodernism is driven by a strong sense of scepticism and irony.

[It] is intrinsically anti-authoritarian in outlook and negative in tone: more
concerned with undermining the pretensions of other theories than putting
anything positive in their place. It is one of the characteristics of postmodernity
that there is a decline in belief in universal theories, and a greater commitment to
pragmatism in political affairs. This is accompanied by a generalized suspicion of
authority and its grand narratives, and a concern to encourage diversity and
cultural difference. (Icon 340)

This serves to illustrate that postmodernism is less of a belief system than it is a state of
mind. In other words, postmodernism can be viewed "as an attitude in which we cannot give up our
cherished hopes and beliefs, but at the same time can no longer embrace them with unqualified or
wholehearted adherence" (Icon 286-7).

Probably no Quebec critic argues more passionately and convincingly for aspects of
postmodernism than Nepveu in L'Écologie du réel, although he is also less than interested in "une
espèce d'euphorie de la post- ou de la trans-modernité" (L'Écologe 10). In announcing the death
of la littérature québécoise, Nepveu suggests that it be replaced by la littérature post-québécoise
(14).
Nepveu, as many others in Quebec, was stricken by a deep sense of “after” following the defeat of the first sovereignty referendum in 1980. After the failure to create the independent nation-state envisaged by the separatists, he sees a renunciation of nostalgia, but also a refusal of cultural amnesia (L’Écologie 10)². He suggests that here is an opportunity to re-evaluate Quebec’s cultural and literary mode d’être, not from a nationalist perspective, but from a contemporary one based on the postmodern concepts of catastrophe, alterity, parody and pluralism (10). A strong part of this new acceptance of the plurality in Quebec society is a sense of shared exile.

Nepveu’s position represents a radical shift in the perception of canon formation and literary criticism in Quebec. Nepveu’s approach means an abandoning of the canon as a preconditioner of the social system, and an adoption of a more descriptive or phenomenological approach which is more closely allied with contemporary Quebec reality. What is needed, Nepveu says, is a true écologie du réel (10).

La littérature «québécoise», elle, transforme, ou veut transformer, la réalité. Elle est portée par une sorte de mythe faustien où s’affirment les infinies possibilités de développement du moi (individuel et collectif) mais où, du même coup, comme l’a rappelé Marshall Berman à propos du mythe de Faust dans la modernité, se pose l’exigence d’une perpétuelle et infinie destruction.

Cette transformation du réel (création / destruction) suppose une habitation radicale du présent, de l’ici-maintenant. Un présent vulgaire, aliénant, dégradé où éclatent de toutes parts les signes de notre inexistence et où, dès lors, tout esthétisme littéraire semble un alibi, un refuge dans l’«aventure intérieure» [. . .]

Dire le réel, écrire vrai, c’est à la limite détruire tout ce qui en soi, ou hors de soi, se dérobe à l’absolu présent. (19)

It is important to understand Nepveu’s choice of terms here. He is not only calling for a re-evaluation of Québécois literature and culture within the postmodern reality, but he emphasises the

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2. All references not clearly labelled as direct quotations may be assumed to be my own translation or paraphrase of the author’s position. Except where otherwise indicated, all translations are my own. All direct quotations are indicated by either quotation marks or indented text.
ecology of that reality, meaning that it must be viewed as an ongoing sustainable system. His belief in "l'écologie du réel" implies that it contains its own developmental checks and balances, even if they may not always be self-evident. It is equally important to note that Nepveu's concept of an ecological reality means that it is continually transformed by an endless process of creation / destruction, and that the destruction is not necessarily a negative. Because of the implicit re-creation, it is destruction more in the sense of destructuring, a process of dissolution and resolution in which the essential elements are reformed.

In L'Écologie du réel, Nepveu sought to predicate a rereading of la littérature québécoise based on an understanding of contemporary Québécois society. In Intérieurs du nouveau monde, published in 1998, Nepveu explores how Quebec and other New World cultures are all phenomena of the joint American continental experience, an experience marked by a search for interior space. Part of the problem in recognizing our common American identity is due to the appropriation of the term "American" by the culture of the United States of America. Nepveu and others are now beginning to use variants of the term "USian" to refer to things pertaining to the US, while they try to reserve "American" to refer to things relating to the common New World continental experience.

Critical Background

Traditionally in Quebec, in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, literary criticism was the venue of clerics like l'Abbé Henri-Raymond Casgrain (1831-1904) and Monseigneur Camille Roy (1870-1943) who saw it as an essentially prescriptive vehicle for preserving the social order while advancing the cause of French-Canadian literature. To quote Casgrain: "Notre littérature sera nationale ou elle ne sera pas" (Quoted in Wyczynski, 276). Later, and in particular since the Quiet Revolution, Québécois literary production and criticism advanced rapidly. While critics such as Gilles Marcotte and Jean-Charles Falardeau argued that Quebec criticism lacked the Barthesian qualities of "un langage personnel et une vision du monde," (Marcotte quoted in Bayard 126) the rise of Quebec nationalism further fuelled the movement for a distinct littérature québécoise in an
atmosphere of increased intellectual freedom and secularism. What followed was a dialectical movement between imported structuralism and a separatist, Marxist and historicist-inspired discourse (Bayard, “Critical Instincts” 126). Quebec’s answer to structuralism — cultural semiotics — became its critical canon of the 1970s, and history as an explanatory paradigm continued to flourish (128).

Criticism often tended to maintain an essentially prescriptive role, serving as a defining agent of the nationalist imagined community. According to Caroline Bayard, the prescriptive nature of literary criticism lent the Québécois canon greater credibility as an agent of nationalism at a time when the politics of canon-formation was coming under increasing attack elsewhere (126).

The importance attached to the role of literature as a defining agent of the imagined community of Quebec nationalists has thrust Québécois criticism more to the forefront of cultural and political debates than literary criticism in the rest of Canada; as E.D. Blodgett says, “the literature of Quebec is more important ideologically than that of Canada” because Quebec is more recently emerging from colonial status. He distinguishes between “literature as an object of study and literature as an ideological weapon,” that is, as a tool of nationalist imaging (Configuration 16-17). However, when Blodgett says that: “One of the essential characteristics of a candid nationalism is unity of language. Nationalism only grudgingly tolerates ambiguity” (17), he seems to imply that ethnic or linguistic nationalism is almost an expression of the natural order, an argument that would seem to be contradicted by the plurilingual cases of Belgium, Switzerland, the USA, India, China and others.

The very timing of Quebec’s postcolonial emergence coincided with the rise of postmodernism, multiculturalism and the concept of the global village, and the associated decline in closed systems such as nationalism. However, the growth of Québécois cultural awareness also coincided with a rise in English-Canadian as well as other post-colonial nationalisms, not to

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3. According to Benedict Anderson, the nation-state is a relatively recent (19th Century) political invention that creates a “people” from a previously culturally mixed population. The development of a national literature is seen by him and others as critical to developing a sense of national identity.
mention awareness of Black, feminist and Gay cultural communities. More recently, there have been increasing calls for greater recognition of the postmodern and essentially multi-ethnic realities of contemporary Quebec society. As Bayard says:

Lorsque Gilles Marcotte parlait du «concert discordant des théories et des méthodes» qui nous force à constater l’extrême fragilité descriptive de la pensée et le fait que «le temps d’affirmation est devenu si court qu’il en est presque dérisoire» (La Littérature\textsuperscript{5} 161), il suggérait aussi que les deux seules tentations qui s’offraient à nous étaient soit l’absolutisation d’un système au détriment des autres (fin du désordre et retour d’une pensée unidimensionnelle dont il avoue se sentir plus ou moins directement issu), ou le parti pris de la diversité, du relativisme, de l’éparpillement, du grappillage, du divers. (100 Years 44)

In Le Trafic des langues, Sherry Simon says that Quebec will soon be a fully pluralistic society, a fact reflected in the sudden increase in the number of Québécois texts in French by immigrant writers (30). The problem becomes one of protectionism of Québécois culture versus growth (32). Not only are there more “non-pure laine” texts appearing, but more texts are polylingual (132). The polylingual texts, with French as the common denominator, reflect the increasingly multi-ethnic nature of Quebec culture. For Simon, what is marked by the new multiculturalism in Quebec is not the existence of separate ethnic groups, but that the individual is involved in multi-ethnic experiences, as reflected in works such as La Québécoite by Régine Robin, Copies conformes by Monique LaRue, and Babel, prise deux by Francine Noël (131-39). Despite these changes, there is still a marked resistance to the recognition of English Quebec writers as being expressions of the Québécois culture, although even this has begun to show signs of change.

\footnote{Although the actual number of nation-states has increased, closed nationalist states seem doomed to condemnation by the international community in favour of nation-states that recognize their cultural relativity.}

\footnote{Marcotte, Gilles et André Brochu. La littérature et le reste: Lire de lettres. Montreal: Quinze, 1980.}
When Homi Bhabha made the comment that “English is no longer an English language” (Nation 6), he was referring to how the use of English has spread to the point where it may now be, among others, also an East Indian or African language. Considering the new pluralism evident in Québécois society and elsewhere, we hope to illustrate through the exploration of texts here that, in some respects, Homi Bhabha’s comment can now be extrapolated and re-interpreted to describe the role of Québécois language and culture within Quebec, as they serve the expressive needs of people originally from other languages and cultures who now fall within the Québécois postmodern experience. Certainly, this is a phenomenon that may be repeated within other postmodern societies as well.

In discussing L’Écologie du réel, Simon says that it is

[... ] concerned less with presenting new critical objects than in a revisionist view of the tradition. This orientation has the double effect of augmenting the weight and substance of the tradition (what Smart calls the ‘Quebec cultural text’, a scroll unfurling from 1884 to the present day) at the same time as it confirms what René Payant has defined as the essentially revisionist nature of the postmodern 1980s. (“Culture” 170-1)

For Payant, postmodernism involves the type of re-examination proposed by Nepveu:

We understand then that the postmodern is probably not the production of new objects, that it does not derive from the progress of Techno-culture, that it is not a question of style. It concerns interpretative and evaluative systems, in other words reception. The postmodern condition is the [...] disappearance of stable and absolute frames of reference. (Payant, qtd in “Culture” 170-1)

In 1989, Simon Harel published Le Voleur de parcours: Identité et cosmopolitisme dans la littérature québécoise contemporaine, in which he explores cosmopolitanism in Quebec and the role of the foreigner in Québécois literature and culture. Harel sees Québécois literature as a continual balancing act between the old prescriptive approach and a sort of transcultural tower of Babel. For Harel, this ambivalence is a reflection of Québécois society itself. Because of the Québécois inherent sense of alienation, the dilemma of whether to reject foreigners as a threat, or
embrace them as fellow exiles can only be solved by adopting a more open definition of Québécois culture, one where it is possible to accommodate other voices. "Ce geste prend la forme d’une ouverture, d’un signe d’alliance puisque l’hétérotopie de l’identité québécoise montre à tous les nostalgiques des cultures enracinées la prééminence du mouvement et du métissage" (Voleur 290-1).

Nepveu also sees culture as a continuous balancing act, but his vision of an écologie du réel is somewhat more Rabelaisian. Rather than seeing postmodernism as meaning a world without a centre, his vision is of literature not as a solution or a consolation for the lost centre, but as the ultimate balancing force in the continuous reiteration of the unlimited number of centres (L’Écologie 220). He welcomes the new pluralistic society as a chance to create an

Écologie de l’ici : aménagement, gestion des ressources, gestion du moi, vision systémique et environnementale, rituels de séparation et de reconfiguration, rituels de l’impureté à la fois menaçante et créatrice, jeux de formes, conscience des énergies. Dans ce contexte, le réel apparaît bel et bien comme «catastrophique», non pas tant au sens de «désastreux», que selon une acception topologique et énergétique: réel des intermittences, des mutations, des tensions destructives et créatrices. Réel où ne cesse de se revivre, répétitivement, le drame de l’égarement, de l’altérité dépaysante, de la confusion babélienne des signes et aussi le plaisir fou des croisements, des sursisages, des sensations «vraies», c’est-à-dire toujours aussi imaginaires, fictives, irréelles. (L’Écologie 210)

Beginning with Saint-Denys Garneau, Nepveu engages in an extensive rereading of the Québécois canon in support of his argument. Nepveu says that Garneau opened up the realms of the imagination later explored by Miron, Aquin, Brault and Chamberland (41). Although Garneau was largely renounced by critics during the Quiet Revolution, Nepveu sees in him "un fondateur, le premier d’ici qui ait perçu et concrétisé dans une forme littéraire la collectivité comme réunion de solitudes, la modernité comme épopée malheureuse, procession des fils orphelins dans le désert de monde qui est le désert de la pensée enfin responsable d’elle-même" (L’Écologie 74).
imperative that demands that a sense of Québécois identity must be based on a particular political agenda, and embraces instead the position of “celui qui a toujours refusé d’être embouteillé, qui a toujours fui les étiquettes, qui n’a cessé de se chercher, de tourner la page, de jongler avec les identités, de sauter les barrières” (26):

«Ce qui fait qu’un homme est libre, que son destin est passionnant, que sa vie est une aventure, est que son identité excède son appartenance», me disait Bernard-Henri Lévy en novembre 1995. Il ajoutait qu’il croit que «l’appartenance à une communauté de langue, de mémoire ou d’origine n’est pas le dernier mot de la définition d’un individu.» Comme l’auteur de L’Idéologie française, je préférerais toujours l’individu aux nations. Ce qui m’intéresse, chez un homme ou chez une femme, ce ne sont pas ses racines, mais ses branches. Sa capacité de s’extirper, de s’arracher, de se dépasser. D’aller au-delà, de passer outre. (26)

Martineau continues in his support of the individual as a part of the celebration of a pluralist culture and in his rejection of a nationalist-based sense of identity: “Chaque homme n’est-il pas une île? Chaque individu n’est-il pas un pays? Je ferai flotter mon propre drapeau, je brandirai mes propres couleurs. Je parlerai en mon nom” (31). Martineau says that Quebec “devra apprendre à mieux respecter les différences. Car là-bas, ça sera l’anarchie, le bordel. Une culture mouvante, dépourvue de centre, parlant toutes sortes de langues bizarres, déchirée, criarde. All you can eat” (89).

Martineau argues that intellectuals and politicians who continue to support the myth of a homogenous culture are afraid of the idea of a nation based on disparate elements.

On peut dire la même chose du concept de culture nationale : l’idée de culture nationale conçue comme l’expression d’une société lisse et homogène est fallacieuse. Si certain intellectuels et politiciens continuent d’entretenir ce mythe, c’est tout simplement parce que la modernité les effraie ; parce qu’ils n’arrivent pas à concevoir une nation composée d’éléments disparates. Parce qu’ils croient
que l’abstraction est l’ennemie jurée de l’âme, et qu’on ne peut avoir d’essence que dans un monde enraciné. (108-9)

In rejecting a prescriptive definition of Québécois society, Godbout says: “Comme on peut le voir, j’ai plus de passé que d’avenir, mais je refuse de m’enfermer dans la nostalgie” (11). He cites the sterility of the Mirabel airport as a metaphor for a Québécois society not based on transculturalism:

Mirabel, ce peut être une métaphore de notre avenir : à la fine pointe de la technologie, donnant sur le vide, un lieu où ne se poseront plus les transporteurs internationaux. Ce qui menace Québec, peut-on se dire, c’est une mort lente et feutrée, annoncée par notre stérilité d’une part, et par notre incapacité d’autre part à attirer et absorber l’immigré dont nous avons besoin, notre peur de faire de Montréal la grande ville cosmopolite nécessaire. (33)

These are issues facing not only Québécois culture, but which form the basis of the dichotomy facing every culture in the postmodern era. Martineau suggests something of a phenomenological approach when he says: “L’avenir s’amusera à nous tirer le tapis sous les pieds, à nous prendre au dépourvu, à nous répondre par des questions. Le dialogue sera de plus en plus essentiel, nous devrons apprendre à penser en diagonale et à lire entre les lignes” (119).

In “La transculture, entre l’art et la politique,” Lise Bissonnette presents a more jaded view. She remains unconvinced that Quebec society is truly transcultural, and says that transculturalism ends where racism begins, and racism is alive and well (316). She suspects that the current transculturalism seen in art is merely a superficial fad indulging in appropriation, as evidenced by the resistance to works produced in languages other than French or English and by the continued ghettoization of First Nations art. She does, however, acknowledge the political expediency of accepting the risks involved in cultural exchange and osmosis as a means of garnering support among non-Francophones for the nationalist movement (313).

Nepveu’s concept of transculturalism as a balancing act between a celebration of cultural differences versus assimilation seems at times a painful process for the participants. It is a pain
reflected in *Addolorata* and *Déjà l’agonie* by Marco Micone, as well as by many of the contributors to Fulvio Caccia’s *Sous le Signe du Phénix: Entretiens avec 15 créateurs italo-quÉbÉcois*. The phoenix is a mythical bird which is reborn intact from the ashes of its own funeral pyre. As such, it symbolizes the type of continual rebirth associated with survival in the postmodern age. Caccia draws the title from the fact that immigrants, in the process of adapting to life in an evolving society, are faced with an endless process of self-recreation (10). In *Sous le Signe* this continual rebirth is contrasted with the overwhelming desire just to fit in, as symbolized by the chameleon, an animal which changes its colours to match its environment.

Caccia presents interviews with 15 Italian-QuÉbécois artists as they face an endless process of self-recreation in their attempts to adapt to a new life in an evolving society (10). He sees the immigrant trope of return as based in the fact that ethnicity is inexorably linked to a sense of place (11). These interviews provide a view of contemporary QuÉbécois society as seen from the margins. As the range of views gives expression to the fragmentary nature of postmodern reality, what emerges is a sense that this transculturalism is a fragile thing indeed. Many of the participants give voice to the pain involved in actually living this transcultural existence.

Certainly, all of the contributors express a sense of exile and a nostalgic yearning for a lost homeland, as described by Neveu in “La Passion du retour” (36). Many in fact have returned to Italy, at least for a visit. The Italy that these artists yearn for is also an imagined Italy, as their sense of being Italian developed for the most part only after their immigration. Before leaving Italy, most defined themselves after their local region of origin. It is only as members of an exiled community that they are identified, and learn to identify themselves, as first and foremost Italian.

Instead of a predominance of a postmodern sense of play, what is communicated is the sense of the pain involved in losing the past, and the frustration in not being able to participate fully in the present. Some, such as Camillo Carli, argue against immigration as a tragedy in itself and see official multicultural policies as inherently equivocal (142).

The artists here, as all immigrants, must choose between the chameleon and the phoenix, or some combination of the two, just as Nepveu says that QuÉbécois must. Camillo Carli stresses
Lamberto Tassinari is probably the most optimistic of all of the contributors to *Sous le Signe du Phénix*. He sees in immigrant alienation and loss of identity a reflection of the basic anxieties facing all post-industrial societies: “Cette similitude de parcours jette une lumière nouvelle sur le prétendu comportement des immigrants et leur victimisme. […] nous vivons tous l’aliénation” (298). He also sees the effects of transculturalism in Quebec, however, as essentially a chance to re-interpret the dominant culture based on a synergy between the eighty-odd different ethnic contributors (299). Because transculturalism implies a sense of displacement and nomadism, it transcends regional politics and claims all of the world as its territory (301).

