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## Language Dichotomy in Contemporary Montreal A Review of the 'Two Solitudes' in Recent Fiction and Non-Fiction<sup>1</sup>

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### Zusammenfassung

*Nach der frankophonen Eroberung, Niederlage und Wiedereroberung Quebecs lässt sich im späten 20. und im 21. Jahrhundert eine zunehmende Annäherung der zwei großen Sprachgruppen des Landes erkennen. Wie wird in der zeitgenössischen Literatur über diese Entwicklung reflektiert, nachdem sich die historisch angespannte Beziehung zwischen englisch- und französischsprachigen Quebecern beruhigt zu haben scheint? Die in Quebec lebenden Autoren Monique Proulx und Neil Bissoondath beleuchten die Interaktion zwischen Anglophonen und Frankophonen im Montreal der Gegenwart. Ihre literarischen Texte spiegeln dabei einige der positiven Veränderungen wider, die sich in Montreal seit der Zeit der Referenda ereignet haben.*

### Abstract

*Following a history of francophone conquest, defeat and reconquest, Quebec's two major linguistic communities increasingly interact with one another in the post-Bill 101 and post-referenda period. Writers have always engaged in and contributed to the debate. But how does literature make present-day society 'speak,' now that the most turbulent times of Québécois history appear to have calmed down, and that the major literary voices of that era – Gabrielle Roy, Hubert Aquin and Mordecai Richler, to name just a few – have largely passed on? Monique Proulx and Neil Bissoondath, two authors presently living and writing in Quebec, have scrutinized interactions between anglophones and francophones in present-day Montreal in their works of narrative fiction. Their texts reflect some of the positive changes that have taken place in Montreal in recent years.*

### Résumé

*Après la conquête, défaite et reconquête francophone, les deux grandes communautés linguistiques du Québec ont enfin atteint un *modus vivendi* plus harmonieux au tournant du vingt-et-unième siècle. Les écrivains se sont toujours engagés dans le débat et y ont apporté leur contribution. Mais comment la littérature contemporaine aborde-*

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1 For a more detailed discussion see Stefanie Rudig, *Encounters avec l'Autre in Contemporary Montreal Literature: Aspects of Francophone-Anglophone Interactions at the Turn of the New Millennium* (Stuttgart: ibidem, 2011).

*t-elle les relations anglo-françaises voire franco-anglaises des années après des événements cruciaux de l'histoire québécoise comme la Révolution tranquille, la crise d'Octobre, la mise en application de la Loi 101 et les deux référendums sur l'indépendance? Monique Proulx et Neil Bissoondath, deux auteurs qui vivent et écrivent actuellement au Québec, ont examiné les interactions entre les anglophones et les francophones dans le Montréal d'aujourd'hui dans leurs œuvres de fiction narrative. Leurs textes reflètent plusieurs développements positifs observés à Montréal au cours des dernières années.*

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## Introduction

In 2009 Quebec had several things to commemorate. It had been exactly 475 years since Jacques Cartier arrived on the Gaspé peninsula and thus triggered the very beginning of French colonization in North America. At the same time the province celebrated, or rather most Québécois did anything but celebrate, the 250th anniversary of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, the decisive battle in which French Canadians were defeated by the British and subsequently transformed into a *peuple vaincu*. Decades after pivotal events in Québécois history in the course of the twentieth century such as the Quiet Revolution, the October crisis, the passing of Bill 101 – the province's most important piece of language legislation to date – and the two referenda on independence, the French-English antagonism is dwindling and attitudes towards cultural and linguistic difference are changing. Yet, while political tensions between francophones/anglophones and Quebec/Canada are less fraught today than they were from the 1960s to mid-90s, old and new sources of friction remain.<sup>2</sup> A joke happens to capture the core of the situation: "The French and the English don't communicate enough in Quebec. It's as if [they] spoke two completely different languages" (Blue 2009). In Montreal, Canada's only major bilingual city, the country's two main language groups not only coexist but interact on a daily basis across the linguistic divide. Changes brought about by demographic, linguistic, and political developments have significantly affected the way in which francophones and anglophones perceive each other. In addition, Montreal's French-English duality has been replaced by plurality through the impact of globalization and immigration. In order to investigate the ongoing language debate that has been instrumental in shaping the province's cultural and political identities I will study a variety of fictional and non-fictional publications in this paper. After a short

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2 A relatively recent example that received international media coverage was the divergent receptions of the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge during their tour of Canada in July 2011. While the couple was generally warmly welcomed, their visit to Quebec was overshadowed by anti-monarchist separatist protests. Furthermore, after the Parti Québécois election victory in early September 2012 the sovereignty debate has been revived.

general survey of the anglophone-francophone dichotomy in Canadian literature, selected texts by Monique Proulx and Neil Bissoondath will be treated as emblematic of a greater acceptance of and openness to diversity in Montreal at the end of the twentieth and in the twenty-first century. The subsequent discussion of non-literary texts shows in how far literature reflects recent cultural developments in its portrayal of cross-cultural contact as a defining feature of contemporary Montreal. In this Montreal the historically tense relationship between francophones and anglophones has decidedly improved and become more harmonious, while aspects such as language continue to remain *ambigus*.

