

## Redefining Quebec identity: *Nous avons tous découvert l'Amérique* by Francine Noël

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Since its beginnings, Quebec literature has been concerned with the problematics of identity and self-definition, from the early writings of La Nouvelle France to the widespread genres of *roman de la terre* and *roman historique* and to the revolutionary texts of la Révolution tranquille. In fact, it suffices to look at the various appellations applied to Quebec's literary production to grasp the extent to which the problem of self-definition has persistently haunted it: 'Littérature française du Canada', 'Littérature française de l'Amérique', 'Littérature canadienne française' and currently 'Littérature québécoise'.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, in view of the increasingly heterogeneous nature of Quebec society due to the continual flux of immigrants, defining what it means to be *québécois* has become even more complex. The old parameters laid down by the *roman de terre* (religion, tradition, the land and the family) certainly no longer hold tight, nor does the image of 'Quebecness' that emerged from the rebellious sixties. Following the failure of the last sovereignty referendum in 1995, which Jacques Parizeau controversially blamed on the ethnic vote, French Canadians have been forced to face the fact that they are no longer the only significant cultural group living in Quebec.

Given the intricate relationship between Quebec/French-Canadian<sup>2</sup> literature and national identity, it is not surprising that researchers in this area are increasingly turning their attention to questions of multiculturalism, hybridity, the migrant experience and linguistic crises. Although much interest focuses on the texts of migrant or *néo-québécois* writers,<sup>3</sup> there is also a considerable corpus of literature produced by writers considered *Québécois de souche*<sup>4</sup> which deals with a pluricultural and multilingual Quebec. *Nous avons tous découvert l'Amérique* (1992) by Francine Noël is such a text, providing the reader with an intricate representation of the migrant experience from a particular perspective (namely, of a *Québécois de souche*) and subsequently contributing to the debates relating to the need to reconceptualise Quebec identity in all its heterogeneity.

This article will examine the fluctuating boundaries of Quebec identity and the composite face of Montreal as depicted by Francine Noël in *Nous avons*

*tous découvert l'Amérique*. It is a Montreal far removed from the first major appearance of this city in French-Canadian literature, that is Gabrielle Roy's *Bonheur d'occasion* (1945). In the latter, Montreal is largely bipolar, divided between rich and poor, anglophone and francophone, whereas towards the close of this century, in Noël's text, the same city has been transformed into a veritable cultural conglomeration. The article will consider both the representation of and the role played by the 'Other' (the migrant communities) in a predominantly francophone Quebec society. The article also seeks to explore the extent to which Noël's novel promotes integration and cultural exchange as opposed to the assimilation of the migrant communities. How much of the migrant communities' unique culture should be preserved and to what degree should they adopt the traditions and customs of their host country? Furthermore, where does the French language feature amid this hybrid assortment of identities? Finally, the article will investigate what it means to be a Quebecer in a contemporary context and the complex range of issues that are raised for the francophone majority by the increasingly noticeable presence of allophones. It will evaluate the difficulties inherent in the construction of a Quebec nationalism which is pluralistic and inclusive of the migrant population. Indeed, the complexity of the latter goal could explain the overriding ambivalence of the novel—is it possible for Quebec nationalists to win over the ethnic vote in a bid to protect their own cultural status, while at the same time embracing tolerance and accepting difference? The two strands seem to contradict one another, with Quebec nationalism taking root in a strong belief in the specificity of the French-Canadian experience, but the definition of a contemporary Quebecer expanding well beyond such boundaries.

Francine Noël's *Nous avons tous découvert l'Amérique* (1992), originally published as *Babel, prise deux* (1990), depicts modern day Montreal as a multi-ethnic and disparate city. Although at a first glance, given that the novel is both written and recounted from the perspective of a *Québécoise de souche* (the author, Noël, and the protagonist, Fatima), it might seem that migrant voice is relegated to the periphery of the text, the backdrop for the narrative is a rich motley of disparate culture groups which include various Western European settlers, Turks, Jews, asylum seekers and Aborigines.