Simon Harel sees in the cosmopolitan nature of transculturalism in Québécois literature an ironic attempt at decolonization, a rejection of and an attempt to redefine the terms of ethnicity imposed by the colonial oppressor (*Voleur* 201-2). Ultimately however, both Nepveu and Harel agree that culture can be measured by a society’s ability for change and métissage.

For Nepveu, the danger of ghettoizing immigrant literature by considering it as a distinct genre is countered by the strong authentic ethnic presence and by the multiple alternate cultural figures in mainstream Québécois literature since the ‘80s. Texts such as Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues*, which uses a Volkswagen bus as a metaphor for Québécois society and culture, have served to spearhead transculturalism as central to redefining the Quebec experience (“Qu’est ce que” 24-5).

In “La Passion du retour: Écritures italiennes au Québec,” Nepveu explores how the social fondness for the presence of Italians and Italy in Québécois literature, and the penchant for Italy shown by many Québécois writers, including Aquin, in their personal lives, reflects the new acceptance of plurality in Quebec society and Québécois literature. Part of the literary links include a sense of shared exile and the trope of return. For Québécois culture and Italian immigrants alike, it is an imagined Italy, a romanticized version without Italians, where the fantasy of exile and return can be given full play (111). In this sense, *la passion du retour* implies a revisionist view of the past, one where
le retour en arrière implique toujours, certes, le rêve d'effacer la faute du départ, de ce reniement qu'est toute émigration. Mais il y a plus grave encore: ce rêve voudrait aussi effacer toutes les fautes, retrouver un lieu d'avant le péché. [...] S'il y a un péché de la nostalgie, c'est bien celui-là: celui de ne voir qu'une seule faute, celle du départ, en oubliant toutes les autres, et surtout celles qui ont eu lieu avant.

(108)

These themes of exile and of nostalgia for a lost past are signs of the strong convergence between texts by nouveau québécois and néo-québécois writers. Although these themes are well developed in the works of Micone and other Québécois-Italian writers, they were spelled out in detail early on in the Quiet Revolution by Aquin in his pivotal essay "La Fatigue culturelle du Canada-français":

[...] le déracinement, générateur inépuisable de fatigue culturelle, ou l'exil, le dépaysement, le reniement ne libèrent jamais tout à fait l'individu de son identité première et lui interdisent, en même temps, la pleine identité à son milieu second. Privé de deux sources, il se trouve ainsi doublement privé de patrie nourricière: il est deux fois apatride, et cet orphelinage, voulu puis fatal, même s'il ne se traduit pas par une irrégularité consulaire, est un ténia qui ronge, tandis que l'enracinement, au contraire, est une manueldation constante, secrète et finalement enrichissante du sol originel. (Blois 94)

Both Nepveu’s view of the New World experience as one of inner discovery and Harel’s view of the immigrant as a double agent can be seen to draw their roots from Aquin, as he describes the French Canadian as virtually a stranger in a strange land:

Le Canadien français est, au sens propre et figuré, un agent double. Il s’abolit dans l’“excentricité” et, fatigué, désiré atteindre au nirvana politique par voie de dissolution. Le Canadien français refuse son centre de gravité, cherche désespérément ailleurs un centre et erre dans tous les labyrinthes qui s’offrent à lui. Ni chassé, ni persécuté, il distance pourtant sans cesse son pays dans un exotisme
qui ne le comble jamais. Le mal du pays est à la fois besoin et refus d’une culture-matrice. Tous ces élans de transcendance vers les grands ensembles politiques, religieux ou cosmologiques ne remplaceront jamais l’enracinement; complémentaires, ils enrichiraient; seuls, ces élans font du Canadien français une “personne déplacée”. [. . .] Cette fatigue culturelle est un fait, une actualité troublante et douloureuse; mais c’est peut-être aussi le chemin de l’immanence. Un jour, nous sortirons de cette lutte, vainqueurs ou vaincus. Chose certaine, le combat intérieur, guerre civile individuelle, se poursuit et interdit l’indifférence autant que l’euphorie. La lutte est fatale, mais non sa fin. [. . .] La culture canadienne-française offre tous les symptômes d’une fatigue extrême : elle aspire à la fois à la force et au repos, à l’intensité existentielle et au suicide, à l’indépendance et à la dépendance. (Blooms 96-7)

Gilles Marcotte has traced the “Poetry of Exile” back to the 1850s in the works of Crémazie, Alfred Garneau, and Lozeau. Marcotte says that their poetry of terror, despair and estrangement from life is a natural result of their being cut off from their European roots (Shouldice 119). Nepveu talks about how this poetry of exile, “La poésie dite «du pays» aura certes joué un rôle essentiel dans la liquidation d’un certain roman familial trop typiquement québécois et dans le retour à cet «orphelinat de la neige» dont a parlé Jacques Brault” (L’Écologie 100). This sense of orphanhood is carried over in one form or another into the works of the néo-québécois writers Ying Chen and Dany Laferrière. Chen’s works explore how the postmodern sense of exile makes immigrants even of those who stay put, while Laferrière’s works deal with both nostalgia and a living for the moment.

The New Lucidity

Since the Quiet Revolution, a call for lucidity has been a recurring theme in Québécois criticism. The new lucidity espoused by Quebec’s emerging social technocrats and critics seems to fly in the face of the postmodern blurring of forms, fragmentation and confusion. Nepveu takes
particular exception to the term, and attributes the calls for lucidity to an attempt to escape from the magical thinking, insecurity, and the call of the abyss engendered by the postmodern era (L’Écologie 91).

L’expression me vient d’un colloque qui a eu lieu à l’Université Laval en novembre 1963 (Les Nouveaux Québécois, Presses de l’Université Laval, 1964) et qui se proposait de décrire le «nouveau type d’homme» incarné par la Révolution tranquille. «La lucidité [...] est la clé de voûte de la Révolution tranquille» (p.110), y proclamaient notamment Bernard Landry et Denis de Belleval, futurs ministres péquistes et à l’époque respectivement président et vice-président de l’Union générale des étudiants québécois. (L’Écologie 221 n 5)

Although Aquin supported this lucidity, and deplored, in “La Fatigue culturelle,” its lack as being responsible for the “dialogue de sourds” that marked Quebec intellectual debate, he inadvertantly illustrated the problem with this lucidity when he said:

C’est dans cette dialectique entre des tendances-situations qu’il importe de définir ces situations, et non en dehors ou au-dessus. La lutte dialectique est génératrice de lucidité et de logique, mais, chose certain, elle ne saurait toutefois descendre au niveau de l’opposition entre deux partis politiques qui, comme on le sait, se situent d’eux-mêmes en dehors de toute entreprise de compréhension. (Bloc 70)

When any debate becomes binarized, possible alternate viewpoints inevitably become obscured. Lucidity is the condition of brightness, luminosity or clearly logical argumentation; however, the source of illumination must always be considered. As the source of illumination or point of perspective is shifted, a very different picture may emerge. Perhaps the greatest danger in lucidity lies not in being unaware of other perspectives, but in being unable to recognize the possibility that they even may exist. In this sense lucidity risks degenerating into sophistry and means the death of magic, serendipity, synergy, chance and the poetic.

Nepveu attacks the nouveau québécois lucidity as a modernist broom used to sweep away impatiently any criticism or dissent concerning the path of “progress” (L’Écologie 17). He goes
even farther when he says: “Mais se peut-il que la lucidité soit aussi autre chose: une plongée meurtrière en soi-même, une rencontre fulgurante avec la mort, au fond du temps effondré?” (L’Écologie 91).

Reception of Nepveu’s Theoretical Work

When examining cultural criticism concerning a society that is evolving as rapidly as Québécois society has, beginning with the Quiet Revolution and continuing at least until the present, the historical context must always be taken into account. The reality and historical perspective available to Nepveu while he wrote L’Écologie du réel in the 1980s were drastically different from the Québécois cultural and political realities that spawned the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s. Likewise, when considering L’Écologie du réel and Nepveu’s other theoretical works and their reception at the time when they were published, one must be aware of the danger of judging this material in the light of current Québécois cultural and political realities. In fact, Nepveu’s work has contributed in part to the shaping of those realities. The view of Québécois political and cultural reality as an evolving entity is supported by Sherry Simon when she pointed out that, despite the ambivalence inherent in Quebec’s economic and historic situation, for Québécois to end their double exile and move beyond their ideological alibi, they must learn to reconcile themselves with their past and learn to assimilate those elements of American and European culture that foster Quebec culture (Le Trafic 46).

Nepveu’s contribution to literary criticism cannot be denied, and overall, the reception of his work has been quite positive. In 1993, Nepveu was awarded the prestigious Prix littéraire Canada-Suisse for L’Écologie du réel. He received the Governor-General’s award for Intérieurs du Nouveau Monde in 1998, and in 1999 received the Prix Jean-Ethier Blais for a literary essay for Intérieurs du Nouveau Monde and was nominated as a member of l’Académie des lettres du Québec. Intérieurs du Nouveau Monde also won the ACQL’s (Association for Canadian and Québécois Literatures) coveted Gabriel Roy Prize for literary criticism.
In describing the reception of *L’Écologie du réel* in the interview conducted for this work, Nepveu expresses some surprise at how often *L’Écologie* is cited, particularly the chapter on “Écritures migrantes.” He surmises that the timing was right for its publication, in that it embodied what was a new way of thinking that was emerging at the time for Québécois (Appendix A 93).

Thierry Horguelin illustrated this timeliness and the seemingly ever-changing nature of Québécois culture when he wrote in *Spirale*: “Il est à parier que, dans dix ans, on relira à son tour *L’Écologie du réel* comme typique d’un moment, le nôtre, où la littérature québécoise essaie, non sans ambivalentes, de se penser comme contemporaine, sans trop savoir encore quoi mettre sous cette étiquette” (8).

Agnès Whitfield says of *L’Écologie du réel*:

C’est surtout la rencontre conflictuelle, ou faudrait-il parler plutôt de la non-rencontre, de ces deux champs, c’est-à-dire l’impossibilité d’une littérature nationale à l’ère du postmodernisme, qui hante l’auteur. Mais le titre laisse entrevoir déjà une solution au paradoxe, l’écologie désignant ici un champ de forces et d’énergie. (45)

She praises Nepveu for attempting to provide an integrated vision of a time that she feels can only begin to be understood fully with the passage of time:

Qu’on trouve ou non, dans ce concept, une manière fructueuse de repenser la littérature québécoise des années soixante et soixante-dix, l’ouvrage de Nepveu a le mérite incontestable de proposer une vision intégrée d’une époque que l’on commence seulement, avec le recul du temps, à pouvoir évaluer. (46)

In a joint article in *Liberté*, Réjean Beaudoin and Robert Melançon offer some of the strongest support for Nepveu’s core argument in *L’Écologie du réel* that the postmodern and transcultural elements in Québécois literature can trace their roots as least as far back as the Quiet Revolution:

L’idée d’un éclatement de l’unité thématique du corpus littéraire québécois dans les années quatre-vingts est une idée banale qui court littéralement les rues. En un
sens, on pourrait lire l’essai de Pierre Nepveu comme une descente acrobatique dans cette pente à la mode. Ce serait assurément la meilleure façon de ne pas le lire, car on se sert généralement de cette simplification pour distinguer l’entreprise fondatrice de la Révolution tranquille de je ne sais quel syndrome postréférendaire, quand ce n’est pas pour constater la conversion du Québec au vertueux pluralisme multicultural. Il faut plutôt voir que L’Écologie du réel suit exactement la direction opposée en s’efforçant de montrer que l’hétérogénéité et la pratique de mélange des formes et des genres ont ici des racines plus profondes qu’un effet spécial du clignotement postmoderne. L’une des propositions essentielles de cet essai consiste à placer le devenir «post-québécois» de la littérature «du pays» au coeur de l’avenir des années soixante et non pas dans une rupture récente qui serait le fait des années quatre-vingt. (141)

In L’Écologie, Nepveu made his case for une littérature poste-québécoise, whereas in Intérieurs du nouveau monde he seeks to give la littérature québécoise what he considers to be its rightful place among the literature of the New World. In describing Intérieurs, Gilles Marcotte says:

Un livre ambitieux. […] Pierre Nepveu, on le sait ou on devrait le savoir, est un des commentateurs les plus sûrs et les plus originaux de la littérature québécoise. […] On voit ce qui se passe d’étonnant dans l’essai de Pierre Nepveu, et qui n’avait jamais été fait auparavant: les écrivains québécois sont tirés de leur solitude continentale et mis en contact, abruptement, avec les grandes voix des deux Amériques. ("Amérique" 97).

For the most part, Nepveu’s critics seem more ill at ease with his postmodern views than with his actual theories. Michel Biron, writing in Spirale, somewhat dismissed L’Écologie du réel as "Le symptôme d’un phénomène nouveau qui tient à l’époque de plus en plus postréférendaire et à cet incertain pays fatigué de se penser en termes de fondation" (5). Gérard Bouchard doubts Nepveu’s interpretation of Québécois society as postmodern. "[…] sans nier les "Nouveaux
Mondes intérieurs" (P. Nepveu) qui se sont manifestés ici et là, nous sommes assez loin des états d'âme postmodernes" ("De quelques malentendus sur l'américanité").

Bayard finds in Nepveu an elusive postmodernist ("Critical Instincts" 130), while Sherry Simon senses in Nepveu "a certain uneasiness" expressed in "a vocabulary of mysticism and irrationality" ("Culture and Its Values" 177). Simon does attribute Nepveu with producing "the first important overview of Quebec minority writing by a major Quebec critic" (175). Simon would seem to support Harel's position when she summarizes Quebec's problem as a pluralistic postmodern society as one of cultural protectionism versus growth (Le Trafic 32). She says that Nepveu's cultural world is more like a ritualized mixture of signs and discourses, which literature comes to mimic, finding its truth in the expression of the forms or formlessness of culture. Nepveu challenges the myths which since the 1960s have made literature an expression of collective certainties. His rereading of the critical 'fictions' generated from the literature of the 1960s on seeks to restore to this material its reality as 'inner exile,' as 'catastrophe.' (171)

In Critique et littérature québécoise, the proceedings of the 1990 conference at Queen's University entitled "Critique de la littérature / Littérature de la critique," Jacques Pelletier expresses reservations concerning Nepveu's postmodernism, but notes that Québécois literature and history are still inseparable:

J'ai, pour ma part, des réserves à la fois sur la perspective empruntée par Nepveu (celle de la postmodernité) et sur l'interprétation qu'il propose des productions modernes (comme figures du désastre), mais ce qui me paraît significatif et intéressant, au-delà de ces réserves, c'est de constater que la lecture des œuvres encore une fois apparaît indissociable d'une lecture de l'Histoire. ("La Critique" 321)

In the interview, Nepveu expressed some surprise that Intérieurs du Nouveau Monde was frequently praised more for the quality of the writing than for its actual intellectual content (Appendix A 94). This sort of damning praise by critics may be seen as a way of avoiding having to actually discuss what for some must be disquieting ideas. Some resistance amongst Québécois
critics to Nepveu’s and Harel’s theories might best be explained by a natural resistance to paradigm shifts in general. As Winfried Siemerling says in “Democratic Blues: Houston Baker and the Representation of Culture”:

Baker’s model for what I would call a move from pre-scribed recognition to emergent forms of re-cognition comes from Thomas Kuhn’s notion of paradigm shifts. According to Kuhn, scientists recognize and legitimate objects in communally defined, normalizing frames of expectation. Change occurs not through a linear increase in knowledge, but rather in wholesale shifts that redefine entire sets of accepted norms in a field. He compares the perceptual shift between frames of reference with optical experiments that show inverting lenses initially cause extreme disorientation that is overcome, however, when the whole visual field flips into a new pattern of perceptual interpretation. (“Democratic Blues” 44-5)

Baker is an American critic who was an early proponent of greater diversification in the American literary canon to include perspectives of class, race, gender, postcolonial cultures and First Nations (40-1). In attempting to evaluate Nepveu’s theories, it is also worth noting “Baker’s claim [. . .] that ‘critics eternally become and embody the generative myths of their culture by half-perceiving and half-inventing their culture, their myths, and themselves’ [. . .]” (“Democratic Blues” 48).

At some point, L’Écologie du réel may well be recognized as a watershed text in defining Québécois literary criticism. Nepveu’s announcement of the death of a totalizing concept of la littérature québécoise and his call for a new reality-based versus nationalist-based theory of literary criticism is essentially an argument for a descriptive versus a prescriptive approach, and an inclusive view of culture and society versus an exclusive one.

The idea of a culture based on terms of belonging and specificity, such as nationalism, when it is expanded by being adopted by other cultures, reveals a paradox in which all cultures end up having equal value, which in turn means total cultural relativism. For Nepveu, the ensuing postmodern and transcultural uprootedness spells the end of nationalist cultures based on belonging and specificity:
[. . .] la culture de l’enracinement et de la spécificité définie par le romantisme se
voie désormais remplacée par une culture du déracinement, du dépaysement
systématique, ce qui correspond évidemment assez bien au cheminement de la
culture québécoise contemporaine. Mais l’essentiel, c’est qu’il s’agit en réalité
moins d’un remplacement et d’une opposition que d’un simple prolongement:
selon une telle analyse, ce serait justement l’idée d’une culture définie en termes
d’appartenance et de spécificité qui nous aurait plongés dans le plus parfait
relativisme: toutes les cultures ont leur valeur propre, toutes finissent par
s’équivaloir. Dans une certaine manière, la culture du déracinement (postmoderne,
transculturelle) ne ferait qu’épuiser la logique propre à celle de l’enracinement
(nationaliste): morcellement de l’universel, relativisme et même nihilisme.
(“Qu’est-ce que” 16)

Nepveu and Harel

In 1989, around the same time that Nepveu published L’Écologie du réel, Simon Harel
published Le Voleur de parcours: Identité et cosmopolitisme dans la littérature québécoise
contemporaine. Harel, in exploring Québécois literature since the 1960’s, notes “[. . .]cette
problématique d’une identité remise en question par le caractère dramatique d’un éclatement,
d’une confusion des signes et des univers culturels” (28). Similarly to Nepveu, Harel rejects the
nationalist agenda for Québécois literature that developed in the 1960s. He writes: “Les mythes
fondateurs de l’identité que toute société préserve jalousement sont des fabulations, tout comme
ces rêves éveillés qui peuvent le cas échéant, dans des situations socio-politiques très tendues,
devenir autant de cauchemars d’agression” (28). It is not surprising that Nepveu and Harel share
many views, and that these views were published around the same time. To paraphrase the
comments made by Nepveu in the interview (Appendix A 93), these were ideas whose time had
come.
Harel goes far beyond Nepveu in his explanations of the psychology governing the role of the foreigner in Québécois literature. Harel identifies two models for the foreigner in Québécois fiction since the 1960’s. In the first, the foreigner plays the role of a double who serves to legitimate the sense of self-identity. The foreigner is a peripheral character. “[Il] permet à l’imaginaire social de déterminer des frontières séparant le propre de l’impur, le connu de l’inconnu: partition qui évite le retour angoissant de l’étrangeté, de l’indifférenciation” (29).