### A Brief Literary Survey

Canadian literary history is not exactly replete with reflections about the English-French dynamic. But although anglophone and francophone literatures in Canada have developed along fairly independent trajectories and led largely parallel lives, neither side failed to express the country's bicultural reality. Literature, frequently invoked as a mirror of society, was often used, or abused, for political purposes and interspersed with moral messages, which ranged from humorous as in *Une partie de campagne* (first performed in 1857) – a comic warning against the adoption of English speech by dramatist Pierre Petitclair – to vitriolic as in *Poignet d'acier* (1863). The latter is a work by Henri-Emile Chevalier, who wrote several political romances arguing for revenge; in the above mentioned novel, for instance, a deathbed utterance urges, "*Vivez pour arracher le Canada à l'odieuse tyrannie anglaise*" (qtd. in New 2001, 67). Yet, from early on stories also portrayed cross-cultural relationships, like that of a young French Canadian and an English officer in *Antoinette de Mirecourt; or, Secret Marrying and Secret Sorrowing* (1864), for example. Reflecting feelings of animosity as well as signs of dialogue and exchange, Canadian literature has included a range of different perspectives and has contributed to consolidating certain cultural stereotypes, as W.H. New observes below.

In his *History of Canadian Literature* New agrees that there was literary communication between anglophone and francophone Canada in the nineteenth century. However, he notes that

[...] the two versions of nationhood spilled over into literary *topoi*; Quebec tales of martyrdom and the *maudits anglais* countered Ontario tales of quaint habitant, sophisticated Protestant and corrupt Catholic. Prejudices on both sides fed the tales; the mistake was to accept the *topoi* of tale-telling for historical fact. (New 2001, 86)

This dichotomy is very well captured in the paradigmatic work on that subject, namely Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes* (1945), which addresses the problem of conflicting French and English Canadian cultural spheres between WWI and WWII. At once at home in and alienated from both languages and cultures the protagonist

Paul Tallard struggles to define his identity; his eventual marriage to the anglo-Canadian Heather suggests a reconciliation between the two cultural identities. The novel's title has since entered the Canadian collective consciousness and is still widely used to describe the situation of separation and non-dialogue between the anglophone and francophone communities. Over half a century after the publication of MacLennan's novel, in a Montreal that is becoming more and more diverse and multilingual, the question arises whether the image of the two solitudes has finally lost its validity.

All literary genres have functioned as productive arenas for debates on language and identity with sometimes more and sometimes less innovative meditations on the English-French binarism. Some scholars claim that the two linguistic camps "rarely meet or cross over in literature, film, or theatre" and that they have not really tried to engage one another (Holman and Thacker 2008, 154). However, this statement hardly paints an accurate picture, especially not as far as theatre is concerned, because it is there that one can witness a considerable number of instances of very original cultural and linguistic *métissage*, as in the plays of David Fennario, Michel Tremblay and others. Examples include Robert Lepage's and Gordon McCall's bilingual production of *Romeo & Juliette* (with English spoken by the Montagues and French by the Capulets), *L'homme invisible* (the protagonist is incarnated by two actors, one francophone, the other anglophone) written by the franco-Ontarian poet Patrice Desbiens, and Montreal's theatre group Theatre 1774, which works simultaneously in both languages for purely artistic rather than political reasons.<sup>3</sup> Indicative of a Montreal that has undergone profound transformations and in which new categories of identity are surfacing, Fennario's 2005 play *Condoville*, a sequel to his acclaimed play *Balconville* (1979), offers an updated version of working-class Montreal. A quarter of a century later *Condoville* revisits the French- and English-speaking characters and original setting of *Balconville*, which was billed as the first Canadian bilingual play. However, linguistic and separatist/federalist tensions have now been replaced by different concerns, such as gentrification, and conflicts with two new tenants, a homosexual mixed-race couple.

A notable verse piece that takes up the language controversy is Michèle Lalonde's *Speak White*, first recited at the *Nuit de la poésie* in Montreal in 1970 and later published in *Défense et illustration de la langue québécoise*. In her overtly political poem Lalonde tries to defend the French language and the 'black world' of the francophone population, whom she contrasts in an ironic tone with those who are superior, since they 'speak white' – meaning English. About two decades later Marco Micone published a well-known retort, *Speak What*, in which he points to the changed position of the former "*peuple-concierge*" and draws attention to the fact

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3 For more details see Spensley 1998 (163, 166).

that duality has given way to plurality owing to immigration (cf. Mathis 1997, 25).<sup>4</sup> Micone is one of the so-called neo-Québécois writers like Dany Laferrière, Ying Chen and Emile Ollivier, who have substituted the black-and-white picture of French-English antagonism with a new colourful mix and refreshing diversity.

After the politically charged 1960s and 70s one can discern a kind of conviviality in Quebec literature with an important impetus coming from the immigrant population. This redefinition of paradigms since the 1980s manifests itself among other things in creative and innovative phenomena like code-switching or a hybrid use of language (e.g. *Voice-Over* by Carole Corbeil, 1992), which led some scholars to remark that Quebec can boast of a “distinct cultural production that is the envy of Anglophone Canada” (Oakes and Warren 2007, 73). Such bilingual material remains, however, largely ignored by the majority of English Canadians, because they simply lack competence in French. Still, exchange is vital for a culture in order to flourish and to remain vibrant. According to Nadine Ltaif (1998), Quebec literature owes its originality to the contact between English and French: “L’originalité de [l]a création littéraire québécoise résulte du métissage français-anglais. La création littéraire est au carrefour des langues, le point de rencontre des cultures” (82). The language dichotomy thus gives rise to a productive cross-fertilization, which lies, arguably, at the very heart of Quebec literature’s specific appeal.

Books released within the last ten to fifteen years by contemporary authors that discuss the issue of the two solitudes are extremely scarce. In 2004, for instance, Gisèle Villeneuve published *Visiting Elizabeth*, in which the bilingual author develops a hybrid language, as the francophone protagonist begins to incarnate her deceased English-speaking friend.<sup>5</sup> But similar to other recently published books such as Michel Basilières’ gothic novel *Black Bird* (2003), which is set during the October Crisis, *Visiting Elizabeth* does not deal with contemporary Montreal society, as the story unfolds in the riotous 1960s. Exceptions that do scrutinize anglophone-francophone interactions in today’s Montreal are few and far between, and include, for example, Jeffrey Moore’s *Prisoner in a Red-Rose Chain* (1999), written in English and set in his hometown Montreal. In an interview Moore explains his fascination with the city and its hybridity: “Parce que c’est une des plus belles villes d’Amérique du Nord. J’aime la notion de deux cultures et faire partie d’une minorité: je me sens moins comme un mouton, moins anonyme et conformiste” (qtd. in Kamala 2008, 70).

