

Nation and Self-Narration: A View from Québec/Quebec

What is really important is the structural alignment of post-1820s nationalist “memory” with the inner premises and conventions of modern biography and autobiography.

(Anderson xiv)

When I first started thinking about autobiography in Canada and Québec almost a decade ago, I began, not surprisingly, by seeking out the bibliographies and critical studies that would give me the proverbial (critical) lay of the land. What I found was the making and re-making of a homeland, or rather, homelands. Anthony Appiah has suggestively outlined the logic of this mutual implication of personal story and national narrative:

It is a familiar idea that modernity allows the ordinary citizen to make a national identity central to an individual identity. . . . It is a slightly less familiar thought that the identity of this nation is tied up with the stories of individuals . . . whose stories, in helping to fashion a national narrative, serve also, indirectly, to shape the individual narratives of other patriotic—nationally identified—citizens. (9)

One could begin to elaborate on these observations in the following manner. As narratives of identity, both autobiographies—in which an “I” speaks—and nation/alist discourses—in which a “we” is spoken—depend on the invocation of subjectivity, that is, on those speech acts through which a “subject” emerges (Benveniste 224). Moreover, the subject-constituting acts of saying “I” and saying “we” are both predicated on the mutual dependence of self and other; there is no “I” outside the reciprocal dialogue between “I” and “you” that is “constitutive of *person*,” and there “cannot be ‘we’ except by starting with ‘I’” (Benveniste 224, 202). Self and nation are thus implicated in a specular relation of mutual mirroring (or non-mirroring, as the case may be).¹ Nation offers the self (through the process of

interpellation)² an identity as a subject-of-the-nation, while individual subjects' autobiographical acts can (be made to) serve as both a model and a medium for the construction of the collective subject-nation.³

The present essay seeks to engage, more specifically, with some of the contemporary discourses—political, critical, autobiographical—that have been implicated in the mutual articulation of subject and nation in Québec/Quebec. The paper is in five parts, as the focus of analysis moves from political/public discourses and their deployment of autobiographical tropes to construct the life-narrative of the nation; to critical writing on Québec autobiography and its similar investment in a nation-building narrative; to autobiographical writings—first in French and French translation (in the case of Montagnais writer Ann Kapeshe), then in English—which suggest a more complex relationship between the subject and the nation; and finally back to the political and the present, in anticipation of the future. My aim is not to offer a survey of what is (especially in French) a very large body of autobiographical writing,⁴ nor to argue for representative texts. Rather, from the space opened up by Québec/Quebec's difference from itself—the space of the “barred Nation It/Self” (Bhabha 298) that is only partially represented by the metonymic *accent aigu*, for there are other differences here than French/English—I want to ask: what are some of the ways in which “I” and “we” have been conjugated in this place? The texts selected for consideration here have been chosen with a view to facilitating such an interrogation.

1. The I of the Beholden

How fitting that the meanings of “behold,” “beholden,” and “belong” should all be so inextricably linked, thus foregrounding that fraught nexus of personal story and collective history that is my focus here. To “behold” is to be a spectator, to “observe, regard, look”; “beholden,” a past participle form of “behold,” means “[a]ttached, or obliged (to a person); under obligation for favours or services”; a third meaning of “behold” is “[t]o pertain, relate or belong to” (OED). A narrative emerges out of this web of meanings—a prototypical autobiographical narrative, if we understand the autobiographical imperative to emerge in response to the question “where do I belong?” (Gunn 23)—one whose contours some would find all too familiar. The beholder, the one not quite part of the group, the one to whom the group says “we” meaning *not* “I + you,” but “I + they” (see Benveniste 202),

looks on from the sidelines. In seeking admission into the group, s/he stands beholden for the favour of an attachment only the collectivity can grant. That favour is the gift of belonging, an affirmation of a “person’s membership in, and acceptance by” the group (OED). This line separating inside from outside, the beholder knows, is both contingent (“[n]ot of the nature of necessary truth; true only under existing conditions” [OED]) and (presumed) absolute; as Steven Hunsaker notes, the “power to define the nation by excluding is central to the sense of national belonging” (12). An Israeli writer, speaking of that strife-ridden corner of the world into which I was born, expresses such longings to belong with the eloquence of one familiar with both the hunger and the terrible price it can exact (in demanding the Other’s exclusion): “This is what it all comes down to: *Not to be foreign*. To belong . . . What sweetness surges through the body from just saying those words. What bitterness floods the heart [at being made to feel foreign]” (Grossman 58). In Montréal/Montreal, the home of my adult life, the beholder’s craving for and ambivalence towards such sweetness has been the subject of a probing and poignant eulogy, Elspeth Probyn’s autobiographical/polemical *‘Love in a Cold Climate’: Queer Belongings in Québec* (1994). Conceding the recent loss of her desire to belong here, Probyn feels nonetheless compelled to think her way through the problematics of being and belonging in a place where “identity is an institutional project” and the “constant appeals to belong” are impossible to avoid (27).