For Harel, the inherent dilemma in this model is that the idea of the foreigner as a double is intrinsically disquieting. As long as the foreigner is seen as a romanticized other, he serves to strengthen the sense of self identity, but remains a threat. As soon as he begins to become assimilated, the distinguishing lines become blurred, creating the even greater threats of cultural relativism and appropriation. For Harel, the situation is made even more severe by the culture shock encountered by Québécois as they moved from a largely unilingual rural society to culturally and linguistically pluralistic Montreal. The cosmopolitanism engendered by this arrivée en ville makes the event “[…] prend véritablement l’aspect d’un voyage en terre inconnue” (27).

As l’arrivée en ville placed the Québécois in close contact with foreigners, it generated a complex set of interactions. Not only did the above dilemma apply, but the alienation triggered by l’arrivée en ville also gave Québécois something in common with immigrants.

En somme, «l’arrivée en ville» ne peut se réduire à cette seule thématique, popularisée à travers le mouvement Parti pris, d’une reconquête, ou d’une réappropriation qui évacuerait la menace d’une aliénation. C’est dans ce sens que le dispositif cosmopolite peut jouer, abandonnant la thématique de l’aliénation. «L’arrivée en ville» signifierait alors cette hétérotopie culturelle, qu’il s’agisse de l’anonymat, du caractère fragmenté du tissu urbain, ou encore de la prise de conscience du caractère composite de l’organisation sociale. (Voleur, 103)

For Harel, l’arrivée en ville today has come to signify the actual cosmopolitan nature of contemporary Québécois society. In Harel’s cosmopolitan model, l’arrivée en ville
[. . .] peut signifier aujourd’hui, non plus une esthétique de déracinement, de l’exil intérieur, une réappropriation symbolique fortement désirée (dont un roman comme Bonheur d’occasion témoigne), une pulsation d’agrippement vécue comme crispation, retour à la paroisse, à la micro-société protectrice (dont toute une littérature du terroir a pu être l’évocation), mais une revendication cosmopolite, s’écrivant en français mais laissant néanmoins passer les flux de cultures diverses, une étrangeté. (45)

The inherent problem with the attempt to assimilate the other is, for Harel, that it is a defensive strategy in which the dominant culture attempts to include the threat as a distinct part of its own cultural definition, which leads to a permanent alienation of the other.

Ainsi en est-il du melting pot où l’idéalisation de la fusion interculturelle, sous l’effet d’un discours violemment assimilateur, gomme le caractère subversif de cosmopolitisme. De même, la valorisation, non pas de métissage, mais d’une molle coexistence pacifique des cultures d’origine (ce qui correspondrait à la définition du multiculturalisme) suppose, malgré toutes les dénégations, le noyau dur d’une identité transcendante qui subsume les différences. D’où le caractère subversif du dispositif cosmopolite qui fait jouer la confrontation plurielle des langues, des cultures, des modes de vie. Au contraire de l’incorporation, processus défensif de symbolisation, qui ferait de l’étranger un acteur représenté «de l’intérieur», intégré à une économie culturelle dominante. Dans cette dernière perspective, l’étranger se trouverait à symboliser une «marge» imaginaire dans le cadre d’un projet social et culturel unanimité. (Voleur 54)

The problematic solution for Harel is a cosmopolitanism defined not in fixed terms, but as the constant state of flux itself:

Dans toute dimension d’altérité, le mouvement de rejet laisse entendre l’idée que la distinction entre ego et alter pourrait être interchangeable, que l’étranger soumis au rejet pourrait être soi. En fait, le cosmopolitisme se caractériserait par le
maintien d’une ambiguïté, d’une violence symbolique par le biais de ce
mouvement d’externalisation, de rejet. (55)

This fragile cosmopolitanism is built on an expression of otherness that is continuously
redefining itself. The resulting mix is very close to the postmodern concept of catastrophe, in the
sense of a shattering of fixed frames of reference:

Le cosmopolitisme serait donc à mon sens hétérotopique, l’expression d’une
marge, d’une déviance. Parce qu’il est un facteur déstructurant de l’identité
sociale, il représente, du point de vue littéraire, une hétérotopie, le refus d’un
mimétisme linguistique au profit d’un dialogisme énonciatif: multiplicité des
interventions et des prises de parole. Ce cosmopolitisme me semble bien vivant
dans ses dimensions euphorique ou dysphorique. (42)

Unlike Nepveu’s descriptive approach, Harel adopts a more prescriptive attitude when he
describes the role of Québécois literature in maintaining this state of flux or destabilization:

Ainsi un motif essentiel de la littérature québécoise contemporaine, échappant à la
rigidité de ce discours de la survie, serait la représentation, en quelque sorte
maintenue à distance, de l’identité collective (de l’illusion de cette identité comme
partie constituantante du mémorial national), et l’esquisse d’un savoir quant au fait
de si — et exilé —, semblable — et cosmopolite. Là se joue à mon sens
l’essentiel de l’avenir de la littérature québécoise quant à cette capacité, non pas de
dépassement, de transcendance, de fondation d’une identité nationale, mais plutôt
de maintien de l’irrésolution. (53)

For Harel, this cosmopolitanism is reflected in Jacques Godbout’s Une Histoire américaine
and Jacques Poulin’s Volkswagen blues, to name but two works of many, where extra-territoriality
is used to present a series of mixed signs that explore social identity while leaving the original sense
of Québécois identity intact (30, 288). For Harel, both novels take place in California in order to
safely discuss the fate of Quebec. California means cultural plurality, the multiplicity of signs and
the breakdown in meaning (187).
Harel sees in this cosmopolitanism a decolonizing force that questions the rigidity of a Québécois identity defined solely in terms of its own ethnicity or of territoriality. For Harel, it is not the other which defines cosmopolitanism, but rather the concept of an indefinable sense of the other which is continuously being re-formed. In an ironic twist for Harel, this rejection of the values of the coloniser provides a chance to rediscover the essential Québécois identity free from the constraints and intrusions of the other (201-2). As we have seen earlier, however, transcending the other through the transcultural experience is an essentially painful experience. “Mais cette hantise de l’Autre présomait la mélancolie éprouvée pour une antériorité perdue (la race, la langue, la religion). Esthétique de déplaisir puisque la crainte d’un morcellement de l’identité était essentiellement douloureuse” (265-6).

Where Nepveu sees the postmodern reality as meaning that works by néo-québécois writers fit quite well into the Quebec literary tradition, Harel’s approach seems to imply a sort of reverse appropriation. Harel argues for works by néo-québécois writers such as Dany Laferrière, Marco Micone and others as a challenge for Québécois literature to abandon the protective shell used to stereotype foreigners in favour of embracing the foreign element itself (31-2). Harel says: “Opposer les nouveaux venus aux natifs de la langue ne serait pas seulement fratricide, mais désastreux pour la littérature québécoise. Mais peut-être en arrivons-nous à une époque où l’énonciation de cette altérité peut devenir parole commune, accepter le principe d’une identité québécoise qui serait acquisition, création” (32-3). Similarly to Nepveu, Harel acknowledges the parallels between immigrant and Québécois realities. “En somme, le nouveau venu peut trouver ici une littérature qui accepte l’exil intérieur, la condition de minoritaire, littérature qui fait de l’irrésolution un fait d’énonciation” (32).

Paradoxically, Harel also questions the positioning of works by néo-québécois writers:

Littérature immigrante de langue française, littérature québécoise, quel sera le chapeau désignant qu’on lui attribuera, la nomination étant ici un important facteur de naturalisation. S’agira-t-il d’une littérature «ethnique» écrite dans les marges de la culture québécoise «officielle»? Les tenants de cette littérature

Similarly to Nepveu, for Harel the flux and métissage resulting from the cosmopolitan experience remain the defining elements in culture itself (281, 290). He rejects as an idée reçue, or a blindly accepted cliche, “La certitude, par exemple, qu’être Québécois, c’est être quelque chose d’unique sans que l’on puisse statuer sur la dynamique de cette différence” (28). For him, however the foreigner always remains a threat, and métissage is always contamination.

Where Harel sees alterity, parody and pluralism as the results of the cosmopolitan reality and potentially leading to a cultural catastrophe, Nepveu says that this is an opportunity to re-evaluate Quebec’s unique cultural and literary mode d’être, not from the fixed ideology of a nationalist perspective, but from a perspective based on these contemporary themes of catastrophe, alterity, parody and pluralism. Nepveu’s écologie du réel remains an evaluation and, by implication, a re-affirmation of Québécois literature and culture.

Il y avait, dans plusieurs textes des années soixante, un ton prophétique, annonciateur: cette littérature trouvait en partie son assise dans le fait qu’elle pouvait se donner comme pré-québécoise, comme lieu d’une naissance encore à venir. Une des hypothèses de ce livre est que cela n’a pu concrètement avoir lieu que dans la mesure où cette même littérature était déjà en quelque sorte post-québécoise: ce qui signifie non pas une négation du «québécois», mais sa mise en abîme, son épuisement, sa catastrophe créatrice. L’avènement de la littérature québécoise (et non plus canadienne-française) signifierait ainsi la plongée de la quibécitude dans la négativité, dans un espace culturel ironique et ludique, où la
distance et le dépaysement ne cessent de faire sens et de perdre le sens, simultanément. (L’Écologie 16)

As much as Nepveu’s écologie du réel demands a renunciation of the nostalgia that is a prerequisite to imagining a culturally homogenous ethno-nationalist Quebec, it also demands a renunciation of the cultural amnesia that a postmodern sense of the here-and-now might seem to imply (L’Écologie 9-10). By proposing a rereading of the traditional Québécois canon in a postmodern light, a reading based on an understanding of the here-and-now as opposed to one based on a preconceived political or cultural agenda, Nepveu hopes not to subscribe to a sort of postmodern euphoria, but to discover “un certain mode d’être de la conscience québécoise et, plus largement, un mode d’être du psychisme et de l’imaginaire contemporains, mais au sens où «mode d’être» signifie aussi «mode d’éclatement», et où l’un renvoie toujours à l’autre et au pluriel” (10).

For Nepveu, postmodernism and transculturalism are intertwined elements of the current culture du déracinement (“Qu’est-ce que” 16). Nepveu says that culture remains an essentially indefinable internal value measured by its ability for self-change, disorientation and migration, and that the theory of transculturalism allows for “la réappropriation d’une québécité elle-même déjà transculturelle” (27). Culture is the process itself, forever changing (19). Diglossia, translation, appropriation and a sense of the here-and-now are all central to transculturalism.

The postmodern emphasis on an appreciation of the here-and-now does not deny a sense of history or imply a rejection of the past and its influences. Rather it is a call for a sceptical re-evaluation of the presumed narrative of “History” and a call to recognize that History itself is composed of a multiplicity of histories. For Nepveu, to appreciate the here-and-now is to have an understanding of it as an archaeological fact, that is to have a sense of temporal relativism (26-7). Temporal relativism means that this emphasis on the here-and-now implies both an awareness of the past as well as the possible future.

In “Qu’est-ce que la transculture?” Nepveu credits Fernando Ortiz with coining the term transculturalism to describe the peculiarly complex cultural interbreeding in Cuba. Transculturalism describes the process of deculturalization and reculturalization involved in the
meeting of two cultures. In these crosses, both cultures are changed, and what emerges is something new, more than just a mosaic. Unlike other models describing the meeting of cultures which assume that the dominant culture absorbs the weaker, or that the cultures continue to exist in parallel in a form of mosaic, what emerges for Ortiz is something new produced by a blending of the cultures ("Qu’est-ce que" 17). Moreover, this synergistic process is endless, somewhat in the manner of the poststructuralist semioticians’ endless chains of signifier and signified.

In defining the term transcultural, Lamberto Tassinari says:

Le terme transculturel a une dimension politique car ce mot implique la traversée d’une seule culture en même temps que son dépassement. L’unité qu’il sous-tend n’a pas la même résonance que celle qu’évoquent les termes “inter-culturel” ou “multiculturel”. Ceux-ci définissent un ensemble et le circonscivent dans un espace et un temps alors que le transculturel ne possède pas de périmètre. C’est le passage et l’implication totale à travers et au-delà des cultures. ("Le Projet transculturel" 299)

Nepveu says that transculturalism remains an alternative to a Quebec culture defined in terms of identity, appropriation, and homogeneity, but acknowledges that transculturalism itself involves certain risks as a balance is sought between a celebration of cultural differences and eventual cultural isolationism on the one hand versus mimeticism and eventual assimilation. Indeed, Nepveu says that rediscovering its traditional transcultural nature is the only way that Quebec can have a culture based on specificity ("Qu’est-ce que" 27).

Although Harel seems to agree with most of Nepveu’s views of Québécois society as intrinsically pluralistic and postmodern, and of the importance of métissage as one of the key elements in defining culture itself, Harel seems far less optimistic of the eventual outcome. For Harel, transculturalism is simply the reality, a reality that threatens to engulf Québécois society and end in the reduction of Québécois to the role of just another ethnic group within Quebec society. The even less attractive alternative is to die of cultural isolation while yearning for a past that never was. Harel seems to feel that the Québécois just have to accept this painful fact. He sees the
presence of immigrants in Québécois literature as essentially symbols of the disruptive postmodern elements at work.

Nepveu is not impervious to the Québécois dilemma. He quotes Fulvio Caccia: “L’incapacité des Québécois à recréer la totalité de la francité perdue sur le territoire américain est paradoxalement leur salut. Car cet échec garde ouverte la blessure originelle qui leur permet de reconnaître l’autre, d’être l’autre” (“Qu’est-ce que” 20). However, in opening Québécois culture to its intrinsic alterity based on reciprocal contamination, Nepveu raises several questions:

1. Que signifie concrètement l’affirmation selon laquelle le projet transnationalitaire (Nicolas Van Schendel) impliquerait le fait que la culture québécoise retrouve, avec les autres cultures, une «position minoritaire»?
2. Dans quelle mesure la transformation, la «mise en jeu» de notre singularité ou spécificité impliquent-elles le renoncement, la dissolution, la mort? S’agit-il de mourir à l’autre ou d’interagir avec l’autre? Faut-il choisir pour emblème le phénix de Fulvio Caccia ou le caméléon, dont se réclame un autre Italien, mais en rupture de ban, Antonio d’Alfonso?
3. Quel est le rapport entre littérature transculturelle et littérature immigrante? À cet égard, malgré l’affirmation nostalgique et même tragique d’une perte, la transculture n’implique-t-elle pas ultimement la dissolution de tout sens du tragique? Sommes-nous pour ainsi dire condamnés à un nomadisme mou, à une banale philosophie du devenir, ou alors, à une pratique de la culture comme jeu? En somme, ne revenons-nous pas à la case départ: cosmopolitisme facile, confusion intellectuelle, refus de définir, fuite en avant? (“Qu’est-ce que” 20-21)

Nepveu finds many of the answers to these questions in texts by néo-québécois writers themselves. Apart from the issues of convergence between texts by nouveau québécois and néo-québécois writers, Nepveu says that néo-québécois texts “fournissent un repère indispensable, dans la mesure où ils proposent tous, à des degrés divers, une pratique concrète, critique, du dépaysement et d’un certain «territoire imaginaire» de la culture” (21). He outlines three major
tropes to be found in néo-québécois texts: 1) alienation and loss of identity, where pluralism means not cultural enrichment, but a lack of identity or at best, self-irony; 2) nostalgia, an exercise in memory where the past is only dimly remembered and is subject to revisionism; and 3) continual rebirth, or of a synergetic rebirth, where the cultural confusion is not all negative, nor is all lost, and the cultural blending is a result of cultures that are in themselves derived from earlier crossings (21-3).

These are questions that face any critic who attempts to describe Québécois literature and society, although there can be no easy answers. Even though Nepveu acknowledges the pain triggered by transcultural experience, in opting for the phoenix, symbol of continual rebirth, as a model, his approach is far more celebratory than Simon Harel’s. For Harel, the ultimate Québécois dilemma is that if foreign elements are rejected because they seem a threat to the already perilous culture of Quebec, the Québécois face even greater cultural estrangement. However, accepting foreign elements means running the risk of losing an intrinsic Québécois identity through cultural contamination. Harel describes the transcultural process as a “passage de l’altérité à l’altération” (Voleur 271).

Traditionally there has been a tendency to label works by immigrant writers as ethnic literature more concerned with the construction or maintenance of identity in the new culture. In “La Passion du retour: Écritures italiennes au Québec,” Nepveu explores how a sense of exile and la passion du retour form common themes in texts beginning with Gaston Miron and continuing through nouveau-québécois and néo-québécois writers alike. For Nepveu, these common themes as well as the themes of catastrophe, alterity, parody and pluralism mark néo-québécois texts, not as marginalized ethnic works, but as essentially Québécois texts that are a part of Quebec’s pluralistic reality (L’Écologie 200).

In Intérieurs du nouveau monde, Nepveu explores Quebec and other New World cultures as phenomena of the joint American continental experience, an experience that he finds marked by a search for interior space. He distinguishes between américain and états-unien. For Nepveu, quite apart from the threat to Québécois culture posed by its isolation within a much larger English-speaking population, some of the ambivalence in Québécois culture towards things American
stems from the inherent equivocation in the term “American” itself. The economic and cultural hegemony of the United States of America has coloured the term “American” to mean both things “New Worldian” and “USian.” Nepveu and others are now beginning to use terms such as “USian” to refer to things pertaining to the US, while they try to reserve “American” to refer to things relating to the common New World continental experience. From Patagonia to the Arctic Circle, we all share the commonality of being American. In the interview, Nepveu refers to la littérature québécoise as being only one of several in an emerging new literature of the Americas written in French (Appendix A 90). In an article in Le Devoir published as a background piece on the eve of the 2001 Summit of the Americas held in Quebec City, Dany Laferrière for instance has strongly echoed these views in chronicling how his personal identity has evolved from being Haitian to Québécois to his current self-definition as both an American and Québécois writer who works in French (“Ma découverte”).

In Intérieurs du Nouveau Monde, Nepveu attempts to show how texts of the Americas in several languages share a common description not of the continental vastness, but of the voyage as one of self-discovery of inner space. He further explores the theme of la passion du retour as a search for the inner self, a quest that he traces as far back as the writings of Marie de l’Incarnation in 1650 (41).

He says: “Le dépaysement moderne, c’est aussi la possibilité de rêver en profondeur l’ancien” (322). He suggests that perhaps in the rise of new cultural icons in the US, such as the Brooklyn Bridge, can be seen utopian attempts to connect with the waking dream of the American past. Montreal’s transculturalism as a “sanctuaire des différences” is an icon in its own right of the resistance to pressures of US-style globalization, a hedge against USian hegemony (322-3).