Minority status in part fuels the work of these anglophone writers in Quebec, where the distinctive linguistic constellation further enhances their language sensibilities. Montreal writers in particular draw inspiration from the English-French dual-

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4 For an in-depth discussion of Québécois poetry see Mathis’s article “La poésie québécoise: un bilan” (1996).

5 As a result, the novel as a whole is only accessible to a bilingual readership; consider for example: “[...] je pense, is Elizabeth the English pendant to la discrétion de maman, must I now discover la vie in the silences between the words of two languages [...]” (Villeneuve 2004, 75).

ity, as does Gail Scott (1998), who describes herself as “an anglophone writer who wishes to write with the sound of French in her ear, the better to narratively frame her own language/culture from a certain critical distance” (5). With “My Montreal: Notes of an Anglo-Québécois Writer” she has produced a kind of manifesto for the contemporary anglo writer, in which she explains why “[...] an anglo writer of my generation, must, in order to express the Québec of this last quarter-century – the Québec of referenda, of economic downsizing – participate in and ultimately address, two often clashing, but also mutually nourishing cultures, simultaneously” (G. Scott 1998, 7). The new anglo-Québécois literature – ‘new’ because, while English language writing has existed for a long time in Quebec, claiming its Québécois membership is only a relatively young phenomenon – is thus one marked by contact and exchange.

With the redefinition of Quebec as a francophone society subsequent to the Quiet Revolution, anglophone writers also need to re-evaluate their relationship with the dominant cultural group in the province, and since the 1980s they are said to be generally “open to francophone aspirations and interested in participating in Quebec society” (Leith cited in Leclerc and Simon 2005, 17). In the works of anglo-Québécois authors a certain “reterritorialisation de l’anglais en sol québécois” (20) manifests itself according to Catherine Leclerc and Sherry Simon, whose article “Zones de contact: nouveaux regards sur la littérature anglo-québécoise” in a 2005 issue of the scholarly journal *Voix et images* is itself a sign of recognition for this new kind of English-language writing in Quebec. Other forms of acknowledgement for anglo-Québécois literature by francophone literary institutions include the fact that in 2004 the *Grand prix du livre de Montréal* was given for the first time to an anglophone writer – David Solway (*Franklin’s Passage*). The post-referendum years have featured some further ‘firsts’ in Quebec history, like the well-attended *Write Pour Ecrire*, in which francophone and anglophone writers read works of artists from the other language group to enthusiastic audiences of both languages (cf. G. Scott 1998, 9).

In 2004, a small anthology entitled *Montréal, la marge au cœur* brought together short stories (all in French, one in translation) in which four francophone and one anglophone writer tell their personal vision of the city. What these authors do not have in common is the same mother tongue, but they are connected through their shared experience of Montreal. It is thus their affiliation to the city that serves anglophones and francophones as a ‘contact zone.’

### **Two Voices: Monique Proulx and Neil Bissoondath**

Being historically enshrined in the city, the language dichotomy manifests itself most perceptibly in Montreal, the province’s social laboratory. Montreal scholar Sherry Simon asks in her book *Translating Montreal: Episodes in the Life of a Divided City* what Quebec’s economic and cultural metropolis would be without the language difference and concedes that this is a provocative question, since to eclipse

the language difference would be to eliminate “the very substance of Montreal’s cultural history” (Simon 2006, 206). The language-conscious city thus offers an unequalled setting and frame to investigate exchanges between Quebec’s two major linguistic communities in literature.

In order to paint a more complete picture of Montreal’s English-French duality, I will explore fiction by writers from both sides of the linguistic divide. The francophone perspective will be represented by excerpts from the short story collection *Les Aurores montréalaises* (1996) by Monique Proulx, a Quebec writer of novels, short stories and screenplays, who is also well and widely received in English Canada. Another member of Quebec’s intellectual elite, Neil Bissoondath, is studied for his articulation of what can be seen as a distinctly anglophone angle on the French-English dichotomy in his novel *Doing the Heart Good* (2002). Proulx and Bissoondath belong to the few contemporary writers who broach the subject of the ‘two solitudes’ in present-day Montreal. Born within a couple of years of each other in the early 1950s, Proulx and Bissoondath are today prominent representatives of Quebec’s cultural and literary scene, reaching a large audience within and beyond the province. Proulx, a francophone *de souche*, was born in Quebec City and settled in Montreal in 1984, whereas Canada has been Bissoondath’s chosen home ever since he immigrated from Trinidad at the age of eighteen. Both writers are popular with francophone and anglophone readerships. A reviewer of the English translation of *Les Aurores montréalaises*, for instance, concludes, “Finishing this book, the reader is convinced Monique Proulx is yet another reason why Canada would be infinitely poorer without Quebec” (Garvie 1997). As for *Doing the Heart Good*, it won – tellingly so – the Hugh MacLennan Award for the best English book written in Quebec in 2002 (Dinka 2005).