Predominantly situated in a particularly diverse part of the city, near Parc and Laurier streets, the novel examines how the *Québécois de souche* deal and interact with the various immigrant communities that now constitute the neighbourhood, including its population of Hassidic Jews, who are depicted as notoriously resistant to any dominant culture. *Nous avons tous découvert l'Amérique* is a profound probing of what it means to be *québécois* in

a modern context and a reflection on both the positive and negative aspects of pluralism. *Nous avons tous découvert l'Amérique* evokes the first referendum on sovereignty for Quebec, held in 1980 (when the triumph of the 'No' vote was attributed primarily to anglophones and conservative francophones) and also alludes to the heated debates over Bill 101 concerning the preservation of French as the official language in Quebec. *Nous avons tous découvert l'Amérique* recognises multiculturalism in Quebec as a powerful undercurrent—one that is primarily positive but also has the potential to shift the power balance away from French Canadians. It could, therefore, be seen to have predicted the outcome of the 1995 referendum, in which the immigrant vote was a key factor.

As the original title would suggest, Babel is a key motif throughout the novel, serving as a metaphor for modern day Montreal and highlighting one of the central themes—linguistic and ethnic pluralism. This pluralism is not only evident in the presence of foreign languages, but can also be traced to the range of French registers employed (Khordoc in Bertrand and Gauvin, 2003, 72). Montreal is a veritable cacophony of voices, which begs the question as to which one, if any, should be dominant.

Since numerous analogies are made between Babel (which signifies 'confusion' in Hebrew) and Montreal, it is perhaps appropriate at this point to recap the biblical tale, Chapter 11, Genesis. The famous legend recounts a time when the first generation of humans all spoke a unique, original language. Thus united and with a firm belief in their own capabilities, they decided to construct a tower, the tower of Babel, that could reach heaven and from which they could triumph over their achievement. Witnessing such excesses of human pride, however, angered God and subsequently led him to disperse his people and confound their language. No longer sharing the same idiom and therefore unable to communicate, they would cease to be a threat and would be humbled. Hence the once unitary and coherent vision of the universe was lost forever and replaced by a bewildered, kaleidoscopic picture.

As the novel's protagonist, Fatima, who suffers both from insomnia and an insatiable curiosity, wanders around the streets of Montreal, she remarks on the burgeoning eclecticism of the city. She states, 'Cette ville est bâtarde mais j'aime sa bâtardise, cela évoque Babel et son effervescence' (*Nous avons tous*, 152). This comment constitutes the first of many comparisons between her environment and Babel.

Fatima's interpretation of Babel, however, diverges from the biblical myth. In the latter, linguistic confusion gives rise to a divided and dysfunctional community, whereas when Fatima evokes the image of Babel, she imagines a place where different groups of people, each with their own distinct cultural traditions and unique languages, can cohabit peacefully:

Ces rêves ressemblent à des fantômes! Cette fois-ci, c'est la construction de Babel qui réapparaît: à un moment donné, les intervenants se mettent à utiliser plusieurs langues, ils se comprennent et moi, je leur réponds aisément. Il m'arrive même de rêver que je maîtrise des langues rares, perdues ou sacrées... Toujours il y a, dans ces rêves, une ambiance de légèreté. C'est Babel, la joyeuse... (*Nous avons tous*, 198)

Fatima's Babel is a positive one, a meeting place for diverse peoples as opposed to a melting-pot of cultures, but one that she knows to be difficult to achieve:

Les peuples constructeurs sont à la fois différents et semblables, et leur rassemblement est possible car, littéralement, ils sont parlables. C'est une utopie, celle de la communication dans le respect des différences, mais une utopie interdite. (*Nous avons tous*, 198)

While Fatima considers multilingualism to be an asset, with the potential to enhance the life of Montreal's inhabitants, at the same time her emphasis on 'communication' between each individual faction leads her to summon 'Babel-avant-la-foudre' where 'la langue servait de lien entre les peuples, agissant comme un mortier qui soude les briques de l'édifice' (*Nous avons tous*, 360). Fatima names this unifying language as French and considers its preservation to be vital for the future of Quebec identity, while at the same time acknowledging that the latter is mutating and will never be the same again. This is an outlook shared by many Quebec academics. Gérard Bouchard, historian, stresses this very point, stating that while Quebec identity needs to be re-articulated in fresh terms, the French language must remain central to any new definition. He asserts, 'Ce qu'il faut faire si on veut avancer cette question de l'identité québécoise, c'est de redéfinir le cercle de la nation en l'élargissant', but also argues that it remains 'important de présenter la langue française comme étant dénominateur commun minimal de cette nation'. He pursues this concept, reflecting on the inclusive rather than exclusive role that the French language will play in modern Quebec:

Au départ, le dénominateur commun, sur le plan culturel, c'est la langue française, comme langue première ou langue seconde ou tierce, mais la capacité de s'exprimer en français. Et, à l'intérieur de ce cercle, c'est l'interaction des identités et des cultures qui va, à la longue, produire un ciment, quelque chose qui va ressembler à une véritable identité nationale. Donc, assurer au départ la survie du français comme langue officielle, c'est ce que fait la loi 101; et, pour le reste, laisser faire les acteurs. En d'autres mots: agrandir la patinoire, tracer les lignes tout de même, et laisser les joueurs se démêler, ou carrément se mêler, pourquoi pas? [...] Cette nouvelle nation québécoise... dans toute sa complexité, dans toute sa diversité. Selon ce modèle... la nation québécoise, sur le plan culturel, se définit d'abord par référence à l'usage de la langue française, comme point de départ. C'est un modèle qui essaie d'inclure tous les Québécois, quelle que soit leur origine ethnique (linguistique, religieuse et le reste), dans un même ensemble linguistique pluriculturel. (Bouchard and Lacombe, 1999, 172)

Adding to the image of Montreal as a contemporary version of Babel, that is, disparate, eclectic, multilingual, is the fragmented form of the novel. *Nous avons tous découvert l'Amérique* is a collection of loosely arranged diary entries spanning the course of the year and recounted from two perspectives—predominantly that of Fatima, the protagonist, but also of her lover, Louis. The diary entries are interspersed with news flashes and a selection of letters, in the latter half of the novel, from Amelia. The pace of the narrative is thus rapid, at times chaotic, and the voices many. The content of the news items focuses on the mayhem, disorder and destruction in the world at large, highlighting international problems of cohabitation similar to the ones faced by Montreal. Paradoxically, amid the pandemonium and constant babble, a sharp sense of solitude, symptomatic of life in a metropolis, is simultaneously delivered through the medium of the personal diary.

The theme of pluralism extends into the lives and relationships of the characters, especially Fatima and Louis, neither of whom seem able to conduct exclusive love affairs. The recurrence of the 'threesome' in the novel (one example of which is Fatima, Louis and Amelia; another is Louis, Fatima and his wife; a third is Fatima and her trio of lovers) also serves to underscore one of the major themes of the novel, namely, multiplicity. By the end of *Nous avons tous découvert l'Amérique*, none of the love triangles have been resolved: Louis has not given up his wife or the ghost of Amelia, nor Fatima her other lovers. The homogenous unity of the couple no longer holds tight, in the same

way that a monolithic and traditional definition of Quebec identity does not relate to the modern-day reality.

The character of Fatima—a *Québécoise de souche* despite ‘ce prénom ridicule’ (*Nous avons tous*, 111)—emerges as the principal spokesperson for multiculturalism and inclusion. Fatima’s name itself is interesting in that it could be said to symbolise the new Quebecer—both from here and there, the same and other, native and exotic (the name Fatima is foreign but she is of French-Canadian descent). Fatima is juxtaposed against her neighbour, referred to throughout as ‘la grosse voisine’, who represents a more narrow-minded attitude to the arrival of immigrants in Montreal:

Un appartement s’est libéré dans son immeuble; elle se demande qui s’y installera. ‘Encore des couettes’, dit-elle. ‘Ou du monde normal comme nous autres, des Canadiens français.’ (*Nous avons tous*, 23)

The novel opens with Fatima observing her Jewish neighbours’ preparations for the Sabbath. Fatima is fascinated by ‘Otherness’ in general and is open to cultures different from her own, regularly addressing her neighbours in a few words of their own language and defending the rights of immigrants:

Mon attirance pour les inconnus dépasse la simple empathie: c’est une sorte de pulsion, une chimère qui me poursuit. J’aimerais pouvoir mener plusieurs vies parallèles. Etre à la place des autres... (*Nous avons tous*, 14)

She is particularly curious about the community of Hassidic Jews, whose sheer refusal to integrate marks them off as the most extreme form of alterity in the novel. Fatima’s vision for Montreal is one of harmonious heterogeneity, thus the Hassidic community’s self-enforced isolation irritates her. She becomes obsessed with gaining recognition from this group until she can no longer support their indifference. In an outburst of anger and frustration in the presence of her ‘integrated’ Jewish friend and occasional lover, Allan, she complains:

Je demande seulement qu’ils me regardent! Je ne peux plus d’être la femme invisible! Si je ne tolère pas le mépris, venant des Juifs ou de n’importe quel groupe ethnique, c’est parce que je les place très haut. Comme beaucoup de Québécois, j’ai une image très positive de l’Autre: je suis toujours prête à supposer que les étrangers sont mieux que nous. Il n’y a là rien de singulier; c’est une attitude de colonisé. Mais le fait de découvrir que ces êtres ‘merveilleux’ ont

dans leurs rangs des intégristes bornés me scandalise! (*Nous avons tous*, 319)

Fatima's outlook is that everyone is equal, despite surface differences, and that everyone deserves respect and recognition. She does not want the various ethnic groups to be assimilated into Quebec culture but rather to have them integrate while preserving their uniqueness. The problems she encounters with the Hassidic group reveal the inherent difficulties of such a utopian vision. At the same time, Fatima's own attitudes towards sharing and cohabitation are ambivalent. On the one hand, it would appear that she embraces such values outright; on the other hand, she is fiercely protective of her own personal space (her apartment and her diary) and is adamant that no one will encroach on her privacy – 'Je suis bien comme ça, seule. Sereine. Libre' (*Nous avons tous*, 37) and 'Ici, c'est chez moi, chez moi seule' (*Nous avons tous*, 65).

The characters of Amelia (Fatima's best friend) and Linda (her patient) merit discussion in relation to the themes of multiculturalism and multilingualism in the novel. Of Spanish and French descent but living in Quebec, Amelia embodies the typical hybrid being. Fatima admires her facility in slipping from one language to another: 'Ce pouvoir de traverser les langues et de faire le pont entre les deux cultures' (*Nous avons tous*, 27) and 'Quand je suis avec Amelia, ses passages d'une langue à l'autre me procurent un sentiment de jubilation' (*Nous avons tous*, 60).

But Amelia is stricken with a perpetual sense of dislocation, neither from 'here' nor 'there', and Fatima remarks that 'ce qui nous fascinait chez elle—le cumul de cultures et le déracinement—lui avait toujours été un poids' (*Nous avons tous*, 59). Similarly, travelling for Amelia is not a source of pleasure and relaxation but something that she is fated to ('l'obligation de bouger s'impose à elle comme une sorte de contrainte', *Nous avons tous*, 239), as her identity is in limbo, split across three different nations. Amelia's half-finished homes and her Sunday ritual of house-hunting (the perpetual search for 'la maison idéale...celle qu'elle ne voudrait plus quitter' and 'l'assouvissement symbolique d'un désir de stabilité', *Nous avons tous*, 83 and 229) are symptomatic of her inability to belong. Plagued by a need to rediscover her roots, Amelia embarks on a journey to Europe, which, as her letters to Fatima reveal, only serves to reinforce her sense of being an outsider as she learns, painfully, that she does not fit in there either:

Je ne suis plus ni française, ni espagnole, je suis probablement  
devenue québécoise.<sup>5</sup> Si j'ai une place en ce monde, c'est à

Montréal, avec vous. Je n'y suis pas toujours à l'aise, mais j'y suis moins mal qu'en Europe...