Intérieurs itself, with its fragmented style, diglossia and its blend of personal narrative and literary criticism, is best read as a postmodern text. Nepveu is well aware of criticism as a creative force. “Ce discours sur la littérature (partagé d’ailleurs par de nombreux écrivains autant que par des critiques) constitue un acte créateur: une fiction qui révèle le donné autant qu’elle l’invente.” (L’Écologie 53). In this light, L’Écologie du réel and Intérieurs may both be seen not only as texts
about postmodernism, but as postmodern texts themselves. Nepveu’s style itself includes the blurring of genre lines and the disappearance of stable and absolute frames of reference for criticism as he varies from the rational to the rationalizing, from the dialectic to the poetic, from essay to autobiography. Nepveu’s postmodern reality can only be written about from the margins, and it is a lacking, unreasonable, derisory and crumbling reality at that (55).

For Harel as well, cultural reality is best described from the margins:

L’unanimité sociale semble bien avoir été battue en brèche, ainsi que cette illusion d’une identité plénière où «être» québécois signifierait la certitude de racines, d’une singularité indiscutable. Si un nom n’est que ce qu’il désigne, et que l’identité québécoise est appelée à se modifier fortement suite à ce métissage culturel, il en est de même pour la littérature québécoise qui fait déjà l’expérience de la traversée des signes. (Voleur 290)

To summarize Nepveu’s position, a rereading of Quebec literature shows that it has always been based on transculturalism, the balancing of centrifugal/centripetal forces, the tropes of leaving and return. The current situation is part of a developmental path that began long before the Quiet Revolution, with Crémazie, Saint-Denys Garneau and Miron. In Nepveu’s view, texts by néo-québécois writers fit well within la littérature québécoise.

Despite Harel’s view that texts by immigrant writers represent a challenge for inclusion, certainly Nepveu and Harel hold many views in common. The main thing that distinguishes them is that Harel’s approach is in a sense more static; that is, he attempts to describe the phenomena of Québécois culture and literature as he finds them. He sees the problems inherent in Québécois culture as intrinsically paradoxical. There is an inherent pessimism in his approach that is reminiscent of what Nepveu in the interview attributes to Québécois writers in the fifties and early sixties (Appendix A 86). The key to understanding Nepveu’s approach is found in the title itself of L’Écologie du réel, and is made more clear by him in the interview (Appendix A 89). His optimism for the future of Québécois culture is made possible by his understanding of the Quebec situation...
not as a problem in need of solution, but as an actual ecosystem, an ongoing process with its own sets of checks and balances.

In a postmodern society, everyone suffers from an interior exile, which for Nepveu explains in part the Québécois affection for the romanticized migrant. Transculturalism makes exiles of even those who stay put, as is evidenced for Nepveu by a rereading of the Québécois canon. To be Québécois is to be an immigrant in your own land, to live in interior exile. As the Quiet Revolution ushered in the nationalism of the sixties, cultural relativism and a sense of nihilism entered Quebec literature. For Nepveu, a Québécois national identity can only survive through a phoenix-like endless process of death and rebirth in a transcultural setting.

Establishing an écologie du réel involves an ongoing balancing act between the two extreme positions of nationalism and cultural protectionism, on the one hand, and a form of postmodern hegemony leading into chaos or a religion of non-sense, on the other. But, for both Harel and Nepveu, literature and art will continue to strive to define the new centres, the seats of consciousness and of experiences of difference and alterity. The idea of a stable, homogenous and assimilative society is replaced by a society based on cultural sharing. Transculturalism means a descriptive versus a prescriptive definition, however fragile the tenets may be ("Qu’est-ce que” 30).

Toute réflexion sur le métissage et la trans-culture se doit, me semble-t-il, de prendre acte de cette ambiguïté qui traverse la conscience contemporaine elle-même: d’un côté, cette peur de la pollution, souvent paroxystique; de l’autre, ce culte de l’hybride et de l’impureté (Scarpetta) qui traverse les productions culturelles. Ce sont là, vraisemblablement, les deux faces d’une même réalité psychique, d’un imaginaire que toutes les écritures «migrantes», «immigrantes», transculturelles, métissées, métèques, post-modernes, etc. investissent, travaillent et déplacent à des degrés divers. (L’Écologie 210)

This debate of inclusion versus exclusion, of the descriptive versus the prescriptive, is not new to Quebec. For both Nepveu and Harel, society will always be defined by its margins and its
ability to continuously re-invent itself. However, for Harel, “Le cosmopolitisme serait donc à mon sens hétérotopique, l’expression d’une marge, d’une déviance. [. . .] un facteur déstructurant de l’identité sociale” (42). Harel sees the transcultural process as a passage “de l’altérité à l’altération” (Voleur 271), where the other must always be seen as something of a threat.

In many senses, the core of this debate is very old and may be equated to the debate between Dionysian versus Apollonian structuring systems. Dionysus was the Greek god of mystic ecstasy, fertility and wine, and therefore represented the enjoyment of life. Apollo was the god of intellect and of rational consciousness (and by inference, of lucidity). He stands as the vanquisher of unconscious terrors. It is important to note that an implied competition between structuring systems based on the attributes of these two gods does not necessarily predicate a binarization of the debate. Both gods were, after all, intrinsic elements of a holistic Greek mythological system. However, I hope through this work to cast my vote with the Dionysians.

Applying Nepveu’s Theories

Ultimately, any literary theory must draw its strength from actual texts. Given the scope of most bodies of literature, while an attempt to justify a theory by basing arguments on a few texts must seem immediately suspect, an exhaustive examination and analysis of an entire corpus could easily take a lifetime. With this caveat in mind, this thesis attempts to relate Pierre Nepveu’s theories of postmodernism, transculturalism, exile and the New World experience to néo-québécois Dany Laferrière’s Eroshima and Odeur du café, and Ying Chen’s Les Lettres chinoises and L’Ingratitude. The idea is not to provide an exhaustive analysis of each, but to examine them in sufficient depth to see how they relate to Nepveu’s theories.

As his thesis also attempts to illustrate the convergence between nouveau québécois and néo-québécois writing by comparing these works by Chen and Laferrière to other néo-québécois and nouveau québécois texts, there is an a priori assumption of Nepveu’s view of contemporary Québécois literature as essentially containing strong postmodern and transcultural elements. It is in the spirit of Nepveu’s call for a rereading of the traditional Québécois canon in a postmodern
light, a reading based on an understanding of the realities of the here-and-now, that the present work is undertaken.

Although Nepveu himself makes his case by drawing on an extensive number of texts, most of his examples of néo-québécois writers are drawn from the Italian-Quebec community. As this work relates Nepveu’s theories to Chen and Laferrière’s works, the hypothesis is that Nepveu’s theories, if valid, should apply to these néo-québécois writers, and by inference to other néo-québécois writers as well.

There is a certain postmodern irony in the fact that Laferrière, who describes himself both as a Québécois and American writer, now spends much of his time in Florida like many other Québécois. It seems to be yet another indicator of the postmodern era when Québécois society itself can be seen to transcend its borders. Or, as Antonio D’Alfonso says: “To limit ethnicity to a country is to belittle the highest component of its meaning, that is ethnicity has developed into such a complex transborder experience that the terms emigrant and immigrant can no longer contain it” (In Italics 19).

The choice of texts for inclusion in an analysis such as this one is always problematic. It would be a crass generalization to label any text as “typical.” Les Lettres chinoises is as different from L’Ingratitude as Éroshima is from L’Odeur du café. These works were chosen to illustrate how widely varying individual works may still fit Nepveu’s theories by sharing common elements. On the other hand, even if a few chosen texts do seem to support Nepveu’s or Harel’s views, this does not per se validate their theories. In an attempt to address this problem, wherever possible relevant references will also be made to other texts to somewhat further broaden the scope.

Ying Chen’s work was chosen because her depiction of Chinese life, both at home and within Quebec, seems to echo closely the plight of Italian immigrants to Quebec, themes explored by Nepveu and in the plays of Marco Micone. Her treatment of the other also yields fertile ground for exploring Harel’s theories. Chen’s work also clearly demonstrates that the fragmentary and derisory elements of postmodernism do not mean the death of tragedy.
it relates to Nepveu’s theories as well as to other Québécois texts. The final chapter presents the conclusions. Each chapter more or less functions as a stand-alone essay, with the relevant theories explained in Chapter 1 referenced as needed. This approach should minimize the need to repeatedly redefine Nepveu’s theories and at the same time hopefully will avoid the danger of degenerating into a confused and meandering comparison.

Chapter 2 discusses how in *Les Lettres chinoises* the multiple narrators, each identified only at the end of their entry, contribute to the sense of fragmentation and confusion. This chapter also explores how each of the characters deals with their sense of exile differently and how transculturalism makes immigrants even out of those who stay put. In Chapter 3, the discussion focuses on how Ying Chen’s *L’Ingratitude*, with its narration from beyond the grave and its shifting perspective, produces a dream-like mood and a sense of confusion. Discussion also focuses on the fragmentation caused by the shifts in time and perspective, and on the nature of the narrator’s self-deprecation. Chapters 4 and 5 respectively discuss Laferrière’s *Eroshima* and *Odeur du café*. Apart from the fragmentation and sense of ironic self-derision that marks Laferrière’s work, there is a lightness that somehow seems to represent the most optimistic elements of living in the here-and-now of postmodern catastrophe. Chapter 6 presents the conclusions, including current directions and potential questions raised by the interview with Nepveu. The bibliography is divided into primary and secondary sources and contains a listing of all texts referenced in this document as well as all other related works consulted in the course of preparing this work.

The Appendix contains a transcript of an interview with Pierre Nepveu conducted on August 2, 2001. One of the things that makes writing about contemporary Quebec criticism most interesting is the relative accessibility of the artists and critics. Since *L’Ecologie du réel* was published in 1989, a lot has happened in Quebec. The interview with Nepveu focuses on how his thinking has evolved since that time, what he sees as the current situation, and what trends he predicts for the future. References to the interview are included in the text as “Appendix A” followed by the page number.

With the exception of the major authors discussed in this work, the Index of Authors lists every instance where an author’s name is mentioned.
Chapter 2
Les Lettres chinoises

In 1962, Hubert Aquin wrote in “La Fatigue culturelle du Canada Français”:
Nos penseurs ont déployé un grand appareil logique pour sortir de la dialectique canadienne-française qui demeure, encore aujourd’hui, épuisante, déprimante, infériorisante pour le Canadien français. Le “comment en sortir?” a été le problème fondamental de nos penseurs et leur fuites dialectiques ne font qu’exprimer tragiquement ce goût morbide pour l’exil dont nos lettres, depuis Crémazie, ne font que retentir. (Blochs 99)

As more writers of other cultural backgrounds enter the literary scene, it becomes obvious that the tropes of alienation, return, and a sense of shared exile span what previously might have been assumed to be cultural boundaries. For Nepveu, this postmodern reality can only be written about from the margins (L’Ecologie 55), and this is the reality reflected in Ying Chen’s Les Lettres chinoises¹, where “How to get out of it” becomes the basic question facing all of her characters.

Les Lettres chinoises, first published in 1993, is an exchange of letters between four parties, each of whom is marginalized by his or her own unique situation. Chen’s device of using a series of letters by these different characters to explore emigration as exile versus migration serves to enhance a sense of fragmentation. In emigration as exile, the subject is cut off from his or her sustaining culture and normal frames of reference. Emigration as migration is more closely allied with the idea of continual rebirth, as the transcultural experiences are viewed as part of a natural process because throughout human history people have tended to move about.

Because each letter writer presents a different viewpoint, the result is a form of unreliable narration which forces the reader to attempt to decode what is actually being expressed. Letters as a narrative device manifest how each narrator has his or her own distinct reality and is cut off from the others. The term polyglossia usually denotes the presence of multiple languages in a text. But as each of the characters in Les Lettres chinoises expresses themselves in his or her own voice,

¹. Leméac, Ying Chen’s publisher, has released two different versions of Les Lettres chinoises, one in 1993, and another in 1998. The original contains several extra chapters as well as a more extensive text. In the later version, all letters to and from Yuan’s father have been removed. All page references here are to the 1993 version.
there is the implication of a certain type of stylistic polyglossia intrinsic in this use of multiple narrators. Although the epistolary novel is nothing new\(^2\), this continual shift in narrative voice gives expression to the sense of fragmentation and overall confusion. To identify the narrator, the reader is frequently forced to check who has signed each letter; however, the narration is rendered even more unreliable by the ambivalence expressed by the characters.

The fragmentation and confusion are enhanced through various conflicting accounts of the same events. It is a literary device also used to great advantage by Aquin in *Trou de mémoire*, as each narrator discredits the previous narrator and seeks to win the reader’s sympathies. The device of the formal conventions of the epistolary novel allows Chen to engage in a far more “didactic” text than would probably be possible using another style of narration. Here, each character is free to lecture the others in ways that might be more difficult to achieve in another format.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Nepveu has identified the major themes of alienation and loss of identity, nostalgia, and continual rebirth in néo-québécois texts (“Qu’est-ce que” 21-23). Chen’s characters explore each of these themes, but the individual perspectives and ambiguities of the characters make these three themes seem more like possibilities along a continuum rather than separate viewpoints.

Sassa lives in Shanghai and is engaged to Yuan, who has emigrated to Montreal to study. Sassa is supposed to follow Yuan to Montreal. But, because her sense of alienation renders her able to accept neither the idea of change nor the conditions of the moment, she precipitates a series of events to make her travel impossible. Rejecting the past and unable to look to the future, she becomes equally unable to survive in the present. Her realization that “le monde est partout le même” (51) dooms her more than anything else. Her story explores how transculturalism and the postmodern condition makes exiles of even those who do not emigrate. The problem is that these stay-at-home “exiles” may lack the necessary adaptive skills to survive in this new environment. For them, there is no escape.

\[
\text{On n’a pas besoin d’aller à l’étranger pour devenir étranger. [. . .] Quand on ne se sent pas bien ailleurs, on blâme son exil et on se console avec les souvenirs de sa mère patrie, purifiés et embellis par l’imagination grâce à la distance et au temps.}
\]

\(^2\) Examples include the 17\(^{th}\) Century Gabriel Guileragues’ *Lettres portugaises*, Jane Austen’s *Emma*, John Barth’s *Letters*, and Alice Walker’s *The Colour Purple*. 
écoulé. Mais quand on est étranger chez soi, on n’a aucun espace de retraite. On a l’impression de s’exiler dans les abîmes pourtant familiers, sans issue ni consolation. (37)

Plurilingualism is seen not as an asset, but as a chameleon-like way “moins pour s’enrichir que pour s’effacer” (51). Her alienation and loss of identity lead to a sense of bitter self-irony and, ultimately, to her destruction. For Sassa, to leave one’s home means exile and an abandoning of the things that define oneself.

Il n’est pas plus facile de quitter son pays que d’y rester. […] On vit dans une époque d’exil. Le mal du pays est devenu le mal du siècle. […] je crains de devenir trop visible dans un autre pays. […] Et s’il faut mourir, il vaut mieux que ce soit dans les ténèbres tranquilles que dans les lumières curieuses. (51-2)

Yuan, a Chinese student newly-arrived in Montreal, yearns for a romanticized past and for Sassa, his fiancée back in Shanghai. As he adapts to his new surroundings, he also learns to develop a sense of dual vision, and is frequently not quite sure which side to take (22, 41, 55). “Ce sont des ni A ni B, a dit l’un des invités […] des amphibies, des choses mixtes et impures… Et des immigrants, me suis-je dit” (48). Yuan explores the life of the immigrant “comme un nouveau-né” (18) and, in a passage that is reminiscent of the Sermon On The Mount, compares his exile to the migration of birds (53). “Ils s’envolent vers un avenir inconnu, les ailes chargées des poussières du temps et la tête pleine de chansons éternelles” (54). He then describes Da Li as resembling a bird (54). Yet later, his ambivalence becomes obvious as he criticizes Nicolas, his North American friend, for his “sagesse des papillons” (56).

As he adapts to his new life, he finds a sense of happiness in becoming an orphan of the snow (40); however, Da Li describes him as at times still feeling like a cultural orphan (104). Although his letters reflect a yearning for the past even as he embraces the present, his nostalgia is tempered by revisionism. When he waxes nostalgic about their favourite restaurant (105), Sassa reminds him that when they went there, he had found the bowls dirty and the soup thin (110).

Yuan’s father essentially plays the role of fifth business, providing support for Yuan’s threatened sense of tradition and serving as a foil to explore cultural relativism.3 Ironically, he

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3. All letters both to and from Yuan’s father were removed from the 1998 version.
works in the Cultural Exchange Bureau, seen as a source of cultural contamination and dangerous new ideas. Curiously, although he encourages Yuan in his computer studies, he cautions him against the dangers inherent in lucidity (25-6).

Da Li, a university friend of Yuan and Sassa in China, reflects the trope of continual rebirth. But as such, she is also the destructuring agent who drives a wedge into Yuan and Sassa’s relationship. Da Li embraces the future and change for its own sake, while rejecting any ties. “En me coupant d’une racine, je risque d’en acquérir une autre. Or, je n’aime pas les racines. Je les trouve les unes comme les autres laides, têtues, à l’origine des préjugés, coupables de conflits douloureux, destructeurs et vains” (83). Da Li represents the trope of continual rebirth, but because she has lost any sense of cultural relativism, and hence lives only for the moment, she also represents a type of self-preoccupation. She reminds the reader that rebirth comes with its risks, and that any birth has the potential to turn out a deformed fetus (158). The price that she pays for electing to exist only in the moment is a sometimes overwhelming sense of nihilism: “Toute ma vie, j’ai senti cette inexistence” (91).

Like Yuan, Sassa also has revisionist and romanticized memories which are not to be trusted (102), except hers begin by expressing her ambivalence to tradition (42-3) and finally become overwhelmingly negatively coloured. “J’écris des mensonges. Car […] si un rêve est une réalité, le récit de ce rêve devient un mensonge” (89). Eventually, even the past becomes tawdry. When she first revisits their favourite restaurant, she finds that the noodles “sont toujours bonnes” (102), but later describes it as “bel et bien aussi banale que les autres” (110). In a rejection of even the present, she says: “Je pense que l’un de nos pires ennemis est notre imagination. Il faut donc la tuer […] et devenir banalement heureux” (110). For Sassa, the transcultural experience is one that has a price of a complete loss of any sense of security and is paid for with bureaucratic blood and a rending of the fabric of her life (66-7); “Les plantes sans racines ne vivent pas […] Je ne vais pas très bien” (80). As her memories become less reliable, she becomes doomed by her inability to accept either the present or the future, and ultimately seeks refuge in oblivion: “Je serais peut-être bien plus heureuse si j’étais morte à cette époque” (100).

Even as Yuan sees emigration as a natural migratory behaviour, one that should come as easily to humans as it does to the birds (53), he attempts to make the best of his déracinement,
because “Il y a dans la nature humaine quelque chose qu’on ne surmonte pas. Alors on crée des lois pour contrôler cela. Ce serait trop naïf d’espérer trouver, là où il y a des hommes, une terre exempte des virus que sont les préjugés. [. . .] Les Soupéens sont donc les mal-aimés de Shanghai, et les Shangaïens, de Beijing, et les Chinois du continent, de Hong Kong (97). He asks why it is that “un Chinois soit plus solitaire ailleurs que dans son propre pays et que je sois moins heureux à Montréal qu’à Shanghaï?” (98).