The dynamic interrelation of alterities is emblematic of Montreal. Strictly speaking, the image of the two solitudes has never accurately reflected the actual situation in Quebec, least so in Montreal. Not only has there been a degree of continuous mixing and interaction between the communities of English or French Canadian descent, but a third party has also always been involved. First of all the indigenous population has to be mentioned; and although it has practically disappeared from collective memory, present Montreal is located at the site of the former native village Hochelaga, the name of which designates one of today’s poorest districts of the city (cf. Michaud 1992, 17). Later, immigrants increasingly took on the role of the third partner in the dualistic English-French relationship and are now often referred to as the ‘Other Solitudes’,<sup>6</sup> which focuses on the immigrant experience and ethnic diversity in Canada. The city thus provides a space where Self and Other are put into contact with one another, an unavoidable contact zone. Mary Louise Pratt uses the

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6 The phrase was originally introduced by Linda Hutcheon, co-editor of the book *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fictions* (1990). Consider also Michael Greenstein’s study of Jewish-Canadian literature, *Third Solitudes* (1989).

term 'contact zone' to "[...] refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (1991, 34). Such a space of contact and confrontation is the Montreal of *Les Aurores montréalaises*, in which Proulx takes stock of the diversity and hybridity of the city. Connecting the individual stories, the metropolis itself is the true hero of the collection and serves as "a backdrop for a postmodern human mosaic at the end of the twentieth century" (Eibl 2008, 454). Going beyond mere setting, Montreal emerges as its own character and largely invalidates negative connotations of difference and otherness.

Montreal may appear exotic from many different angles, since it accommodates such a large variety of Others and their voices. Yet, "exoticism is merely the unknown," as one character in Bissoondath's novel realizes (Bissoondath 2002, 70). For some, this aspect of the metropolis holds a great charm and they will welcome diversity with open arms, just like the protagonist of Proulx's short story "Jouer avec un chat": "*Il sera heureux, ici. [...] Tout à l'heure il a bu des espressos avec un Italien, de la retsina avec un Grec, il a des frères inconnus partout qui ne demandent qu'à pleurer et à rire avec lui. Il marche dans l'amour du genre humain et de Montréal!*" (Proulx 1997, 23). Yet, others are unnerved by the unfamiliar and shocked by "*mille monstruosités citadines (« Mon Dieu! La fille a les cheveux roses... Ma parole, ce type se promène quasiment TOUT NU! ... As-tu vu, c'est tous des nègres, les chauffeurs de taxi ... »)*" (Proulx 1997, 40). Irrespective of any subjective stance on alterity, diversity is undeniably a constitutive feature of the metropolis.

Anglophones remain Montreal's principal Other (or other Self), as anglo- and franco-Montrealers have been bound to each other in a kind of forced marriage for centuries. Still, for a Québécois coming from somewhere else in the province, *les Anglais* occasionally also continue to be somewhat exotic. In "Le futile et l'essential," Proulx depicts a middle-aged woman from rural Quebec who visits her daughter in Montreal, bringing with her a list of places and tourist 'musts' that Mrs. Chapleau, "Monique's husband's cousin's wife who has a sister who often comes to Montreal," kindly drew up for her. Starting with such sights as the botanical gardens, the Musée des beaux-arts or the Olympic Stadium, the list also includes:

- Les boutiques chic de la rue Laurier, continuait studieusement Fabienne, les smoked meat de chez Saint-Laurent boulevard Schwartz ...
- Chez Schwartz boulevard Saint-Laurent, rectifia mollement Martine.
- ... le cimetière Mont-Royal, le quartier des Anglais, le ...
- Martine éclata de rire, un rire plein de soufre et de désespoir.
- Le quartier des Anglais ?
- Mais ... oui ! dit Fabienne. Tu sais bien, dans l'Ouest, Ouestmoont ça s'appelle ... (Proulx 1997, 45)



With slightly vexed amusement Martine imagines her mother tracking down *les Anglais*, armed with her camera:

Oui, il était extrêmement facile de l'imaginer, Fabienne son petit chapeau et son appareil photographique faisant irruption chez des quidams de Trafalgar Heights, à Westmount, martelant le heurtoir en or massif de quelques maisonnettes de trois millions de dollar pour s'enquérir poliment : Êtes-vous un Anglais ? ... *May I take a photography ? ...*

– Mais il y en a partout, des Anglais, éclata Martine. Je peux te présenter ceux de l'appartement d'en bas, si tu veux ! ... (Proulx 1997, 45)

To her daughter's last proposition, to be introduced to the English people of the apartment downstairs, Fabienne does not even react, because that would simply be too mundane.

Montreal is not Quebec. The pluralistic metropolis is distinct from the rest of the province and from Quebec City, the capital and sort of *pars pro toto* for Quebec in that the number of anglophones resident there has been dwindling, for example.<sup>7</sup> In fact, for those accustomed to the cosmopolitan city, provincial Quebec possibly gives a rather monolithic impression. In a conversation with anglo-Canadian writer Margaret Atwood, Victor-Lévy Beaulieu, a well-known figure on the Quebec literary scene, said that he had no direct contact with the English language in his childhood and he described his first experience with an anglophone as a culture shock:

The only anglophone I saw in the whole of my childhood was in Trois-Pistoles: every fall, [Planter's] sent Mr. Peanut on tour around the province. [...] We wanted to know if he was the real Mr. Peanut or just someone disguised as a peanut [...] and we were completely stunned to discover that Mr. Peanut was black, an anglophone, and he said I'll never know what to us in his language. (Atwood and Beaulieu 1998, 144-45)

Quebec's largest city thus occupies an ambivalent place in relation to the entire province. On the one hand, the francophone majority is most fragile in Montreal, but on the other, it is also there that the influence and survival of the French language and Québécois culture in North America is being negotiated. In her short story "Leçon d'histoire," Proulx takes up this issue as well. Two men are debating Montreal's role as cultural capital, but cannot reach a consensus despite the conciliatory intervention of the woman seated between them. While one of them accuses

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7 In many respects, however, the capital is not representative of the rest of the province, where some regions are basically unilingual. For instance, the capital historically had a significant anglophone population, still has a number of anglophone schools and thrives on anglophone tourism.