Belonging becomes particularly fraught in the context of a public/political discourse driven by that master trope of nationness, the figure of “*the many as one*” (Bhabha 294), a figure paradoxically both modeled on and contested by the autobiographical. Imagining the nation as a self-identical subject, the figure of the subject-nation occludes the very lesson autobiographies offer: that “the use of nation as a source of identity differs radically with ethnicity, gender, and economic situation” (Hunsaker 1). In Québec/Quebec, the question of national identity and collective belonging continues to be a pressing and central concern. The on-going Michaud Affair is a case in point. On 15 December 2000, the National Assembly passed a unanimous vote of censure denouncing comments made by former Parti Libéral (PLQ) MNA Yves Michaud in his brief to the estates-general on language, faulting immigrants and the Jewish community for failing to support the sovereigntist project. The language of Michaud’s brief and the appended “Tableau vote ethnique” make explicit who, in his view, the col-

lective “nous” are, and who the beholden. There are those “dits de ‘souche”” who constitute the national collectivity proper, and then there are all the others (Michaud n.p.). Immigrants are needed and to be welcomed, but on condition that they recognize their status as beholden to the national collectivity, and fulfill their obligations which include, according to Michaud, adopting the national group’s language, culture, and way of seeing the world, as well as supporting sovereignty.

And so the new millennium in Québec has been ushered in by a political upheaval that saw *premier ministre* Lucien Bouchard resign, in part, over the Michaud Affair (finding unacceptable the vocal support for Michaud among some party members), and Bernard Landry succeed him with a vigorously pursued ideological/political platform rooted in the ideas of the Québec “people” and the Québec “nation.” On the occasion of the recent Summit of the Americas in Québec city, Landry’s PQ government displayed its slogan on an electronic message board situated on the grounds of the National Assembly across from the summit’s convention centre: “Québec, une nation d’Amérique et d’avenir.” But if there is a Québec nation (and a nation-state in/of the future), who are its (true) nationals? How is belonging to be articulated within an identity grid commonly represented as consisting of “les francophones de vieille ascendance [de souche],” “les Anglo-Québécois, les communautés culturelles et les Autochtones?” (Gérard Bouchard 76, 79). The danger, as Robert Schwartzwald has noted, is of subscribing to a collective discourse that “seeks to ensconce the primacy of the subject-nation at the expense of a heterogeneously articulated national subject” (287). Yet it is precisely such a discourse of the subject-nation that has characterized the political rhetoric of the governing party in the last few years. In a speech given in the months leading up to the 1995 Québec referendum, then *premier ministre* Jacques Parizeau urged his audience to rally behind the sovereignist cause and endorse “un projet qui leur ressemble.” The national project so conceived, however, remains an inherently paradoxical one: rebelling against what are seen as the forces of homogenization from without (“les Canadiens” who have denied the collectivity its identity), it demands homogenization from within.

Québec is at a crossroads, Gérard Bouchard has recently argued, suggesting that certain current conceptualizations of the nation are leading this society towards a dangerous impasse (14). Any reflection on identity, belonging, and nation in Québec, he insists, has to engage with a complex

network of relations. He offers a list of some of the issues and considerations that should inform any narrative of the nation in Québec: the historical invasion/occupation/settlement by French-Canadians and other immigrants of the territory recognized today as Québec, and the on-going relations between these groups and the Native populations; the history of the relations between the French-Canadian population, a majority in Québec, a minority in Canada, and the French and British colonial powers, and the experience of this group within the Canadian and North American contexts; the differences and divisions *within* the francophone majority; the relations between the francophone majority and the other (state- and self-identified) linguistic and ethnic groups that inhabit the territory of Québec, considered within the larger context of changing demographic and socio-economic realities (128-31). It is such a rethinking of the narrative of the nation that leads Gérard Bouchard to his alternative vision of a New World “nation québécoise,” one that would be defined by a profound reorientation in four directions: moving away from ethnicity towards an ethics of rights; from an organic (ancestor-oriented) conception of French-Canadian identity to a language-based francophone cultural identity; from a French-Canadian culture to an inclusive national “culture québécoise”; and from a primarily cultural nationalism to a vision of social and collective progress (73).

But the difficulties of translating such a vision into a political discourse that seeks to mobilize the citizenry for a secessionist cause are nowhere more evident than in a brief text authored by Gérard Bouchard’s brother, former *premier ministre* Lucien Bouchard. There is a telling internal tension at the heart of Lucien Bouchard’s forthright and forceful resignation speech of January 11, 2001. On the one hand, Bouchard reaffirms in his speech his government’s accountability to all Quebeckers, categorically endorsing the democratic principles of *l’État québécois*: “de générosité et d’ouverture à toutes et à tous, sans égard à leur origine ethnique et culturelle.” On the other hand, he reiterates (cannot but reiterate) his mission, as leader of the Parti Québécois, to bring about Québec’s sovereignty, clearly not the wish of *all* Quebeckers (as referendum after referendum has shown), and pursue a national project conceived and advanced not in the name of the aforementioned ethnic and cultural diversity of the citizenry, but in response to what are seen as the aspirations of “le peuple québécois.”⁵ Tellingly, when Bouchard turns to English for a brief paragraph, he has little to say to his

“fellow citizens”: he expresses gratitude for their support, and states his resignation. There is no story here, no appeal to a common history or a shared destiny, no passionate invocation of the deepest ties of kinship; “le peuple québécois,” we are left to conclude, does not translate well into other idioms. In whose image, then, the “people” and the “nation”?