Da Li supplies the derisory and parodic elements. When Sassa asks her if she is in love with a foreigner, Da Li plays with the ambiguity of the word itself. In a culture of déracinement, everyone is a potential foreigner, “une plante sans racines” (82-3). Those who leave are doubly cut off, equally unable to adapt to the new situation or to return to the old (91). In a parodic echo of “l’orphelinat de la neige,” Da Li describes the Quiet Revolution as where “on a quitté les églises pour se plonger dans les magasins. [. . .] Sur leurs ruines, des milliers et des milliers d’enfants sans parents, de parents sans enfants, de maris sans femme, de femmes sans mari, des individus seuls avec chien ou chat” (143). Faced with this chaos brought on by freedom, Da Li is left in a quandary as to what she wants (143).

Nepveu’s call for an écologie du réel as involving an ongoing balancing act between the two extreme positions of nationalism and cultural protectionism on the one hand, and a form of postmodern hegemony leading into chaos or a religion of non-sense on the other were discussed earlier (p38). Each of Chen’s characters in Les Lettres chinoises serve to illustrate one of these positions, but Chen presents them more as options along a continuum than as polar opposites. Sassa and Da Li represent both ends of the spectrum: Sassa, with her conservative views, represents cultural protectionism and is ruled by the past, while Da Li’s life is in constant flux with no fixed reference points. Yuan’s optimism is tempered by his father’s support and advice. Yuan follows the middle path, willing to explore the future while maintaining a sense of historical perspective.

For Nepveu, as literature continues to define the new centres and experiences of difference and alterity, the idea of a stable, homogenous and assimilative society is replaced by a society based on cultural sharing. In this transculturalism, both are changed, and what emerges is something new (“Qu’est-ce que” 17). Of Chen’s characters, only Yuan is shown to represent
successfully this position. Through his interactions he is not only changed, but he also influences his new North American friends. His success is due to his participating in his own development.

The rest of the characters are trapped in a transcultural world not of their own making. Caught between ageless values and a world in which those values no longer apply, they are unable to live with their situations and each seeks their own form of escape. Yuan’s father retreats into himself, Da Li escapes to Paris and a flight into the future, while Sasa presumably escapes through death.

_Les Lettres chinoises_ illustrates how the postmodern need not mean the death of tragedy. None of the relationships survive, and each character continues to drift in his or her own isolated world. A certain didactic message is conveyed as each character’s individual success seems to be a reflection of his or her ability to adapt to change, while continuing to be aware of other possibilities.

The pain experienced by the characters in _Les Lettres chinoises_ is the same pain reflected in _Addolorata_ and _Déjà l’agonie_ by Marco Micone, as well as by the contributors to _Sous le Signe du Phénix: Entretiens avec 15 créateurs italo-québécois_, as discussed in Chapter 1. In _Sous le Signe_, Caccia sees the immigrant trope of return as based in the fact that ethnicity is inexorably linked to a sense of place (11). But the yearning is for an imagined place and past. Before leaving, most immigrants defined themselves after their region of origin. It is only as members of an exiled community that they are identified, and learn to identify themselves, as Italian (or Chinese). Just as most Italian-Québécois immigrants developed a sense of being Italian, rather than Moliscean, Calabrian, or Campobascean, etc. for the most part only after their arrival in Quebec, Yuan becomes “Chinese” by coming to Quebec. Sasa remains in Shanghai and views herself as a Shanghaian, viewing other Chinese from the provinces as foreign. In _Les Lettres chinoises_, Chen drives home the point that although the postmodernist reality makes immigrants even of those who stay home, the stay-at-homes may lack the necessary adaptive skills to survive.

For Nepveu, culture remains an essentially undefinable internal value measured by its ability for self-change, disorientation and migration (“Qu’est-ce que” 19). For Nepveu, to be able to live in the moment, to appreciate the here-and-now, means also to have an understanding of both the past and the future (26-7). When Yuan’s father says that “Une personne qui vit exclusivement
dans le présent n’a pas d’avenir. Ceci simplement parce qu’un oiseau qui passe toute la belle saison à chanter crèvera en hiver” (69), he illustrates Nepveu’s position that to live successfully in the present demands a sense of temporal relativism. In a reinforcement of the importance of the past, he asks after Yuan’s grades. “Je suis curieux de connaître tes notes d’examens, tout comme ton grand-père l’était de connaître les miennes” (69).

Certainly in Les Lettres chinoises one sees evidence of Nepveu’s passion du retour. Apart from the nostalgia and the references to rebirth, what is communicated through the alienation and loss of identity is the sense of the pain involved in losing the past, and the frustration in not being able to participate fully in the present. For Nepveu the successful resolution of the passion du retour lies not in a quest for an unachievable past, but in a return in the sense of rediscovering one’s inner self (“La Passion” 105). Only when he is alone, walking through winter does Yuan express a sense of happiness (40).

For Nepveu, the passion du retour involves a “retour à soi-même” (105), a voyage of discovery of the inner self, where there is always the danger of becoming too self-absorbed, of lapsing into egotism. There is also a fine line to be sought in balancing a sense of self against a sense of the group.

On dit de certaines émotions qu’elles nous mettent tout à l’envers: la passion du retour implique justement cela, ce travail actif et bouleversant du retour à soi, un retour qui risque toujours (et cela est essentiel) d’être “taxé d’égoïsme,” et qui ne combat donc la culpabilité que comporte tout exil qu’au risque de devoir assumer une autre culpabilité: celle de dire “je” alors qu’il faudrait dire “nous,” céder au chantage du “nous.” (“La Passion” 106)

The characters in Les Lettres chinoises reflect a similar sense of fragmentation to the one to be found in Micone’s Déjà l’agonie, where three generations of the same family each experience their own revisionist memories. In Déjà l’agonie, Maria and Franco, the grandparents, represent the past. The present is represented by the politicized Luigi, married to Danielle, who is a symbol of Québécois culture. Unable to reconcile themselves to an unacceptable present, politics becomes the most important thing in their lives, to the point that their son Nino, the hope for the future,
rebels against their self-absorption. “Je vous en veux à mort, parce que vous m’avez jamais écouté. Vous êtes deux égoïstes” (68).

In *Les Lettres chinoises* both Sassa and Da Li, because of their self-absorption, also exhibit a sense of egotism. The other characters are, more or less, willing to take their chances with life. Da Li’s refusal to consider anything other than what confronts her at the moment shows her preoccupation with her self, but only Sassa demands that the world meet her solely on her own terms. In the end, Sassa’s withdrawal is tantamount to a suicide as the ultimate act of self-absorption.

Although Sassa’s déracinement is produced by the erosion of the world around her (her sense of enracinement renders her imobile), it so traumatizes her that she is unable to experience any pleasure. To acknowledge pleasure means an acceptance, at least temporarily, of the present. She ultimately seeks refuge in her own destruction. Danielle in *Déjà l’agonie* (68) and Giovanni in *Addolorata* (60) mask their ahedonia behind a veil of political correctness. Sassa masks hers behind imagined illness and a series of lies.

*Addolorata* and *Déjà l’agonie* share enough common elements with *Les Lettres chinoises* to warrant a discussion of all three works. Both *Addolorata* and *Déjà l’agonie* focus on the double disorientation produced by the loss of the homeland coupled with a new land that will forever remain somewhat foreign. The immigrant is seen as doubly cut off, similar to Aquin’s double exile. In *Addolorata*, Giovanni says: “Dans un pays où les riches et les patrons mènent le gouvernement par le bout du nez, tous les pauvres, tous les ouvriers sont des immigrants, même s’ils s’appellent Tremblay ou Smith” (61). In *Les Lettres chinoises*, although Yuan is the one who is physically exiled, it is Sassa, the transcultural exile in her own land, who is cut off the most.

If the male characters suffer from this sense of double exile, then, from a feminist perspective, the women in all of these works may be seen to suffer a three-fold exile. Perhaps it is this extra burden that is their undoing and in some cases forces them to move on. Addolorata finally rebels in a monologue (72) reminiscent of the housewife’s revolt in Denise Boucher’s *Les Fées ont soif*. She ends up by leaving Giovanni. In *Déjà l’agonie*, it is Maria who rejects her husband’s return to the dead past, and it is Danielle who abandons the life of the voluntary poor activist. In *Les Lettres chinoises* Sassa’s inability to embrace the present leads to her abandoning Yuan and to her withdrawal. Da Li escapes in a flight into the future.
through a continual transcultural rebirth that forces one into the -and-now; however, successful living in the here-and-now means an awareness and acceptance of both the past and the future.
Chapter 3
L’Ingratitude

At first glance, L’Ingratitude, as a novel set in Shanghai, might seem to have little to qualify it as Québécois literature other than the fact that it was written in Quebec in French. However, a closer look reveals that it provides a wealth of concordance with Nepveu’s theories of the postmodern convergence between nouveau québécois and néo-québécois texts. Here we see ample evidence of the confusion of signs caused by the death of history, distinct genres and fixed ideologies and here the themes of catastrophe, alterity, and parody are given full play, while the themes of exile and la passion de retour are explored. L’Ingratitude, although it contains elements of nostalgia and rebirth, is overwhelmingly about alienation and loss of identity.

In this light, L’Ingratitude can be seen as a type of postmodern ghost story. It is a first person narrative by the ghost of Yan-Zi, who the reader quickly learns is already dead. The first chapter establishes the narrator’s death, and in particular her suicide, as the ultimate act of self-imposed exile while simultaneously registering her strong ambivalence to the act. The book is divided into 35 short chapters, with each functioning as a succinctly independent meditation on death or suicide, a literary device that serves to heighten the sense of fragmentation. Almost every chapter is composed of part reminiscence of events leading up to Yan-Zi’s death and part contemplation on death itself. It is a death, however, that ultimately leads to a sort of rebirth through the euphoria of freedom.

The disdain with which the funeral attendants in Chapter 1 treat Yan-Zi’s corpse because it is a suicide (9), Yan-Zi’s own ambivalence, and the fact that the narration is from beyond the grave all serve to signal that this is an unreliable narrator. The irony when it is finally revealed that her intended suicide was actually an accidental death further establishes the narrator as unreliable. The sense of catastrophe is enhanced by references throughout the text to the advancing state of decay of her body. Although suicide is used as the ultimate destructuring element throughout, the confusion of signs achieved through the narrator’s ambivalence, scraps of diglossia, auto-parodic elements and other hints let the reader know that this is a text to be considered on many levels.
As discussed in the introduction, for Nepveu, postmodernism presents a reality that is lacking, unreasonable, ironic and crumbling, and can only be written about from the margins (L'Écologie 55). For Nepveu, néo-québécois texts are important, not just for the convergence that they share with nouveau québécois works, but also because they can serve as benchmarks “du dépaysement et d’un certain «territoire imaginaire» de la culture” (“Qu’est-ce Que” 21). In this light, L'Ingratitude may be seen as a postmodernist text with some strong similarities to Réjean Ducharme's Le Nez qui voque and Anne Hébert's Kamouraska. Although Le Nez qui voque and Kamouraska usually may not be considered as postmodern texts, when they are re-examined according to Nepveu's call for a rereading of the Québécois canon in a postmodernist light, it can be seen that they indeed do contain many postmodern elements, and that they share many elements with L'Ingratitude.

Both Chen's and Ducharme's works are so richly textured that the references to the text cited here are but a few of many possibilities. Their style of writing is in some sense evocative of Herman Melville's in Moby Dick, where virtually any page chosen at random could produce a host of symbolism and allusion.

The equivocal titles of both Le Nez qui voque and L'Ingratitude signal that the signposts themselves are suspect and subject to multiple readings. The title Le Nez qui voque by itself is nonsensical, as voque is not a word. However, in case anyone might miss the point, Mille Milles, the narrator, informs the reader that the whole text is “une équivoque,” or an equivocation. Nothing here is to be taken at face value. The title L'Ingratitude contains an ironic equivocation between "ingratitude" and "en gratitude;" although this is not a perfect homophone, as in French the proper expression would be "en signe de gratitude."

Mille Milles spells out some possible meanings when he talks about the equivocation inherent in the taches and tâches historiques of the Marché Bon-Secours and the Papineau residence. When Mille Milles says that he himself is a "nez qui voque" (10), we are given clues to the possible multiple readings of history and memory and to the narration itself. Whenever Mille Milles asks "Est-ce que c'est clair? Est-ce que c'est assez clair" we know that it is anything but
clear. His manifest ambivalence towards Chateaugué, Questa and women in general underscores that nothing that he says can be accepted at face value.

Both of these novels are open to a variety of archetypal readings, but in the postmodern tradition, each of these readings at best provides only a fragmentary interpretation. Nevertheless, there is a synergy at work which makes these novels greater than the sum of their fragments. As Franca Marcato-Falzoni suggests with regard to Ducharme’s work:

Rien dans le roman n’est alors directement signifiant; tout devient allusif et renvoie secrètement à une signification cachée et complexe qui transcende le sens visible et «apparent». [...] Le narrateur est d’ailleurs lui-même victime, mais il ne l’ignore pas, de cette activité polysémique aut polymorphe qu’est l’évocation.

(Marcato-Falzoni 188-9)

In both novels there is only one actual voice, the narrator, on whose interpretation of events the reader is forced to rely. In defence of his own unreliable narratorship, Mille Milles says: “Êtes-vous à la recherche de la vérité? Consultez les pages jaunes de votre bottin téléphonique” (132). In both works, all that is revealed about the other characters is seen through the narrator’s eyes. The other characters exist only as objects in the narrators’ minds: all of the women in Mille Milles’ life are objects, as are the men in Yan-Zi’s. This point is made obvious in Le Nez qui voque by Questa’s three daughters all called Anne, and in L’Ingratitude by the obvious parody in the diglossic name of her lover, Hong-Qi, the foreigner who is not to be trusted (43). It is just after her liaison with Hong-Qi that Yan-Zi’s life quickly begins to unravel, illustrating how Hong-Qi also represents Harel’s idea of the foreigner as the ultimate destructuring agent who will destroy tradition and any connection with the past (41). Hong-Qi is contrasted with Chun, the other man in Yan-Zi’s life, who is also more symbol than actual character.

Her rejection of Chun, with his boring acceptance of the status quo based on out-dated values, represents Yan-Zi’s rejection of the past. The reference to Chun’s name is somewhat more obscure and ironic. According to the I Ching, Chun is the name of the hexagram which represents “Difficulty At The Beginning,” or more literally a blade of grass pushing against an obstacle as it
As much as Mille Milles insists on being true to detail, it becomes obvious that he is suffering from selective memory syndrome. The suicide pact is slowly diminished until it is remembered only as a game, "pour jouer un tour au pharmacien, […] pour rire" (274). Chateaugué herself becomes "la pauvre idiote […] laide […] stupide et médiocre (274-5).

*Le Nez qui voque* also works on the level of a political allegory, an interpretation that also can be applied to *L’Ingratitude*. Nicole Bourbonnais says that Ducharme makes Mille Milles the incarnation of the colonized French-Canadian, suffering from an inferiority complex which compels him to condemn anyone or anything that risks seeming superior to him ("Ducharme" 189). In this light, Mille Milles’ shifting memory is evocative of Ernest Renan’s comment in “What Is a Nation” that the essence of a nation “is that all individuals have much in common, and that they have forgotten many things” (Renan 11).

Yan-Zi gives a hint of a potential political interpretation when she switches to the plural to describe the suicide as a defining act “[…] d’une séparation brutale, d’un déracinement féroce pour sortir de la torpeur et nous redécouvrir, sinon pour nous abandonner définitivement” (12). There is a sense of equivocation here, as the use of the plural might also refer to her relationship with her mother. Her father, once always willing to engage in political debate, now sits idly (31). Symbolizing the death of nationalism and the alienation from collective political goals, she dies on the national holiday, which is also her birthday (93-4). The political allegory is furthered in the speech given by Yan-Zi’s mother which begins with “Il est trop dangereux de traiter de politique dans ce pays, […] on ne vit pas en Amérique, il faut toujours prendre en considération notre réalité à nous. […] le jour où ils tueront leur passé, ils pleureront leur avenir!” (27)

Seen as a political allegory, both Mille Milles’ and Yan-Zi’s seeming rational cold-heartedness can be interpreted as manifestations of the “culte de la lucidité” of the *nouveau québécois* (*L’Écologie* 91). Although both Yan-Zi and Mille Milles operate in opposition to conventional wisdom, they explain their positions with great clarity and lucidity. Because of the contradictions in statements made by both Mille Milles and Yan-Zi, it is obvious that the logic behind the lucidity of each is seriously flawed. From within the confusion engendered by the
postmodern reality, there is no clear solution to be found. Nepveu says that perhaps lucidity, rather than being “commandée par le désir de progrès qui est désir de vie et volonté de puissance [. . .], is actually “une plongée meurtrière en soi-même, une rencontre fulgurante avec la mort, au fond du temps effondré” (91). As a civil engineer, Yan-Zi’s uncle also represents reason, or lucidity. As he displaces Yan-Zi from her room, his death amidst a sea of lies signals the death of lucidity itself (105).

As unable as Mille Milles is to accept his past, he is almost equally as ill at ease in the present. In a Freudian sense, Mille Milles’ repressed sexual drive becomes a symbol of his unflagging zest for life, despite his nihilism. As Chateaugué represents the past, Questa, with her red sports car, represents the present, the age of the automobiliste and a “conQuest” that Mille Milles is unable to consummate.

With their indeterminate roots set in the Quebec hinterlands, both Mille Milles and Chateaugué are examples of Jacques Brault’s “orphelinat de la neige” (L’Écologie 100). With her suicide as the ultimate act of déracinement and exile, Yan-Zi becomes another type of orphan.

For Nepveu, the progression of Québécois culture into the current post-modern era is marked by torment and obsession. The imminence of death makes the present intolerable and forces an altered sense of reality burdened by a hyperactive conscience (94). Both Mille Milles and Yan-Zi vacillate between self-deprecation and boastfullness, between bravado and remorse. After Mille Milles has denounced his pact with Chateaugué and marginally embraced the present by getting a job and riding in Questa’s car, he says: “Je ne me ressemble pas. [. . .] Chaque fois que je me retrouve, je me trouve différent” (196). Yan-Zi says “Quand je ne serais plus rien, je serais moi” (24).

Non-identity and uncertainty also appear on the level of form. Nepveu says that Ducharme’s use of poetry and the memory of poetry (like that of other Quebec novelists) is of an ironic nature signalled by its stiltedness and the repetition of a theme. It is the result of an ironic polemic between the novel and poetry (L’Écologie 109). Irony is similarly at work in Yan-Zi’s destructuring of the Shakespearean quote “To be or not to be” (L’Ingratitude 15). Within the new
genre of the postmodern Québécois novel, it is as if the narrators are seeking to justify themselves with reference to forms, texts and authors, yet they also transpose them into new uncertain contexts. As Mille Milles says: “Je suis un poète; qu’on se le dise; qu’on ne me prenne pas pour un vulgaire prosateur” (Le nez 166). The photo of Nelligan, however, becomes a caricature juxtaposed with the picture of Frankenstein and other bric-à-brac that add to the sense of postmodern confusion (L’Écologie 110).