Montreal of its prominent position, the other refers to it affectionately, significantly rolling the 'r':

Montréal accapare les subsides culturels de l'État les peintres de Montréal les écrivains de Montréal les dramaturges de Montréal raflent tout l'argent institutionnel comme s'il n'existait pas de créateurs en dehors de Montréal Montréal veut tuer les régions autres que Montréal Montréal Montréal. Montréal a besoin d'aide votre survie dépend de la survie de Montréal toutes les régions devraient spontanément encourager et vivifier la culture à Montréal au lieu de se sentir si petitement jaloux de Montréal c'est à Montréal que se joue le test de la survivance du fait français rien qu'à Montréal Montréal. (Proulx 1997, 74)

Later on the discussion turns to Quebec sovereignty and hints at yet another of Montreal's liaisons, that with Toronto or (English) Canada. Proulx implies that the chronic insecurity complex with regard to "the survival of the French fact" is not only entrenched in Québécois culture, but also that to take part in Montreal's language wars has become a reflex for some. In "Sans domicile fixe," for instance, two literature professors play at growing indignant over causes that are worth it, such as language:

Nous jouons souvent tous les deux à nous indigner pour des causes qui en valent la peine, le Québec, la langue, le multiculturalisme menaçant, et cela nous apporte une sorte de répit heureux, un relent d'extrême jeunesse. La plupart du temps, notre indignation est factice, épuisée. (Proulx 1997, 223)

While their game affords them some happy respite, they cannot enjoy it most of the time, in all likelihood because a real concern about their cultural identity underlies their playful indignation. Despite frequent moments of warmth and laughter, a tinge of melancholy runs like a red thread through most stories of Proulx's collection. The author certainly did not aim at comedy or political satire; instead, and remaining true to the book's title, Proulx enlightens readers on the colourful diversity of her chosen home town in *Les Aurores montréalaises*.

Bissoondath's novel *Doing the Heart Good* is an episodic first-person narrative by the protagonist Alistair Mackenzie, a seventy-five-year-old anglophone Montrealer who re-evaluates his life after having lost his house and possessions to an arsonist, and who is now forced to live in his daughter's household. The centrality of language to life in Montreal is expressed in the following brief plot summary:

Alistair Mackenzie has lived his life in a francophone society refusing to speak a word of French. He must now live with his bilingual (anglo-

phone) daughter, her bilingual (francophone) husband, and their six-year-old son, who understands English but speaks only French. (Sankar 2001, 51)

*Doing the Heart Good* could also be categorized as a sort of *Bildungsroman* in that it traces the development of its protagonist, who eventually comes of age, though unusually late in life. By the end of the narrative Mackenzie has gained the wisdom that was so long denied to him. In the paragraph quoted below he takes stock of his life:

Have I learned anything through this long life of mine? Yes. Unequivocally yes. A certain measure of humility that has been decades coming to me. I was born to a people to whom a sense of entitlement was innate. Even if my family were not among the blessed with mansions and chauffeured cars, there were always others, like Tremblay, who were below us. Even in our modest circumstances, we came from among the winners. It's not as if we lived every day with this sense, not as if we awoke every morning energized by the knowledge of our supremacy. We were, rather, unconsciously shaped by it. We felt ourselves to be special by virtue of history, by the levers of power some within our community controlled. (Bissoondath 2002, 344-45)

Not only does the narrator draw up a balance sheet of his personal history, but also of the history of English-French relations in Quebec. Born in 1920, Alistair Mackenzie grew up in a society in which anglophone superiority was still largely undisputed. Consequently he adopted an outlook on life according to which he felt justified in looking down on francophones, such as his former francophone upstairs neighbour Tremblay. It has taken him decades, he says, to become aware that Quebec society has undergone a profound restructuring, including a more just distribution of power that was once chiefly claimed by members of the anglophone community. The acclaimed Québécois writer and filmmaker Jacques Godbout reflects on these changes in post-1960 Quebec, prognosticating the following in 1989:

It is its cosmopolitan nature that will ensure Montreal's future. I do not mean by that exotic restaurants, trendy boutiques or cafés; I mean a population that has come from all over the world, that accepts French as a natural fact, English as a convenient means of communication, and that will create a diversified culture grafted on a French-speaking tree. (Godbout cited in Bissoondath 1994, 192-93)

Though not without struggles, Mackenzie in the end cannot help but be part of such a diversified, predominantly francophone culture and accept his status as a member of a minority now considerably reduced in influence.

The conclusion of the conflicts between the anglophone Mackenzie and the francophone Tremblay indicates that all their contention in the past basically boiled down to the language difference. Some time after the fire forced each of them to go their separate ways, Mackenzie phones his former neighbour:

A silence falls between us, but unlike the old days, it is not charged. We each, I suspect, have tallied our losses, mourn them, would like to make whole again what we can. Too much has been wasted in mindless bickering. Still, I can think of nothing else to say. 'Well, Tremblay, it was good hearing your voice. I should go now. I just wanted to wish you and your wife –'

'You want to hear somet'ing funny, M'sieur Mackenzie?' he says.

'Go ahead.'

'I am learning Spanish. *Si, sen-your*. Evening course. My wife and me, we plan a big voyage next year. To Espagne.'

I find myself chuckling. 'Maybe I should take Spanish lessons, too.'

'You come with us!' He laughs.

'No, no. I was just thinking about you and me, Tremblay. We need a new language, a new way of speaking to each other.'

He is silent again for a moment. Then he says, 'We have not need of Spanish, M'sieur Mackenzie. You come, make a visit. We will find the new language, you and me.'

Now it is my turn to fall silent. 'How far is it to your new home, Miss-your Tremblay?'