[...] un pays que je rechoisis en toute liberté: après quinze ans de déchirements, après cinq siècles de réflexions sur les rapports entre l'Europe et l'Amérique, moi, Française de souche espagnole, je reprends la route de mes ancêtres et c'est pour rentrer chez moi: ce pays est aussi le mien. Chaque culture a ses limites, mais, tout compte fait, système pour système, je préfère le Québec: les barrières y sont friables, et le rêve, encore permis. (*Nous avons tous*, 310–1)

Ironically, Amelia dies in an aeroplane accident just as her new home country is in sight. Symbolically, the death of this character could be said to signify the failure of integration. Indeed, the character of Amelia is ambivalent; while those around her rejoice in her multilingualism and exoticism, Amelia suffers from being in a position of eternal exile, an experience which she reflects on in a letter to Fatima, written shortly before her last fatal journey:

J'ai déjà parlé avec assurance de transculture. Je me demande si le mot bâtardise n'est plus approprié. Ce terme suppose moins d'élégance et de raffinement, il ne fait pas référence à un trip d'érudit contrôlant les codes, mais il cerne bien la condition des migrants. Ce mot contient une part de douleur, l'inévitable douleur des mutations. Tout immigrant est un mutant car l'exil nous transforme. (*Nous avons tous*, 310)

The character of Linda can also be interpreted as embodying both a hopeful and tragic vision of multiculturalism. Following a car accident, Linda is sent to Fatima, a speech therapist, to be treated for aphasia. Linda requests to have her therapy delivered in English, despite the fact that French is her mother tongue and that her family have nationalist leanings. Fatima is thus placed in the predicament of choosing to help the girl, imprisoned in silence, by agreeing to carry out therapy in English or adhering to her linguistic principles and refusing to work through any other language but French—unwillingly, she opts for the former.

Linda's aphasia could be interpreted as a metaphor for the tensions which emerge when numerous languages enter into contact and conflict, simultaneously predicting a grim future for a multilingual Quebec and highlighting the importance of one uniting language. But if we take Linda's car crash itself as

a further metaphor, then the future of French as a dominant discourse looks similarly bleak. The smashed-up car represents a broken language; this broken language is not simply Linda's temporary aphasia but also the precarious position of the French language in Quebec, as Linda not only loses the ability to speak it, but rejects its recovery too. In addition, the omnipresence of death and grieving in *Nous avons tous découvert l'Amérique* could be aligned with the loss of a firm sense of Quebec identity, an analogy that could be extended to the fear for the future of the French language repeatedly expressed throughout the text.

As previously mentioned, the fragile status of the French language is one of the central concerns of the protagonist. Fatima, a French language purist who notes 'tous les ratés et les moindres fautes de syntaxe' (*Nous avons tous*, 340), laments the increasing use of English by the younger generation of Quebecers, even those who attend French-speaking schools. Similarly, Fatima and Louis, in a restaurant one evening, comment on the number of customers who opt for English over French even when their accent clearly reveals that French is their mother tongue. Fatima perceives that 'tout rapport à la langue est un rapport de pouvoir' (*Nous avons tous*, 330) and worries that the francophone community will become endangered if newly arrived immigrants choose English as their language, raising the question of independence as perhaps the only way for Quebec to protect its identity:

Amelia nous voyait comme des géants courageux, débonnaires et avenants... Des géants? Depuis quelques années, je nous trouve plutôt petits et peureux. Pissous. Nous finirons par disparaître, piégés par nos atermoiements. Nous deviendrons minoritaires dans notre propre pays. Pourtant, nous sommes le peuple d'accueil. Un peuple d'adolescents insécurés. L'épopée bouffonne du referendum l'a montré: on a été incapable de couper le cordon. Huit ans plus tard, on est encore là, à se demander si on existe! Si on est 'viables'. (*Nous avons tous*, 358)

In contrast to the pessimistic vision of Quebec to which Linda's aphasia gives rise, it is also possible to interpret it in a more positive light. Linda's motivation to speak English is so that she can interact with her Italian boyfriend, English being their common ground. Thus, it would appear that communication is possible when desired by both sides.