Both works ultimately reject nostalgia, a fact which, according to Nepveu, provides an opportunity for a re-evaluation of the mode d’être from a contemporary perspective based on catastrophe, alterity, parody and pluralism (L’Écologie 10). Yan-Zi’s rejection of both the past and the future, and her ultimate escape into the eternal present is a flawed echo of this position, as is Mille Milles’ rejection of Chateaugué and most of the world around him and his confused insistence on the reality of the moment.

Tout cela, maintenant, c’est de la mauvaise littérature, des réminiscences, du non-sens, du passé, du dépassé, du trépassé, du déclassé, du crétacé. […] C’est fini maintenant. […] Voici le présent. Le présent n’est beau que lorsqu’il est passé, et quand il est passé il n’est plus. […] On ne peut que regretter amèrement le passé. […] Les souvenirs les plus doux sont les plus amers. […] Ce n’est pas vrai. Rien n’est vrai. Tout est fini, tout n’existe plus, tout est passé : passé ou à passer.

L’avenir n’est pas à venir mais à passer. (Le Nez 79)

Mille Milles’ wordplays and invented words serve as pointers to a new linguistic and cultural identity, a part of the “ti-pop” culture described by Nepveu as the parodic and derisory caricature of what is left of the Quebec imagined community (L’Écologie 21). Mille Milles’ word plays force the reader to continually re-evaluate what is presented. He introduces himself to Questa as Étin Célan, supposedly because of her glittering lipstick (148). But he later reveals himself to her as actually insolent, (154) and is called Bel insolent by Chateaugué (256).

Le nez qui voque and L’Ingratitude both fail to end on an optimistic note, but they do conform to Nepveu’s vision of literature not as a solution or a consolation for the lost centre, but
as the ultimate balancing force in the continuous reiteration of the unlimited number of new possibilities and perspectives (L'Écologie 220).

L'Ingratitude and Kamouraska also share many common elements. The shifting voice of the already-dead narrator in L'Ingratitude provokes a sense of the same dream-like state produced by the multiple personalities of the narrator in Anne Hébert's Kamouraska. In L'Ingratitude, the magical realism induced by narration from beyond the grave and its shifting perspective add to a sense of confusion that matches the feverish narration in Kamouraska.

Both stories unfold through a series of flashbacks. The shifts in time and perspective adds to the sense of fragmentation, particularly as the unreliability of the narration progressively increases. Depending on her narrative state, Hébert's heroine alternately narrates in the third person, the first person, and refers to herself as both Madame Rolland and Elizabeth d'Aulnières-Tassy. Both her accounts and Yan-Zi's contain many contradictions that become increasingly obvious as the stories unfold. The reader is reminded that a first-person narrative is by its very nature subjective and therefore suspect.

Both narrators are trapped in changing worlds not of their own making, caught between ageless values and a world in which those values no longer apply. They are unable to live with their situations and yet are unable to escape. Yan-Zi is trapped in a meaningless life within a rigid social order. She has a love/hate relationship with her mother, who represents the past. Yan-Zi attempts to sever any sense of connection of the past: "Je l'ai obligée à démissionner de son poste de mère. Je l'ai anéanti" (13). Unable to cope with her roots, and even less able to effect change, she attempts to escape through suicide. But in an ironic twist, her accidental death at the last moment deprives her of even this refuge. Hébert's heroine attempts escape through dementia.

This sense of alienation resulting from being trapped in a world not of one's own making and thereby being forced into an interior life is evocative of Saint-Denys Garneau's poetry, as discussed by Nepveu (L'Écologie 74), and as reflected in "Accompagnement": "Je marche à côté d'une joie / D'une joie qui n'est pas à moi / D'une joie à moi que je ne puis pas prendre" (Scott 14). When one reads "Cette femme à côté d'une cage d'oiseau" in L'Ingratitude (132), one
wonders if there is not an intertextual echo here of the poem “Cage d’oiseau” by St-Denys Garneau which includes the following lines: “Je suis une cage d’oiseau / Un cage d’os / Avec un oiseau / L’oiseau dans sa cage d’os / C’est la mort qui fait son nid” (Poésies complètes 96). It is a sense of alienation also explored by Anne Hébert in “Les Petites Villes.” “Pas un homme ne s’en échappe / Ni une fleur ni un enfant.”(Tomb 32)². Likewise, Yan-Zi’s inability to escape except through suicide can be seen as a reflection of Hébert’s sentiments in the poem “Inventaire” (36).

A sense of the tragic in L’Ingratitude also hearkens back to the themes in Saint-Denys Garneau’s and Hébert’s poetry, the principle tragedy lying not in Yan-Zi’s decision to escape through suicide, but in her sense of exile, caused by her failure to connect with the present, which robs her of even suicide as an alternative. She ends up as just another traffic statistic. Her decision to kill herself is at least an action, an attempt to seize the day and at the same time to punish Chun for not doing the same. She rejects Chun because he hesitates. She says: “Je savais qu’il restait sur place, immobile et trempé dans la lumière blanche. Il regrettait. Il passait sa vie à regretter.” (61)

For Nepveu, success in a transcultural environment with its constant state of flux means being able to flow with the moment (“Qu’est-ce que” 26-7). In L’Ingratitude, Yan-Zi is doomed by her failure to adapt. Her problem with her mother is symbolic of her ambivalence toward the past. On the one hand, she dreams about being free of parents: “Tu côtoies l’Histoire mais tu n’a pas d’histoire” (89). She describes her relationship with her mother as: “[...] notre histoire, ce chapitre rempli de vaines espérances et de déceptions” (90). However, she subsequently registers the other side of her ambivalence: “On ne pouvait venir au monde tout seul. On ne pouvait pas exister sans parents. Une personne sans parents est misérable comme une peuple sans histoire” (98).

In “La Passion du retour: Écritures italiennes au Québec” Nepveu explores how la passion du retour is actually a voyage of inner discovery, one where nostalgia flavours the memory of the

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1. F.R. Scott, in St-Denys Garneau & Anne Hébert provides both the original and translated texts of selected works by both authors.
2. Likewise, P. Miller, in The Tomb of the Kings, provides both the original French and the translated English version of Le Tombeau des rois.
overcome by life itself, and sits there blushing and drooling at his niece. Yan-Zi is so overcome by his behaviour that she starts to tremble. In a magical moment, the two worlds are united, and “les assiettes tremblent aussi” (64). However, her revulsion at her father’s lechery is tempered by her own ambivalence. “Pourrais-je détester mon père sans me détester moi-même?” (65).

The strong sense of irony and self-parody developed in this scene, and which pervades the entire book, is enhanced when her attempt at suicide ultimately fails. While grasping for her pills, her own final solution to her sense of estrangement and her vain attempt to retreat fully into interior space, she is accidentally killed by a passing truck, by a machine symbolic of the contemporary life that she is incapable of embracing.

Unfortunately, even in death, Yan-Zi cannot escape from reality, that is the here-and-now, symbolized by Seigneur Niloù, who greets all of the dead and is responsible for their re-education to an acceptance of conventional wisdom of the world and their eventual rebirth (92-3). Yan-Zi’s rejection of the past, as symbolized by her mother, renders her incapable of embracing the present, and cuts her off from any chance of a future in this lifetime. “Mais les traîtres à leur mère continueront, morts comme vivants, à vagabonder, à se voir exclus du cycle de la vie, à être partout et nulle part. À ne pas être.” (129). Her final cry for her mother is her salvation, just as she is slipping into the abyss (133).

The similarities between elements of Le Nez qui voque, Kamouraska and L’Ingratitude illustrate the convergence between nouveau québécois and néo-québécois texts. As L’Ingratitude uses nostalgia to explore the darker sides of catastrophe, exile and a destructured world, it pushes the exploration of that darkness farther than either Le Nez qui voque or Kamouraska. It demonstrates how postmodernism need not mean the end of tragedy, even when that tragedy is riddled with irony.
Chapter 4
Éroshima

In Éroshima, first published in 1987, Dany Laferrière pursues the theme of nuclear Holocaust as the ultimate sexual experience. The lightness bordering on flippancy of Éroshima stands in sharp contrast to the darkness of Chen’s work. Similar to Nepveu’s “l’orphelinat de la neige” seen in Québécois literature (L’Écologie, 100) and Miconé’s “les orphelins de l’émigration” (Addolorata, 95), Laferrière’s narrator in Éroshima can be seen as another type of orphan, this time as an orphan of the Bomb.

Apart from a strong sense of self-irony, this is not a work which explores alienation and loss of identity to any extent. Other than being described as a black Haitian, the narrator has no real identity. Nor is there any great sense of nostalgia: the only references to the past are through group memories of Rita Hayworth and Hiroshima. This text is about continual rebirth, where the cultural confusion is certainly not all negative, despite living in the shadow of the Bomb. The perceived threat of inevitable nuclear destruction provides the narrator with the licence to exist solely for the moment. Here, with almost a total lack of history, we see the theme of continual rebirth carried almost to the point of “une espèce d’euphorie de la post- ou de la trans-modernité” (L’Écologie 10).

The unnamed narrator is a black Haitian, living, mostly in Montreal, a life dedicated solely to his own pleasure while he awaits the nuclear apocalypse. In the opening paragraph, he announces his intention never to get out of bed again. He later compromises a little. Against a backdrop of the hip here-and-now world of trendy fashion photography, he is cut off from any sense of the past or the future as he drifts from bed to bed and city to city.

At first, there is seemingly no passion du retour here, only a passion of the moment, of l’écologie d’ici carried to extremes, as the narrator celebrates his own existence, his blackness, his sexuality, and his sense of inevitable nuclear doom. Living in the shadow of the Bomb provokes in the narrator a sort of dark nostalgia for the original explosions on the Bikini Atoll and Hiroshima. For the narrator, the nihilism engendered by living in the shadow of the Bomb explodes into an unprecedented release of erotic and sexual energy:
On a dit tant de mal de la Bombe qu’on va finir par croire qu’elle est uniquement dangereuse. Ses adversaires ont pourtant laissé de côté son aspect le plus explosif: la charge sexuelle qu’elle concentre en elle. […] L’idée qu’à n’importe quel moment, tout cela pourrait sauter ne devrait-elle pas nous pousser à une orgie sans fin? À vouloir grimper sur le premier venu? […] Qui sont ceux qui ont quelque chose à perdre dans une explosion finale? Pas vous. Ni moi. Alors, dansons! La danse au-dessus du volcan. *Birth, Copulation and Death.* (63)¹

Given the level of egotism of the narrator, and some of the hyperbolic accounts, it is safe to assume that the unnamed narrator is used by the author as an ironic device. The narrator’s egotism also serves to discredit him, establishing him as yet another unreliable narrator and pushing the reader to attempt to decipher the meaning of the text on multiple levels. In a text such as this, with its mix of factual and fictional accounts, there is bound to be some ambiguity as to who exactly the narrator is, which serves to blur the genre lines. This blurring of genre lines and the sense of fragmentation are enhanced by the structure of the book itself.

The text is interspersed with Haiku, other poetry, excerpts from the *Kama Sutra,* and other supposed quotes. The first part of the book, entitled “Le zoo Kama sutra,” contains 15 numbered chapters with the text itself numbered continuously every few paragraphs. Each numbered section stands as a single vignette. This mixing of poetry and prose, as discussed in the previous chapter and described by Nepveu in some cases as the result of an ironic polemic between the novel and poetry (*L’Écologie* 109), seems here also to be a form of ironic self-justification of the narrator.

In the second half of the book, the text switches to named chapters and unnumbered paragraphs. Later still, Laferrière recommences the numbered paragraphs, only to abandon the scheme yet again. If the numbering of sequences relates to anything textual, it seems analogous to his description of the women. The chapter where he restarts the numbering sequence contains sexual escapades similar to those in “Le zoo Kama sutra.” Hoki, Keiko, Misako, Reiko, Mariko or Vicky are indistinct except for their physical appearances and sexual preferences. They, too, could

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1. All references to page numbers in *Éroschina* are from the Typo, 1998 edition.
just as easily be numbered as named, a point driven home by Keiko and Reiko being twins, and in the chapter “San Juan par le trou de la serre” with its account of Chevelure Noire and Peau Douce (111-16).

As discussed earlier, Nepveu speaks about how the immigrant, being deprived of a sense of “we,” is forced into a sense of “I” that can result in a type of egotism (“La Passion” 106). We have also seen how for Nepveu, l'écologie d'ici must involve a sense of temporal relativism. In Éroshima, Laferrière illustrates how a headlong rush into living in the here-and-now may turn into egotism. The narrator, and seemingly most of the characters, are so completely caught up in the here-and-now that any sense of the past is lost, and given the threat of the Bomb, the future seems unlikely. In fact, this situation encapsulates a three-horned dilemma of many postmodern perspectives, in which the past is illusory and unattainable, the present is fragmented and unacceptable, and the future, uncertain. This creates a situation in which the individual is thrust into a heightened sense of “here-and-now” that was previously thought to be the reserve of Zen Buddhist adepts. It is precisely because of this lack of temporal relativism that the egotism emerges. In this case the pressure of living in the shadow of the Bomb causes a psychological explosion where the death of history goes beyond signalling its abandonment as a master organizing narrative, and instead triggers a complete flight into living for the moment.

The narrator’s narcissism renders him virtually incapable of portraying any of the other characters as anything but objects. The women are all sexual objects, and most of the significant male figures other than the narrator — particularly in the cameo appearances by Leonard Cohen (34-5) and Norman Mailer (65-75) — seem like attempts at parodic self-aggrandizement on the part of the narrator, and smack of self-justification à la Mille Milles. Even in the one episode in which an average male plays a significant part, the narrator upgrades his name to Barachnikov (35-7).

Objectifying the other characters places the narrator into a type of self-imposed internal exile, an exile that is enhanced by the recurring theme of voyeurism. As a voyeur, the narrator is of necessity outside of the action, a non-participant. This is particularly evident in the erotic scenes, in which almost all he is watching, not participating. As the voyeur, he is the other, whether he is
describing a woman masturbating (23-5), a lesbian seduction scene at a party (33-37), a German girl sleeping in the chapter “Berlin au crépuscule” (103), another lesbian seduction scene in “San Juan par le trou de la serrure” or an Asian woman on the metro in “Vague Sourire d’un chat chinois,” which opens with: “J’ai l’habitude d’aller regarder les visages des gens dans le métro” (95). This voyeur-as-exile theme is expanded to include photography as voyeurism in Chapter XII, when the narrator says: “Photographier est l’acte sexuel par excellence” (50). He then proceeds to report on the movements of a young girl he calls Lolita, ending with “LOLITA DANS LA CHAMBRE NOIRE” (51).

This alienation and lack of a real identity on the part of the narrator illustrate Nepveu’s point that migrancy and pluralism do not always and necessarily mean cultural enrichment, but can signal a lack of identity or, at best, self-irony. The narrator’s sense of exile is also an ironic play on the concept seen in Harel of the foreigner as an essentially threatening and destructuring element. Usually, the view the outsider as a threat comes from within the mainstream group. In an ironic twist, the narrator reminds the reader that he is the only Black in this fully pluralistic society at the same time as he is seen as the foreigner who himself calls for the Bomb, the ultimate destructuring agent.

In fact, it is not entirely true that the narrator is the only Black. The chapter Harlem River Drive provides a vignette of Basquiat at breakfast. Basquiat was a New York-born graffiti artist born of a Black Haitian father and a Puerto Rican mother. He had a a brief and meteoric career as a gallery artist during the 80’s, which was cut short by his death of a heroin overdose at age 27. “Basquiat himself maintained that all he wanted was to be famous. He could learn to draw later, he said. He got his wish, of course, but his dream of fame turned into a nightmare” (Bosworth). The vignette of Basquiat in the morning seems to echo this position.

Some of the parodic elements are understated, almost as if the reader is challenged to discover them and thereby discover other layers of meaning. One example is the detailed description of the Japanese fish delicacy fugu, which can be a potentially life-threatening poison. The narrator seems totally ignorant, saying blithely in his defence: “Oh! Vous savez, je ne connais
The sense of nostalgia and *la passion du retour* are displayed not only in Kero’s, but also in the narrator’s fondness for things Japanese. If the essence of nostalgia is that it is for an unattainable past subject to revisionist memories, how better to illustrate the narrator’s alienation and exile than by his also being nostalgic for not only a Japan that no longer exists, but for one that he never even knew. “Par contre, l’élégance suprême pour moi est nippone. Là, je ne parle pas des Japonaises modernes.


This zest for a borrowed, yet unattainable, nostalgia is balanced, in the third-to-last chapter called “Un paysage du Douanier Rousseau retouché par V.S. Naipaul,” against some evidence for Nepveu’s theory of the New World experience as a voyage into inner space. However, here too ironic references abound. The irony here lies in the title, inasmuch as Rousseau is known for his exotic landscapes and other settings which were solely the product of his own mind. The second irony is that V.S. Naipaul, renowned for liking almost nothing, here in the heat, dust, bugs and chaos of Port-au-Prince “commence à sentir cette ville foldingue” (126) and is thus finally given something to complain about by the narrator.

Here, as Laferrière restarts the numbering scheme, the tone of the narration changes to a more serious one. As already discussed, any first-person narration is inevitably subject to suspicion, as the reader is forced to accept that whatever transpires does so solely in the narrator’s head. In this chapter, the trope of return also receives an ironic treatment as the setting returns to Haiti, the narrator’s birthplace. However, the narrator does not appear in this chapter, only V.S. Naipaul and some girls. The chapter ends with: “On n’a pas de destination. Ça roule, cool, vers l’Apocalypse” (129).

In the penultimate chapter, “Éroshima”, the narrator states: “Je ne m’intéresse qu’aux clichés, et le premier cliché sur le Japon, c’est l’érotisme.” The rest of the chapter consists of Haiku interspersed with clichés concerning Japanese culture, such as “La mort, là-bas? Mishima, Kawabata, Dazai, Akutagawa. Ils n’ont qu’une façon de mourir, semble-t-il. Se suicider” (139).
Laferrière’s fragmented and widely varied styles and the mixing of genres support the postmodern concepts of the death of distinct genres and master narratives. Despite the fact that the narrator seems to be involved in a flight from history, the text itself is an exploration of Nepveu’s concept of temporal relativism, an attempt to reconcile history with contemporary realities.

Éroshima, given the narrator’s exuberance in the face of such a potentially depressing subject, stands as an expression of the trope of continual rebirth, where the cultural confusion is not all negative, nor is all lost. However, the self-absorption of the narcissistic narrator is yet another example of the potential egotism inherent in la passion du retour, and an echo of Mille Milles’ situation in Ducharme’s Le Nez qui voque.
Chapter 5
L’Odeur du café

As much as Éroshima is about the here-and-now, and lacks any real sense of memory, 
L’Odeur du café is all about memory and nostalgia. Unlike the displaced nostalgia for things 
Japanese seen in L’Éroshima, here the nostalgia is for the narrator’s supposed actual childhood. 
L’Odeur du café, first published and recipient of the prix Carbet de la Caraïbe in 1991, is a highly 
romanticized, almost whimsical, account of a childhood spent in a family shattered by poverty. By 
definition, a sense of nostalgia implies an idealized and revisionist account of the past, and that is 
exactly what Dany Laferrière delivers. Yet this seemingly simplistic approach actually belies a 
work of far greater complexity. Rather than having the characters express a sense of nostalgia and 
their passion du retour, as does Micone, Laferrière uses L’Odeur du café as the nostalgic vehicle 
itself, presenting a seemingly straightforward account of the narrator’s childhood spent in Petit-
Goâve, a small village in Haiti.