'Not far,' he says.

I suddenly know that it doesn't matter how far it is, I will find a way to get there. (Bissoondath 2002, 335)

Despite Mackenzie's eagerness to overcome the disunion with his former antagonist, he does not go as far as using the other's language but prefers finding a new one instead, perhaps in order to start afresh on an equal footing. However, Tremblay suggests that their feud has not been a question of English, French or Spanish for that matter but of the personal implications the other's mother tongue once held for them. Hence, if they adapted their mentality, there would be no need to change linguistically, so to speak. *Doing the Heart Good* has been criticized, by Katherine Miller (2003, 167) among others, for submitting its message too plainly, as the eventual détente between Mackenzie and Tremblay is brought about by an overtly symbolic incident on June 24 – *Saint Jean Baptiste Day* – which is *La Fête nationale du Québec*. Yet, neither Bissoondath's nor Proulx's works are obnoxiously didactic. Both

clearly seek to promote a rapprochement between Montreal's two major linguistic groups in particular, and the city's different ethnocultural communities in general. Thus, they paint a picture of an effectively multilingual and pluriethnic Montreal that thrives on difference.

### **Beyond the Realm of Literature**

The literary depictions by Proulx and Bissoondath surely augur well for the state of francophone-anglophone relations in Montreal. There is no use, however, in painting an over-idealized picture of the situation, because in all likelihood there will always remain a certain degree of tension between the two linguistic communities (and, of course, literature is not a mirror of reality). But this tension can be productive, as evidenced by Montreal's imaginative fertility, and should not obscure the fact that there is also increasing comprehension between anglophones and francophones; not just on a purely linguistic level, but also with regard to their different cultural sensibilities.

With the turn of the millennium, Montreal has come to a new self-understanding, redefining itself as a place of diversity. Talking about the spirit of contemporary Montreal, Simon (2006) remarks that it is "a city whose Differences have been downgraded to differences" (212). Similarly, Jocelyn Maclure (2003) argues in her analysis of Quebec's pluralistic society:

Difference, whether it be sexual, cultural, linguistic, gender-based, or another kind, is starting to be seen as a wellspring from which identity can draw, instead of a problem it has to solve. The expansion and fissuring of the centre is proceeding slowly, it is true, but no more slowly in Quebec than in other nominally liberal societies. (137)

This new valorization of otherness is expressed in *Les Aurores montréalaises* as well as in *Doing the Heart Good* – two texts that exteriorize difference and solitude. Their portrayal of how the characters gradually deal with the Other effectively reflects some of the positive changes that have taken place in Montreal in the aftermath of the 1995 sovereignty referendum.

There have been several definite signs of a growing rapprochement between francophones and anglophones in recent years. The *Commission des États généraux sur la situation et l'avenir de la langue française au Québec* (Commission of the Estates general on the situation and future of the French language in Quebec), created by the Parti Québécois government of Quebec in 2000, stressed in its final report that anglophones were not their enemies but a constituent part of Quebec's reality. "We are turning the page on the 'two solitudes'" (qtd. in Boileau 2001), declared one of the two anglophone commissioners. The report affirmed that after twenty-five years of language legislation, French is a language "pour tout le monde" and acknowledged as the common language in Quebec by the majority of anglophone groups.

Furthermore, the report proclaims that anglophones are no longer defined as a minority in Quebec but as a “communauté québécoise de langue anglaise” (Gérald Larose cited in Boileau).

A number of events in 2009 also bespoke a certain equilibrium in French-English relations in Quebec. The *Université de Montréal*, for instance, offered for the first time eight courses in English as part of its summer program. Jean-François Lisée, the executive director of the university’s *Centre d’études et de recherches internationales*, declared, “We’re breaking through a wall [...]. It’s something that maybe couldn’t have happened 15 years ago” (qtd. in Bauch 2009). A further incident that seemed to have reached a satisfactory conclusion for both linguistic groups was the performance of two anglo bands, which had at first been banned, at a concert during the Fête Nationale celebrations in Montreal. According to Lisée, the episode was a great day for Quebec nation-building: “Imagine, anglos banging on the doors to get in on the Fête Nationale” (qtd. in Bauch 2009). A journalist of the anglophone Montreal daily *The Gazette* comments:

There’s general agreement among rational folk that the episode was in the end a reassuring demonstration of how French-English relations have evolved to a level of relatively comfortable accommodation that sits well with a majority of both language communities. It would be an exaggeration to say that language peace reigns unperturbed in the land of Quebec, but the last major English-French confrontations – over bilingual signs – was 20 years ago and while there have been occasional eruptions of hostility since, they have tended to be over lesser grievances that were soon passed over. (qtd. in Bauch 2009)

Another reporter of the same newspaper tried to answer the question why young anglophones are not leaving Quebec as they did a generation ago. He suggests that it is not only because they speak better French and are not “being chased away by political uncertainty,” but also because, by the 1990s, a “cultural shift” had made speaking English “more acceptable in Quebec” (Johnston 2009).<sup>8</sup>

This more harmonious *modus vivendi* between francophones and anglophones in post-1995 Quebec is also due to the fact that anglo-Quebeckers have more or less accepted their minority status.<sup>9</sup> Dickinson and Young (2008) argue that “[y]oung

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8 One has to emphasize, however, that this opinion is pronounced by Montreal’s major anglophone newspaper.