In conclusion, it could be posited that *Nous avons tous découvert l'Amérique* seeks to propose a new cultural vision for Quebec, one where the various mi-

grant communities would legitimately occupy an important space. Undoubtedly, however, this raises many issues concerning the future of the French language and the reactions of the *Québécois de souche* to the increasingly heterogeneous nature of their environment. The novel presents us with two opposing reactions through the characters of Fatima and her neighbour – those who welcome ‘Otherness’ and the possibility of cultural exchange and those who shun any form of difference, perceiving it to constitute a threat to their sense of self. As for the French language, it will either unite the disparate elements of modern Quebec or serve to isolate those whose native tongue differs. What is interesting about *Nous avons tous découvert l’Amérique* is that, while initially it appears that the migrant experience is solely examined from the perspective of a French-Canadian Quebecer, on closer analysis it becomes clear that Amelia’s letters provide us with an insight into the experiences of a newcomer to Quebec; these experiences range from feelings of permanent exile and dislocation to an expression of gratitude towards the flexibility and inclusiveness of Quebec.

As well as dealing with these key questions concerning the changing face of Quebec identity, *Nous avons tous découvert l’Amérique* also touches on other points which merit mention. These include the seemingly gender-marked identification with and acceptance of alterity. On the whole, women in *Nous avons tous découvert l’Amérique* emerge as more favourable and open to the presence of the ‘Other’. It is the Hassidic grandmother who finally smiles at Fatima, and the professions of the two principal female characters in the novel, speech therapist and translator, reveal a desire to communicate, whereas the professions of the main male characters, architects and an urban planner, suggest a need to delineate and demarcate territory. Additionally, the noticeable absence of anglophones in *Nous avons tous découvert l’Amérique* leads us to query where this culture group fits into the new inclusive vision of Quebec put forward in the novel. Similarly, it is questionable if other ethnic groups, no matter how enthusiastically they are welcomed, will ever have the right to proclaim, like Fatima, ‘Je suis ce pays’ or if newcomers will have to bide their time until they are awarded certificates of ‘québécoité’ (Parris, 2002, 11) by the *Québécois de souche*, just like Fatima’s Jewish friend, Allan.

Although many of the questions posed in the novel remain unanswered, or at best ambivalent (most notably with the protagonist simultaneously embracing the ‘Other’ and travelling down the path to nationalism), what does become clear is that Quebec identity is mutating, and unavoidably so. Louis Hémon’s famous proclamation ‘Au pays de Québec rien ne doit mourir et rien ne doit changer (*Maria Chapedelaine*, 188) has well and truly been reversed.

While on the one hand, multiculturalism may place the French language in a precarious position, on the other hand, Noël is keen to celebrate the arrival of diverse cultures onto Quebec territory. Overall, the text promotes the integration of new immigrants as opposed to their assimilation and, consequently, loss of subjectivity. Alternatively, as Charles Taylor would put it, *Nous avons tous découvert l'Amérique* encourages a 'politics of recognition' whereby the uniqueness of each individual or group is valued (Taylor in Goldberg, 1994). At the same time, the text identifies the need for a way to unite these disparate communities through a common language. Taylor believes that there is no reason why a community cannot have strong collective goals and still respect difference. There will undoubtedly be tensions, but such a goal is not impossible (ibid., 94). What is ultimately important is that *Nous avons tous découvert l'Amérique* includes the immigrants in construction of a modern-day Quebec and evokes a society where old and new will work side by side:

C'est nous, filles et paysans français, qui avons commencé à bâtir ce pays. Nous ne suffisons plus à la tâche. (*Nous avons tous*, 359)

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## Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The term 'québécois' came into usage with the onset of la Révolution tranquille.
- <sup>2</sup> We can only speak of Quebec literature/littérature québécoise after la Révolution tranquille.
- <sup>3</sup> These terms refer to Quebecers of immigrant origin, such as Ying Chen, Dany Laferrière and Marco Micone, among many others.
- <sup>4</sup> *Québécois de souche* refers to francophone Quebecers whose ancestry can be traced back to the first French settlers of the Nouvelle France regime (from the founding of Quebec in 1608 to the ceding of Canada to Britain in 1763).
- <sup>5</sup> What does she mean when she states that she has probably become 'québécoise'? Is this term the only suitable way of defining her sense of 'nothingness'? Is that, therefore, what Quebec identity has become, a void? Or on a more positive note, and indeed Amelia goes on to suggest this, is it because Quebec identity is so plural and fluid?