Here again, Laferrière’s characters in L’Odeur du café can be seen as orphans, this time as 
orphans of the sun, similar to Nepveu and Brault’s “l’orphelinat de la neige” (L’Écologie 100), and 
Micone’s “orphelins de l’émigration” (Addolorata 95). Each character presents such a different 
view of reality and events that they are in many senses cut off from each other’s world views; 
however, these disparate views still manage to create an overall impression of a strongly cohesive 
society, one where magic is alive and well.

Although L’Odeur du café describes scenes of incredible poverty, shattered families and 
personal tragedies, here is none of the violence and horror that one might be conditioned to expect 
from Haiti. Instead, the narrator’s recounting of events is coloured by memories of a world in 
which everyone, despite their differences, eccentricities or alleged sins, has a place. In this 
nostalgic view of the world, there is no exile, except that from which the narrator speaks.
closely matches what would be expected from actually reminiscing about the past, and provides support for Nepveu’s concept of the New World experience as a voyage into inner space.

Although the narrator identifies himself as *Vieux Os*, or Old Bones, as he reminisces about his early life as a child in Haiti, he states that he will never reveal his true name, because: “Da dit qu’on est à la merci de la personne qui connaît votre vrai nom” (26). Old Bones has previously also informed the reader that he has no bones: “J’ai un corps élastique. Je peux l’allonger, le raccourcir, le gonfler ou l’aplatis comme je veux. Mais généralement, j’ai un long corps sans os (comme une anguille). Quand on veut m’attraper, je glisse entre les doigts” (20). With the role of narrator as equivocator established early and with any fixed frame of reference effectively obscured, once again the reader must continuously re-evaluate statements made by the narrator and is forced to conclude that, despite its seeming simplicity, this is a text to be considered on multiple levels.

In this return to the past via Old Bones’ memory, where time itself has lost its continuum, the narration includes nostalgic memories within memories as it drifts back and forth between the time when the family was intact to when his grandfather has died and his mother and aunts have moved to Port-au-Prince. He lives with his grandmother, Da, the community matriarch and around whom the collective imagination revolves. Everyone in the village comes to enjoy coffee on her veranda and to recount their views and opinions. The ubiquitous aroma of coffee is a repeated symbol. It speaks of continual rebirth and serves as a constant reminder to keep things grounded in the here and now, in *l’écologie d’ici*.

The idea of the death of a master narrative and the themes of catastrophe, parody and multiple and contradictory perspectives are sustained by the structure of the book itself, which is divided into seven parts, thirty-eight chapters and a seemingly endless number of subheadings each of which describes a distinct vignette. The result is a sort of literary *film montage*, a mosaic where each chapter deals with an overall theme, a theme which is seldom expressly stated, but must be derived from the vignettes. In a mixing of genres, *L’Odeur du café* functions both as a sort of screenplay storyboard and as a novel. The chapter titles and subheadings can prove equally enigmatic. Chapter 4, “La rose” describes his grandfather’s last days and his death. Only at the end
of the chapter is the reader made aware that the title refers to the rose that his aunt places between his dead grandfather’s fingers (45).

As the fragmentation and confusion of signs force the reader into a continual decoding of what overtly seems like simple reminiscences, in some of the vignettes what is not said can be as important as what is. In the subheading “Robe Jaune,” the reader is introduced both to Vava, the narrator’s love, and to some of the significance of the colour yellow. “Je ne l’ai pas vue venir. Elle est arrivée dans mon dos, comme toujours. Elle revenait de la messe de l’après-midi avec sa mère. Vava habite en haut de la pente. Elle porte une robe jaune. Comme la fièvre du même nom” (17).

In the repeated references to the colour yellow, the complete significance of which can only be known by the narrator, there is a sense of a confusion of the signs. There is “Un Liquide jaune” (15), numerous references to Vava’s yellow dresses, and to yellow ribbons. There are the ribbons that his aunts place in his hair (37), that tie shut the sacks of his grandfather’s coffee (31), and after his grandfather’s bankruptcy and death, that tie his toes together for the funeral (44).

The senses of fragmentation, confusion and varied perspectives are further enhanced through multiple conflicting accounts of the same events. Sometimes the narrator seems to favour one account over others. Then the narrator introduces other accounts to undermine the preferred reading, and then yet again proceeds to undermine the detractors. In Chapter 7, “Les Gens,” the narrator describes thirteen different versions by eleven different people of how Gros Simon moved up in life from being an ordinary longshoreman to owning a truck. The versions include winning the lottery, selling his soul to the devil through an evil priest to win the lottery, and selling his daughter’s life. The most authoritative account is the second account rendered by Oginé, where Oginé helps Gros Simon sell his daughter, Sylphise, as a zombie. Oginé, who by day has the low-status job of tending the empty lot next to the village square, by night directs the town notary and others in raising the girl’s body, because “[.] la nuit est différente du jour. La nuit, le pays devient tete en bas. Tout ce qui était en haut devient en bas et tout ce qui était en bas devient en haut” (73). In a further destructuring piece of information, the name of Gros Simon’s truck has earlier been given the religiously significant name of “Merci Marie” (30).
L’Odeur du Café, with its multiple versions of events, presents a multi-perspective view that does not imply a loss of identity, but instead it is an identity based more on self-irony. Behind all of the conflicting gossip, there is a genuine warts-and-all acceptance, where each fresh cup of coffee is another rebirth. What is left is the message that even in chaos and poverty, if there is acceptance of differences then there is beauty and self-worth. Even in Chapter 36, “Le temps”, when Da loses her house, the equanimity of the remembered moment is not broken. The sense of continuity of life is enhanced here by this being the only chapter that is undivided by multiple subheadings. Augereau, who was sent to inform her, is upset at his task: “Je vous ai vue toute ma vie, Da, à cette même place... C’est important pour moi... Plus important que mon travail à la Maison Bombace...” (214). As Da ponders the news, “Une fourmi a eu le temps de partir de la chaise de Da pour aller jusqu’à l’ancienne balance” (214). Augereau counsels her to ignore the news and just stay put, because “La montagne ne bouge pas” (214). Despite their shattered family lives and their ability to accept contradictions, these people have a very strong sense of place and of specificity. It is almost as if some of the themes of exile and of nostalgia for a lost past explored in the works by Micone discussed earlier are here assumed to have been resolved.

A self-ironic commentary on the futility and inevitability of the never ending struggle for survival is maintained by the colonies of ants on Da’s veranda who are continually rebuilding their world after it is destroyed by Da’s daily washing of the veranda, or by rain storms or other random catastrophes. As they rebuild following the latest catastrophe, the ants serve as symbols of continual rebirth and of the importance of living in the here-and-now. The connection between the life of the ants and humans is first made explicit in two back-to-back vignettes:

LES FOURMIS

Les fourmis ont-elles un nom? Elles courent comme des dingues dans les fentes des briques. Dès qu’elles se croisent, elles s’arrêtent une seconde, nez à nez, avant de repartir à toute vitesse. Elles se ressemblent toutes. Peut-être portent-elles le même nom?

MES FESSES
Da m’a raconté que lorsque j’avais cinq ans, mes cousins plus âgés m’ont laissé dans un nid de fourmis qui m’ont littéralement dévoré. Ce n’est que bien plus tard qu’on m’a retrouvé, les yeux très brillants. Je ne pleurais pas. Mes fesses étaient rouges et boursouflées.

Toutes les fourmis ont de grosses fesses. (26-7)

The subsection “Mes Fesses” provides a parodic explanation of the narrator’s fascination with ants and his connection with them. The symbolistic of the life of ants as a substitute for human existence is later made more clear as the distinctions between the behaviour of ants and people become even more obscured. Zette performs tasks related to the upkeep of her “colony,” while the ants are seen to greet each other warmly and exhibit a sense of mourning for fallen comrades:

Chaque fois qu’il va pleuvoir, je remarque que les fourmis s’affairent de plus en plus. Elles doivent rentrer les marchandises rapidement, sinon c’est la faillite. Même les fourmis ailées se mettent au travail, alors qu’elles ne font rien en temps normal. Zette ramasse son linge. Les fourmis se frottent le nez quand elles se croisent. Et dès qu’il y a un mort parmi elles, elles se tiennent toutes autour du mort jusqu’à ce que les brancardiers arrivent et le ramènent dans le trou. (208)

Within the human society, nowhere is Nepveu’s trope of continual rebirth, where the cultural blending is a result of cultures that are in themselves derived from earlier crossings (“Qu’est-ce que” 21-23), better illustrated than in Chapter 3, “La Maison,” which provides a synopsis of a multi-faceted transcultural past. The household over which Da rules is replete with dark corners and unexplained nightmares, but at its core are her five daughters, who not only have completely different personalities, ranging from the extroverted to the very shy, but also range in skin colour, eye colour and other features from black to Asian and “aussi blanche qu’une Noire peut l’être sans être une vraie Blanche” (32). Despite their differences, they form a complete whole as a family, even when separated by space. The narrator’s own mixed nature is emphasized by his aunts’ taking turns dressing him in different colours and fashions, although the intervention of his grandfather shows that there are limits to the potential of pluralistic influences (37).
The sisters varied appearances provide support for earlier transcultural experiences, experiences which support Nepveu and Ortiz’s view of transculturalism as meaning the process of deculturalization and reculturalization involved in the meeting of two cultures, in which what emerges is something new produced by a blending of the cultures ("Qu’est-ce que" 17). References to Anglo names such as Wilson, the bicycle mechanic (180), and to “chez le Syrien ou chez Abraham”(205) serve to enhance the sense of pluralism and transculturalism.

When Nepveu says that only by rediscovering its traditional transcultural nature Quebec can have a culture based on specificity, and this transcultural definition of society remains an alternative to a culture defined in terms of identity, appropriation, and homogeneity ("Qu’est-ce que" 27), what is important is that this statement is true of virtually any postmodern society. The differences among the characters in L’Odeur du café, ranging from the prosaic to the irrational to the magical, fuel the complex interactions between the parties involved and provide a paradigm of interaction that seems to support Nepveu’s and Harel’s view of the importance of métissage as one of the key elements in defining culture itself.

There are also reflections here of Harel’s position of the foreign as representing the ultimate destructuring agent. From within the microcosm of Petit-Goâve where the narrator lives, Port-au-Prince and Jacmel represent the foreign. The rains from Jacmel are hard but short-lived (58). Ultimately they lead to a rebirth as the ants and people resume their lives and “la vie reprend ses couleurs” (57). Port-au-Prince is where people go when their lives fall apart and from where adversity comes. It is to where the narrator’s father, mother, and aunts move following their financial ruin. It is also to where Odilon moves to avoid his responsibility after getting Ernestine pregnant. Ernestine dies of shame. After Odilon’s initial success in Port-au-Prince, Ernestine’s father’s curse and the big city ultimately destroy Odilon, and he returns so destitute that his would-be in-laws take him in out of respect for their dead daughter (94-6).

L’Odeur du café is a nostalgic text which, like Éroshima, illustrates Nepveu’s vision of an écologie du réel as a celebration of life sustained by continual rebirth and with a multiplicity of centres. Laferrière’s fragmented style and the multiple conflicting versions of events enhance the
sense of confusion engendered by the postmodern concepts of the death of history, distinct genres, fixed ideologies, and master narratives. The simple style of the nostalgic narration would seem to fit in with Nepveu's theory of *la passion du retour* and of the Québécois fondness for the romanticized immigrant.
Chapter 6
Conclusion

Traditionally in Quebec, literary criticism was often seen as a vehicle for preserving the social order while advancing the cause of French-Canadian literature. As the rise of Quebec nationalism fuelled the movement for a distinct littérature québécoise, criticism tended to maintain this essentially prescriptive role, serving as a defining agent of the nationalist imagined community.¹

It is perhaps not a coincidence that Nepveu's L'Écologie du réel and Harel's Le Voleur de parcours were both published in the wake of the defeat of the first sovereignty referendum. In the interview, Nepveu says that their appearance at the same time was due to emerging changes in Québécois thinking at the time (Appendix A 93). Both works call for a re-evaluation of Quebec's cultural and literary mode d'être, not from a nationalist perspective, but from a contemporary one based on the postmodern concepts of catastrophe, alterity, parody and pluralism. A strong part of this new acceptance of the plurality in Quebec society is a sense of shared exile. Both Nepveu and Harel break with the traditional prescriptive approach in their shared belief that a viable Québécois national identity can only survive through a phoenix-like process of re-inventing itself based on ongoing transcultural realities.

Even if one is aware of the historical perspective which led up to the two approaches, Nepveu and Harel's descriptive as opposed to the earlier prescriptive approach becomes a philosophical debate over the way in which a society imagines itself. This is not a new debate, and can be equated to perspectives that accord with Dionysian or Apollonian principles, drama and fruitfulness versus order and logic. In political terms, such principles can be seen at work in the debates between a certain type of nationalism versus transculturalism.

A perhaps unexpected analogy can be drawn from the science of digital imaging, where the usual challenge, which is given the rather unflattering name of BLOB (Binary Large Object)

¹. In Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson builds on Renan's concept that the nation is defined by the common will of people who share many memories, both remembered and forgotten. Literature becomes an essential tool in defining this imagined community.
analysis, is how best to extract useful information from a field consisting of seemingly endless shades of grey. Classically, imaging algorithms have been divided into two schools, morphology and edge detection. Morphology seeks to determine the essence or the skeleton of an object. Morphological algorithms can be very frugal in terms of system resources and tend to produce very robust results. Their main shortcoming is that in extracting the essence, much of the fine detail is lost. A skeleton of an object, no matter how useful it may, is at best only a rough approximation of the original complex structure. Because edges tend to be an intrinsically messy business, edge detection involves considerably greater computational ability. To extract information about a single element, the entire image needs to be repeatedly examined. Both the strength and the weakness of this approach lie in its subjectivity: the amount of detail that is lost is dependant on parameters set by the examiner.

The main point of this analogy is that contemporary imaging practices rely on combinations of both morphological and edge detection algorithms to comment most accurately on information. Similarly, in the interview, Nepveu defended the traditional prescriptive approach as a necessity in its time (86); however, in L'Écologie du réel, he traces the current situation back to Crémazie, Saint-Denys Garneau and Miron and says that Québécois literature has always been based on transculturalism and the tropes of leaving and return. At the time when the Quiet Revolution ushered in the nationalism of the sixties, postmodernism also entered Québécois literature (L'Écologie 15, 22):

L'avènement de la littérature québécoise (et non plus canadienne-française)
signifierait ainsi la plongée de la québecitude dans la négativité, dans un espace culturel ironique et ludique, où la distance et le dépaysement ne cessent de faire sens et de perdre le sens, simultanément. ("Qu'est-ce que" 16)

Nepveu says that the only thing that can explain the sheer volume of texts during the sixties that expressed this negativity during a time of such intense cultural excitement is that Québécois writers were actually responding to the postmodern and transcultural realities of all contemporary literature (L'Écologie 60). "Dans une certaine manière, la culture du déracinement (postmoderne,
transculturelle) ne ferait qu'épuiser la logique propre à celle de l'enracinement (nationaliste): morcellement de l'universel, relativisme et même nihilisme" ("Qu'est-ce que" 16). For Nepveu, in a postmodern society, everyone suffers from an interior exile because, as transculturalism dissolves the old frames of reference, virtually everyone, migrant and stay-at-home alike, finds that their fixed frames of reference are eroded. This in part explains the Québécois affection for the romanticized migrant, but more importantly, it also explains the convergence to be found between works by nouveau québécois writers and néo-québécois writers.

This convergence, as illustrated by the recurring themes and parallel concepts established in the chapters on Chen's work (and also echoed in Laferrière's), do not conclusively prove that these or any other works by néo-québécois writers participate in fact in what is central to la littérature québécoise. Perhaps all are simply expressions of larger postmodern forces at work. In fact, the answer lies outside these néo-québécois works and depends on how la littérature québécoise itself is defined.

Since his arrival in Quebec in 1976, Laferrière has become a highly visible member of the Quebec cultural community, working as a television announcer and public commentator. He was recently sent as a Quebec representative to the Salon du livre de Paris. However, just to add to the ambiguity, in a recent interview, Laferrière described himself as an American writer who happens to write in French. He uses the term “American” both in the equivocal sense of a writer of the Americas and with the full knowledge that his works are written with the intent that they be translated into English for the “USian” market (“Ma découverte”). In fact, much of his work, including L'Odeur du café, was written while in Florida. The fact may be seen as ironic that Laferrière, like many Québécois, now divides his time between Florida and Quebec, which may make him seem all the more Québécois. A large part of Laferrière's literary appeal can be explained by Nepveu's la passion du retour and the fondness expressed by Québécois for the romanticized immigrant.

Chen, who now lives and writes in Quebec, draws her material from her own particular cultural perspective. Yet as we have seen, there is a strong convergence between her material and
some *nouveau québécois* works. Given Quebec’s unfortunate distinction of having one of the developed world’s highest adolescent suicide rates, it is hard not to see how, with their themes of youth suicide, alienation and *déracinement*, *Les Lettres chinoises* and *L’Ingratitude*, despite their settings, are intrinsically related to the Quebec cultural experience.

For Nepveu, the very transcultural nature of Québécois society and culture explains why *nouveau québécois* and *néo-québécois* writers alike share a sense of alienation and *la passion du retour*. Transculturalism also explains the convergence between these groups of work. At least in Laferrière’s and Chen’s cases, perhaps it is time to drop the “néo.”

In the interview, Nepveu discussed how *la littérature québécoise* is now firmly established among writers of the Americas working in French, that this literature finds its strength in its transcultural experiences, and how *la littérature québécoise* is stronger than ever now that Quebec is no longer alone in its self-affirmation (90). Whether works are set in Haiti, Shanghai, Quebec or elsewhere, if *la littérature québécoise* is defined as a literature that is an expression of a culture that is continuously evolving and redefining itself through its transcultural interactions, then works by *néo-québécois* writers certainly deserve consideration within the mainstream.

Nepveu metaphorically concludes his description of the *écologie du réel* by translating a Bertold Brecht quote that the artist Betty Goodwin used in a piece: “Au cours de la nuit, l’univers a perdu son centre et maintenant, ce matin, il y a un nombre illimité de centres. Désormais chaque point de l’univers peut être pris pour un centre car, tout à coup, il y a beaucoup d’espace” (219). He closes with a vision of literature not as a solution or a consolation for the lost centre, but as the ultimate balancing force in the continuous reiteration of the unlimited number of centres (220).