9 Oakes and Warren (2007) write that an “Anglophone or English Quebec identity only really came into being during the late 1960s and 1970s, the period during which *Québécois* came to replace ‘French Canadian’ to describe the collective identity of the Francophone majority” and that “Quebec’s Anglophones were unaware of their minority status before the rise of a Quebec identity” (152). Yet, within the province they had been numerically in the minority before that,

anglophones in particular, themselves products of the language provisions under Bill 101, seem quite comfortable as a minority in an increasingly pluralist Montreal" (361). In a study published in 2006 it was found that over forty per cent of the young anglophones surveyed "considered themselves as much members of the Francophone community as the Anglophone community" (qtd. in Oakes and Warren 2007, 170). This attitude evidences a sense of identification with bi- or multilingualism – probably with heterogeneity and diversity in general – in Montreal.

For these young Quebecers, the acrimonious disputes of pre-1995 Quebec might elude their comprehension today. Richler's non-fiction essay *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!*,<sup>10</sup> for instance, including the torrent of heated and passionate debates it unleashed, may appear to some a mere curiosity of the past. It remains questionable whether Richler's "nightmare" was justified:

A Quebecer born and bred, I suffer from a recurring nightmare that all of us, French- and English-speaking, will one day be confronted by our grandchildren, wanting to know what our generation was about when the Berlin Wall crumbled, a playwright became president of Czechoslovakia, and, after seventy-four years, the Communist Party was overthrown in the Soviet Union and then the Soviet Union itself was dissolved. We will be honor bound to reply, why, in Quebec, we were hammering each other over whether or not bilingual commercial signs could be posted outside as well as inside. We were in heat, not only in this province, but throughout Canada, over whether or not Quebec could be officially crowned "a distinct society." (Richler 1992, 236)

However, language and its implications will most likely continue to be a highly emotional issue;<sup>11</sup> in fact, the ongoing debate seems to have become part of Québécois culture.

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but they had formed an elite. Therefore, it would be more accurate to state that anglophones have now largely reconciled themselves to the fact that they are no longer a *privileged* minority.

10 McGimpsey (2000) describes Richler's satire as Montreal's "cursed potboiler: a book actually read and debated by people who did not go to college, a book frequently discussed by those who never read it." (163).

11 A relatively recent example of an emotional sociolinguistic commentary includes a book called *La Grande Langue: Éloge de l'Anglais* (2002) by André Brochu, a retired literature professor, writer and current member of the *Académie des lettres du Québec*. What the author entitled *essai-fiction* is a satirical, yet bitter invective against the English language. At times self-deprecating, at others vitriolic, Brochu writes: "La Grande Langue affirmait chaque jour davantage sa suprématie et, même chassée des vitrines de Montréal et du reste du Québec, elle occupait désormais dans les cœurs la place laissée vacante par la religion [...]. Pourquoi pas l'anglais? C'est une langue sportive, universelle. Elle est la meilleure garantie contre le narcissisme national. Il faut en finir avec l'identité. Il faut être autre, parler autre [...]. Je parle anglais! je parle anglais! et toutes mes fautes me sont remises" (28, 11, 24).

Yet, there are critical voices as well, who question whether francophones and anglophones are in the process of reconciliation. Genetsch (2007), for example, maintains that “the gulf between the two so-called founding nations appears to be widening, and isolation rather than MacLennan’s (i.e. Rilke’s<sup>12</sup>) caressing solitudes characterizes the relationship between English and Franco-Canada” (3). This was perhaps the case at the time of the referenda, but within the province the current trend is generally towards a more inclusive society. The political scientist Alain Gagnon said after an absence of a few years:

When I came back to Quebec I found a new society in Quebec. I’m very impressed by the rapprochement between the two communities. There’s more and more complicity, in the workplace, in festivals, in local political organizations where before anglophones were in their milieu and francophones in theirs. That’s a very positive change and it confirms that Quebec is becoming a globally inclusive society, and that’s good for everyone. (qtd. in Bauch 2009)

Still, not everybody would agree with that statement. André Pratte, writing for *La Presse*, concedes that relations between the country’s two principal linguistic groups have been fairly harmonious in recent years, but only because anglophones have avoided confrontations.<sup>13</sup> He moreover claims that there is still a lot of incomprehension between the two communities and that “les francophones ont du mal à voir les anglo-Québécois autrement que comme une minorité dominante et menaçante” (Pratte 2005a). A 2005 poll commissioned by *La Presse* might give a similar impression of the situation in Quebec. Quebeckers were surveyed on their attitudes towards voting for a woman, a Black, a homosexual and an anglophone as premier of Quebec, with the result that the strongest opposition (35%) was towards an anglophone premier. However, one has to interpret such surveys critically; that is to say that the poll did not necessarily represent the actual opinions about anglophones. Yet, the results did reveal that speaking ill of anglophones is acceptable and accepted, that anglophobia can be more openly expressed than xenophobia or misogyny, because anglo-Québécois are not protected to the same extent by political correctness (cf. Boisvert 2005).<sup>14</sup>

In addition, public discourse continues to exploit military vocabulary to refer to the language situation in Quebec. One reads regularly about the “threat” or “invasion” of English in francophone newspapers (e.g. Richer 2009). Furthermore, the

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12 In his epigraph to *Two Solitudes* MacLennan is quoting Rilke in translation: ‘Love consists in this, | that two solitudes protect, | and touch, and greet each other’.

13 The shooting during Pauline Marois’s victory speech in Montreal, which killed one person and injured another, recently called the peacefulness in Quebec into question (while being arrested, the gunman shouted, “*Les Anglais se réveillent*”).

14 See also Pratte 2005b and Oakes and Warren 2007, 158-61.



notion of the two solitudes is still widely used, as in “Two Solitudes on Prevalence of French in Montreal: Poll” (2009). According to this article, nearly ninety per cent of francophones agreed with the view that French is threatened in Montreal, while fewer than a quarter of non-francophones did so (cf. M. Scott 2009). The survey thus shows that the survival of French in Montreal remains a perennial concern and cause for a high level of insecurity among the city’s francophone population. On a more alarmist note, Poisson (2009) exclaims that Montreal is becoming anglophone and articulates his regret that francophones too often think that the “battle” is already lost:

La tension monte entre francophones d’un côté et anglophones et allophones de l’autre. Malheureusement, nous continuons trop souvent, en tant que francophones, à croire que ça ne vaut pas la peine, que le combat est terminé et que, de toute façon, c’est déjà perdu. [...] Une chose est certaine, c’est aux francophones que revient le choix de garder ou de céder leur place. Ils auront plus de chance en cessant d’accuser « l’autre » et en affirmant haut et fort leur identité culturelle.

A similar debate is going on about French-English bilingualism and whether it is to the detriment of French. Assuming that language is not a religion, where one is either Muslim or Catholic, Marco Micone (1999) concludes:

Le français n’est pas en péril. La complexité de la situation de la région de Montréal exige des analystes qu’ils tiennent compte de multiples critères, désethnicisent enfin la notion de francophone et se souviennent que nous sommes encore dans une phase de transition.

In 2002, a journalistic experiment that involved the swapping of newspapers, press offices and languages also scrutinized the topic of bilingualism in Montreal. While the anglophone *Gazette* opted for the headline “Bilingualism? Pas de problème,” *La Presse* did not downplay the potentially problematic nature of bilingualism and shifted the question mark to the end of the phrase: “Bilingualisme, No Problem?”<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the francophone journalist Matthieu Perreault writes that “both the Francophone and the Anglophone communities are slowly learning to disentangle language and emotion. For Anglophones, it seems an easier task” (qtd. in Oakes and Warren 2007, 167).

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15 See also Oakes and Warren (2007); the authors remark that “the very fact that both newspapers agreed to the swap tells us something about the state of relations between the two communities” (166).

## Conclusion

Different people and members of different language groups will proffer different accounts of the sociolinguistic and cultural situation in Montreal, which continues to be ambiguous. One thing seems safe to say, namely that everybody, in fact, belongs to a minority – anglophones on a provincial and francophones on a national level and in the North American context. Of course, the anglophone community is, in its very constitution, “unable to transcend linguistic boundaries in order to integrate completely” into Quebec society (Oakes and Warren 2007, 151-52). But, as Simon (2006) proposes, in a “postcolonial Montreal characterized by cultural plurality and relations of diversity” there is the “possibility of the co-existence of many vocabularies within a single national grammar” (172).

The notorious ‘two solitudes’ may not yet have reached the stage of having metamorphosed into ‘two solitudes,’ as suggested by the book of the same title by Margaret Atwood and Victor-Lévy Beaulieu. However, notwithstanding their differences, there is increasing exchange and mixing between the two linguistic communities.<sup>16</sup> Numerous factors<sup>17</sup> have contributed to the amelioration of anglophone-francophone relations in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries in Montreal. Today, franco-Quebeckers are much more confident about their cultural identity than they were prior to the early 1990s and the French language has become a container and expression of a variety of histories and identities. Furthermore, Montrealers exhibit a disposition to deal actively with the Other to make the pluricentric city a liveable place for everybody. After all, whatever their cultural and linguistic differences are, Montreal’s citizens are bound together by sharing the same geopolitical space; their joint experience of the metropolis affords them a common language.

Though not always or necessarily congruent with cultural and socioeconomic actualities, literature reflects, in part, Montreal’s reality. Simon (2006) emphasizes, “It is contact and interaction (not isolation and exclusion) that fuel the work of many Montreal writers – in English and French”; and she concludes, “[b]eing alive to difference is a permanent obligation” (161). In a 2002 interview, Monique Proulx forwards a similar view, while explaining her adoration of Montreal:

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16 This mixing is not just restricted to language, but it can also take the form of exogamy, that is, marriages between anglophones and francophones (or allophones), whose children are then “bilingual and profoundly bicultural” (Jedwab qtd. in Oakes and Warren 2007, 169). In 2001, the proportion of exogamous couples was 55%, 44% of which were anglophone/francophone couples (cf. Oakes and Warren 2007, 169).

17 Although several of the most pertinent ones have been addressed, this study makes no claim to exhaustivity. Some aspects are omitted, such as the economic recovery in Canada beginning in the mid-1990s. (Suffice to say – in the scope of the present paper – that given the economic and political climate during the 1980s and early 1990s, the overall level of dissatisfaction was very high and exacerbated French-English tensions; the impact of the subsequent economic recovery has been particularly pronounced in Quebec).

Je la [i.e. the city of Montreal] vois de plus en plus comme une ville pleine de richesses ; pas dans le sens de la gentrification, bien sûr, mais dans celui d'une maturité : je trouve que les Montréalais vivent de plus en plus dans le respect les uns des autres. Le fait que l'on puisse voir dans une même rue des francophones, des Grecs, ou d'autres, et que le tout ne s'homogénéise pas mais reste en harmonie est réjouissant. C'est une ville qui vibre, qui n'est pas superficielle ; de plus, elle regorge de créateurs, ce qui me plaît énormément. (cited in Navarro)

Today, about 250 years after French Canadians were defeated in the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, francophones and anglophones – by tacit agreement – choose to get along with each other, as do the characters in the selected texts by Proulx and Bissoondath. Bissoondath summarizes the present situation between the two linguistic communities as follows:

Despite the differences between languages [...] we have acquired an uneasy similarity. Though sometimes blinded by the immediacy of political concerns, we are as a people fundamentally blended: our interest in each other cannot easily be extinguished. The right arm may not resemble the left arm, but they belong together on the same body, serving its interests and their own. Each would be poorer without the other. (Bissoondath 1994, 194)

It is thus to be hoped that Montreal appreciates its 'ambidexterity' and takes pride in being a multilingual, pluriethnic city, open to difference and diversity.

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