Or, to quote from Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues*: “Vous dites que vous êtes «quelque chose entre les deux»[. . .] Eh bien, je ne suis pas du tout de votre avis. Je trouve que vous êtes quelque chose de neuf, quelque chose qui commence. Vous êtes quelque chose qui ne s’est encore jamais vu. Voilà c’est tout” (224).
provide yet another perspective. They have a more “American”, in the large sense, perspective, and they deal with their history in a very different manner from Europeans, all of which certainly shows in their writing. Another thing I would say is the redefinition of the Québécois identity which started in the 80s’ has been dealt with more deeply in the 90s’ up to the present, mainly because sociologists, historians, and quite a few intellectuals, mostly from the academic world, have taken these ideas and developed them in a way that makes it more acceptable today to say that Quebec is pluralistic and that the Quebec identity cannot be defined in the way that it was in the past during the Révolution Tranquille. These things have become more banal I would say today, but at the same time, perspectives have become richer and more subtle.

Also some practices that were not very developed when I was studying the transcultural perspective have become more important. One example is the work of translators. I think if you define Quebec, or any other culture, as one where translation should be present, historically, neither its practice by writers nor the theoretical reflections about translation were very present in the sixties and actually until the eighties. Very often, translation was seen as a negative, because we were already so close to the English-speaking world. I am thinking of Gaston Miron, who condemned the translated world in which we live. Of course at this time there was a lot of bad translation in daily life, traffic signs, etc. Translation appeared to be something actually almost dangerous because it concerned the daily life in which French was always treated as a secondary language (it is still often the case today). On the literary front, things however have changed radically. I see a lot of Quebec translators and writers, some novelists or poets, like Jean Chapdelaine-Gagnon who has translated David MacFarlane, Lori Saint-Martin who has translated Anne-Marie MacDonald with Paul Gagné, Charlotte Melançon who has translated many works by Charles Taylor. This, without speaking of poets like Gilles Cyr, Émile Martel or Claude Beausoleil, who have produced quality translations from other languages, Spanish, Korean and so on. I think that this is significant, because first it shows an openness to the “other” which a critic like Sherry Simon has reflected upon.

It illustrates how a society lives through exchanges with other cultures and can be
penetrated by other cultures. Many ideas that were present in the 80s’ and 90s’ have developed in different ways and have become more integrated into the intellectual and largely cultural milieu.

Q. Do you think that the idea that a culture is defined by its edges, that is by its interaction with other cultures, is a concept new to postmodernism? Do you think that within modernism, culture would be defined more by its essence or its core elements?

P.N. Certainly it is one of the core elements of postmodernism, even to the point of becoming banal, and where it is very easy, especially for intellectuals, to fall into a type of facile cosmopolitanism that is disconnected from reality. However, the idea that a culture is defined by its edges, or its interactions, predates postmodernism. One example would be the German Romantics, who defined themselves very much on one hand through national identity, but on the other hand, the German culture, considered as very weak at the time in relation to French culture, could only define itself and affirm its identity through a lot of exchanges, through translation and assimilation of other cultures and ideas. Of course, this does not seem to be the way that the Quebec identity developed, at least explicitly, during the 50s’ and 60s’. There was a strong emphasis on affirming our own particularity, our own specificity — to be fully ourselves in our own place, with our own history and our own perspective, and our own way of dealing with the world, and in that way to become universal — in the way that Faulkner is very universal while at the same time being very regional. The idea was to affirm the particular so that we could move to the universal. Gaston Miron repeated that a lot, the way that William Carlos Williams had envisioned American poetry and culture in the twenties. Certainly, the idea of exchange with other cultures was not absent, but the idea did not become central until the late 70s’ or 80s’.

Q. In a sense did Quebec culture have to come into its own first?

P.N. Well, yes. At the time, most intellectuals had a very pessimistic view of Quebec culture. I am thinking of Anne Hébert, who has never been particularly political or outspoken on cultural questions. Yet, I remember coming across an article she wrote for Le Devoir in 1960. To me, her perspective of Quebec culture in the late 50s and early 60s is very typical — and I can think of other examples from the same time. She was extremely pessimistic and negative about
the culture, our intellectual tools, she thought that our language and thoughts were weak. Gaston Miron felt very much that we were a very weak culture at the time, a culture and literature to be built. It makes sense then, that our first option was to find what was closest to us, to try to affirm our identity through particularities and specificities. I think that it was too early to start dealing with translation and otherness. Nevertheless, one must acknowledge that in the early 60s, exchanges were already daily experience and actually, Quebec writers were opening more than ever before to foreign literatures and cultures. Let's think, for example, about the influence of Aimé Césaire's poetry on Quebec writers. This was when Marie-Claire Blais met Edmund Wilson and discovered the American culture, which was extremely important for her. The writers of the 60s were far more cosmopolitan in their writings than their theoretical works would lead us to believe. I would say the same for Hubert Aquin, Jacques Godbout and Réjean Ducharme.

Q. A number of néo-québécois writers, including Marco Micone and contributors to *Sous le signe du Phénix* have dealt with or described the transcultural experience as producing an intrinsically painful level of cultural anguish. Given the extent of these feelings, do you feel that, in the conclusion to *L'Écologie du réel*, where you refer to the Bertold Brecht concept of not the disappearance of the centre, but the creation of a multiplicity of centres, that your interpretation may be seen to be somewhat optimistic?

P.N. Régine Robin deals a lot with this question in Quebec, with her Jewish background and her view of a world culture, and her life perpetually moving between Paris, New York and Montreal (and even Berlin, about which she has written in her most recent book). She travels a lot and has a very cosmopolitan perspective and does not believe very much in regionalism. Certainly, I believe a lot in what she says, but one must be careful not to forget this aspect of the transcultural experience producing a painful level of cultural anguish, which she would not deny anyway. One must not forget that the experience of immigration is very seldom without problems. I think that any migration or transcultural experience has two faces. Of course it can be something painful, but at the same time it opens new possibilities. I would refer to James Clifford, and his book *Routes* (an obvious pun on the word *Roots*). He is very interested by the new identities
formed by diasporas. He has a very interesting chapter where he goes back to the Jewish experience, but shows that this has become a very common experience today. There are Italian diasporas, Chinese diasporas, and many others. He shows how diaspora, despite the nostalgia and loss of roots, which he does not deny, lead to new ways of defining identity and belonging. People have many simultaneous belongings, they are Canadian but at the same time have ways of remaining Italian, even though at a distance. New relations between these people take place that would not have taken place in the country of origin. This is very complex, but is anything but totally negative.

I think that there is a danger, even today, of falling into a purely intellectual perspective, very remote from other peoples’ daily experiences. This is particularly true for those of us within the network of universities, who are invited to travel, to speak, to participate in conferences. You just take a plane, arrive somewhere else and everything is easy. One can easily come to believe that this is the real world. This is not exactly how it happens for others. So that is why we must not think that the idea of a multiplicity of centers is something that goes without saying. It is very important to keep in mind the two aspects of the experience, positive and negative.

Q. In *Intérieurs du nouveau monde* you define “American” as referring to the common New World experience of people stretching from the Arctic Circle to Patagonia, while using the term *Usian* to describe our neighbours to the immediate south. How has this sensitivity of Quebecers to being both American and not American at the same time grown?

P.N. In a way, English Canadians face the same problem, and not just them. I have just recently returned from Italy, where I was amazed at how well my daughters adapted to the television, feeling very much at home, except that Harrison Ford was speaking Italian. It seemed a bit strange.

Q. They always thought that he spoke French?

P.N. Exactly!

Q. Do you think that the cultural schizophrenia produced by the Quebec situation within the greater American culture is any closer to a resolution? Is a resolution even possible?
P.N. When you talk about schizophrenia, it involves not only America, but France and Canada. It becomes a very complex situation because at the same time, we are Canadians, even people who might not want to be, or at a certain level want to be un-Canadian or non-Canadian. They may feel a lot like foreigners when they travel in Canada outside Quebec. So this schizophrenia is towards America and the United States, but it is also towards Canada and towards France because we have very contradictory feelings about France also.

Q. Is there not an inherent paradox in accepting the fact that the intrinsic transcultural nature of Québécois culture is its greatest strength and that it may yet well lead to its ultimate metamorphosis?

P.N. I found a recent work by Jocelyn Létourneau very interesting. The title is Passer à l’avenir, meaning, in a sense, but not completely, forget about a certain past. He acknowledges the fact that Quebec society is very ambiguous, torn between pro-and anti-Canadian, pro- and anti-American feelings. But to him, this ambiguity is our identity, and he thinks that we should stop seeing it as something negative, as some kind of disease. Létourneau is a very strong critic of the whole sovereignty movement and the Parti Québécois, so his perspective is very political. But it is deeper than that. He wants to put an end to what he calls the melancholic narrative of our past. Our supposed failures are not just a defect, they are part of a conciliatory identity, in perpetual negotiation, and we should try to make the best of it. In that sense, no, I do not think that a resolution is possible.

Q. So you do not see it as a problem with a solution, but rather as an ongoing process?

P.N. It is a process, exactly. And I think that we actually benefit from it in many aspects. It is a unique situation, being at the crossroads of the United States, the American world, the French world. Being able to manage all of this I do not see as a real schizophrenia although at times, it is very complicated and tiring.

Q. In Intérieurs du nouveau monde you seem to define Québécois literature as essentially a literature of the Americas, a literature marked by an exploration of interior space. To what extent do you feel that branding Québécois literature as American in this way might
serve to undermine it as a distinct national literature? Or is it a sign that the Québécois culture is now strong enough to take its place on the American stage?

P.N. To me this is a kind of a false problem. What is interesting is that the French-speaking literatures of the Americas, mainly the Caribbean ones, writers from Haiti, Martinique or Guadaloupe, have become very outspoken in the last 20 years, and have become very present within the Francophone world and have influenced the reflections in Quebec also. The Haitian-born writers, like Joël Des Rosiers or Émile Ollivier who live in Montreal, Patrick Chamoiseau who has won the Prix Goncourt in Paris, or Edouard Glissant, all in different ways, defend the same basic idea: that there can be an American literature in French, whether Caribbean or North American. They think that this literature finds its strength in its mixtures, its “métissage”, that such a literature in French has its own specificity as well as its own linguistic specificity in relation to France. But at the same time, it certainly reflects an American experience which is totally different from the European. Actually I think that this American perspective for Quebec literature is stronger than ever now because Quebec is no longer alone in that affirmation of itself.

At the same time, contact has grown with other American literatures, other than from the United States: with English-Canadian, Mexican or Brazilian literatures, for example. Our American perspective means that we have become conscious of the fact that there is not only one America — there are many Americas. There are many experiences that are a part of it. So in no way is this a negation of our identity. It is just that we have our own way to be American. Of course at the same time we have to be careful of the invasion of American (US) culture. This is a fight: being personal and unique, resisting the American uniformization, keeping a certain national identity. Of course, your question pre-supposes that being a distinct national literature is something important or central.

Q. Well, historically it has been.

P.N. It has been. I do not want to deny that there are still today, to a certain extent, national literatures, but at the same time this notion has certainly become weaker. Look for example at Quebec poetry today. It is not always obvious for many contemporary Quebec poets
that they are so distinct from French-speaking poets from elsewhere. Is there a distinct Quebec national poetry? Yes, to a certain extent, but not as strongly as with people like Gaston Miron and others. Poets in the sixties (this was also the case in English Canada) needed to affirm themselves. I think that today we are a little bit beyond that. I do not mean that we are just a part of a world literature, where there are no borders, but the revendication of difference and specificity is certainly not as strong.

Q. Dany Laferrière in a recent article in Le Devoir described himself as an American writer who happens to write in French. Is this the new reality? Can we expect to see more Québécois writers, both néo and nouveau, defining themselves and their work in this way?

P.N. Yes, you have Dany Laferrière, who writes about his Haitian past. You have also Quebec writers such as Pierre Samson, who writes novels which take place totally in Brazil, with Brazilian characters, in which it is very hard to find something Québécois. At the same time there are writers like Ying Chen, who writes in Quebec, but many of her works do not deal with Quebec reality. She lives in Quebec, but writes from her own background.

Q. Is part of the reason why these writers fit in due to the fact that their themes strike a resonant chord? For example, Laferrière’s L’Odeur du café is filled with a nostalgia for a pleasant and simple past that for most of our minds would seem to be a hell, considering that he is talking about Haiti. Yet it is a very pleasant book. And Ying Chen’s L’ingratitude deals with adolescent suicide, which would seem also to strike a note within Quebec.

P.N. I think that you are right. Through their themes they certainly touch something in us.

Q. Is it because these are universal themes, or because they are themes that somehow relate to the Quebec experience?

P.N. I think that it is more because they are universal themes. Of course Laferrière and Ying Chen are two very different characters. Laferrière has been very present on the Quebec cultural scene, television, etc. He is somebody who is very interesting and funny, with a strong personality. This is something that has helped the reception of his books, although the books themselves are very good. Whereas Ying Chen is very low-profile. Maybe in her case the fact,
unusual in Quebec, that she is a Chinese-born woman writing in French, has drawn attention to her works. But she is first and above all a very strong and original novelist.

Q. In “La Passion du retour” you describe three major tropes to be found in texts by Italian immigrant writers in Québec: 1) the trope of alienation and loss of identity, where pluralism means not cultural enrichment, but a lack of identity or at best, self-irony; 2) the trope of nostalgia, an exercise in memory where the past is only dimly remembered and is subject to revisionism; and 3) the trope of continual rebirth, or of a synergetic rebirth, where the cultural confusion is not all negative, nor is all lost, and the cultural blending is a result of cultures that are in themselves derived from earlier crossings.

Do you feel that these tropes are major factors as well in works by néo-québécois writers coming from other cultures?

P.N. These are tropes that are present in the works of many néo-québécois writers, or at least some writers. I was talking earlier about Régine Robin, and also Naïm Kattan. Both, but particularly Robin, are definitely against nostalgia — or at least try to deconstruct it as much as possible. Robin deals more with an indeterminate identity than with a loss of identity — an identity that has many references but that never is clearly defined, one which remains scattered.

Q. More along the lines of the continuous rebirth?

P.N. Maybe rebirth is not the right word. She has one short story, “Mère perdue on The World Wide Web,” about a man who comes from Europe, having thought that his mother died in the Holocaust. But he learns in a book about trade unions in America that she has been active as a labor rights activist in North-America. He comes to Montreal looking for her, but cannot find her. He tracks down her North American husband who is no help because he has advanced Alzheimer’s. Of course, this is just a brief synopsis, but the story is about the tragedy of the search for identity and finding only traces, and ultimately ending up with nothing.

I recently wrote the foreword for a book called Les Passeurs culturels that has just been published consisting of interviews with néo-québécois writers made by Suzanne Giguère. I particularly like the title, because one of the meanings of Passeur is someone who gets you across
the river to the other shore — not a common occupation today, but I like the metaphor. I would say that these themes and ambiguities I have been talking about are always present. Some writers, but I would say a minority, deny having any nostalgia, any belonging to the past. One who comes to mind is Hans-Jürgen Greif, who has a German background. For the others, there is always a tension between what was lost and what is being moved towards. This is a part of the condition of any immigrant and any immigrant writer. However, I think that the nostalgia is particularly strong in Italian texts, due to the strength of their culture. This is a culture where the feeling of belonging is very strong.

Q. Is the nostalgia found among Italian-Quebec writers also found in contemporary writers in Italy? Or is it the fact that they are migrants?

P.N. I think that it is mainly the fact that they are migrants. Certainly it is not a part of the work by contemporary Italian writers that I have read. It is a part of the larger Italian diaspora. This feeling of something almost folkloric, or sometimes idealistic. Marco Micone dealt with this very well in Déjà l'agonie. But you can find these tropes also in works by Lebanese or Egyptian writers like Nadia Ghalem.

Q. What was the reception of L’Écologie du réel and Intérieurs du nouveau monde when they first appeared? How has the reception of the ideas expressed in each changed, if at all, since their publication?

P.N. Actually, it is somewhat difficult for me to answer that question. I have always been surprised by how often L’Écologie du réel, particularly the chapter on “Écritures migrantes,” has been quoted. A lot of people have come to believe that the term “Écritures migrantes” is my own, even though I credit Robert Oriol, a Haitian-born writer, with the term in the chapter. If I look at L’Écologie du réel, which was published earlier than Intérieurs du nouveau monde, it has become a part of a wider trend or movement. I do not know if the reception has changed that much. Along with other books, it has rather become typical of a new way of thinking of Quebec identity and literature. I probably wrote it at the right time — at a time when people had enough of the old nationalist perspective. They wanted and needed a new perspective. Actually, the situation was
changing a lot in the 80s; Régine Robin’s *La Québécoite*, a very influential novel on those themes, had been published in 1983. A lot of immigrant writers arrived at that time. I think that it is significant that my book was published the same year that Simon Harel published *Le voleur de parcours*. I knew him at the time, but I did not know that he was planning on publishing *Le voleur de parcours*.

Q. When I did my own research on *L’Écologie du réel*, I found that it was reviewed more after *Intérieurs du nouveau monde* was published.

P.N. Yes, right. This probably has more to do with the fact that the first edition was virtually sold out in 1998 and the publisher, Boréal, re-released *L’Écologie du réel* as a paperback around the same time that *Intérieurs du nouveau monde* was published.

As for *Intérieurs du nouveau monde*, the reception has been very good, but at the same time I have had the perception that the reception has been more literary than theoretical. A lot of people who have read it told me that what they liked about the book was the writing itself, the way that I could write essays and make the subject approachable. I am not sure how influential the ideas themselves have become. For example, Gérard Bouchard has quoted me a few times in his studies of the New World, but I do not think that the ideas in *Intérieurs du nouveau monde* have influenced his thinking.

Q. That pretty much covers the questions that I had planned to ask you, except to ask if there is anything else that you would like to say.

P.N. Well, in discussing the question concerning an inherent paradox in accepting the fact that the intrinsic transcultural nature of Québécois culture is its greatest strength and that it may yet well lead to its ultimate metamorphosis, one aspect that I did not discuss is the language itself. For one thing, the situation right now is very new. For one thing, traditionally, for a French-speaking Quebecker, a foreigner was one who necessarily spoke a language other than French, mostly English. What is new now is that people from many different backgrounds are speaking French. They may also speak English and their own native language, but they also speak French. This first struck me at a joint conference of Jewish and French intellectuals, including Gérard
Bouchard. In 1960, 16 per cent of the Quebec population, which means a large majority of English-speaking people, could not speak French. Today, only 6 per cent of the population cannot speak French. Within the Quebec perception, this has created the impression of French as a far more cosmopolitan and international language.

Another thing is, due mainly to our proximity to English culture, we have always had a facility, certainly more so than for Americans or English-Canadians, to learn other languages. This plurality of languages, and this is far broader than the effects of translation we discussed earlier, is very much a part of the Quebec reality. At times, due to political resistance, some people seem to learn Spanish more easily than English. So this transcultural nature of Quebec culture works on many levels.

I am rather optimistic about the Quebec situation, despite many foreseeable political problems. I have been doing research on the papers of Gaston Miron, about Montreal in 1950s. People felt deprived of the chance to express their own abilities, their own culture. I do not mean that there was an absence of foreign influences, but still it was a very small and limited world as compared to today. I believe that greatest challenge facing Québécois in the future will no longer concern preserving cultural identity, but will be how to maintain a level of political power on the Canadian level, in a situation of decreasing demographics and new visions of Canada, especially in the Western provinces but even in Ontario. This is the real matter to worry about.
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