II. The (Critical) Lay of the Land

Like the political discourses discussed above, critical writing on autobiography in English Canada and Québec has been, until recently, strongly invested in the cultural construction of nationness. While these writings have imagined different subject-nations (Canada, Québec), they have shared a common critical orientation, reading personal narratives as sites wherein an individual constructs him/herself as a national subject, and as the collective utterance of the larger subject-nation.⁶ Such a critical project becomes problematic, however, when the principle of selection determining the chosen autobiographical corpus, and the national narrative these autobiographies are made to tell, function to elide constitutive differences *within* the nation. In national narratives, Ackermann cautions us, the heterogeneous nation is often made to appear as an individual—“the people”—conceived as “a homogeneous mass of similarly willed individuals” (122).

In Québécois literary criticism, the interest in the relationship between the individual and the collectivity has been characterized by a particular inflection, as critics have been concerned to trace “the evolution of narrative forms in Quebec in relation to Quebec’s colonized status and nationalist aspirations” (Raoul 41).⁷ Lamonde’s bibliographic study and the critical works of Van Roey-Roux and Hébert illustrate in an exemplary fashion the polemical and rhetorical means by which personal writing can be mobilized for the project of collective identity construction. Lamonde’s leading question is “Quelle expérience collective les Québécois ont-ils faite de la subjectivité?” (33), and Van Roey-Roux proceeds from the similar premise that “à travers les écrits personnels, c’est toute une société qui se dépeint et se raconte” (7). Pierre Hébert reiterates these concerns, devoting an important part of his book to tracing “[l]’histoire de la subjectivité québécoise” (47).

But who *is* this “I” in whose image a whole collectivity is conceived? One answer is provided by Lamonde’s decision to exclude from his corpus “les auteurs québécois anglophones, inuit ou amérindiens,” in order to foreground the homogeneity of the collective experience he seeks to represent (*Je me sou-*

viens 19). Similarly, Van Roey-Roux's introductory chapter makes clear her conception of the collectivity as cohesive, its history and identity continuous. Personal narratives, she suggests, contribute greatly to the creation of the national collectivity precisely because they are vehicles of a collective memory, preservers of the cultural heritage (8); they are like so many links in a chain providing a sense of cohesion and continuity that is particularly important to a society experiencing itself as threatened and endangered (14). The collective desire, as Van Rouey-Roux sees it, is a desire to see one's likeness reproduced many times over: through their personal writings it is "nos semblables" who fill in the gaps in our remembrance of the past and provide us with a sense of belonging (7-8). A crucial slippage is thus enacted at the outset of Van Rouey-Roux's study: from a recognition of the plurality of experiences that personal writings represent, to an affirmation of the singular character of "Le Québécois" (14) who thus becomes the (national) protagonist of this critical narrative.

In these studies, then, self-narration is made to tell the story of the nation, as an individual subject—*un(e) québécois(e)*—is transformed into the representative *Le Québécois*, and then the collective subject "Les Québécois" (Hébert, *Journal intime* 12). Hébert describes his book as a cultural history, and it is, in effect, the auto/biography of the québécois collective subject as he sees it. It is a story that follows the familiar evolutionary trajectory of traditional autobiography, and it begins with the collectivity's experience of colonization. Hébert identifies three stages in the evolution of the collectivity: "la Conquête anglaise" bringing to an end the prelapsarian *Habitant* experience of enjoying "la jeunesse d'une terre neuve" (Harvey in Hébert 48);⁸ resistance; and emancipation. Individual writers' experiences of selfhood are thus subsumed under (or seen as constitutive of) the evolving modalities of a québécois collective selfhood, in a movement from "moi-occulté" to "moi-recouvré" to "moi-affirmé." According to this narrative, an initial valorization of collective identity which was necessary for the survival of a colonized people but came at the expense of individual identity (1840-1930), was then followed by a transitional phase (1930-1950) in which emergent voices experienced themselves as alienated and cut off from the collectivity, leading, in the final phase (1950-present), to a truly emancipated form of writing which allows for the integration of the personal and the collective. In this final stage the "I" becomes fully liberated, a subject who can claim both a personal and a collective identity, affirming "j'existe,

donc nous sommes”: I am, therefore we are (Hébert, “Une Evolution” 37).

A very different story is told by An Antane Kapesh, who was Chief of the Montagnais Band in Schefferville in the 1960’s. In her autobiographical *Je suis une maudite sauvagesse. Eukuan nin matshimanitu innu-iskueu* (1976), Hébert’s legitimate yet victimized collective subject *les Québécois* becomes *le Blanc*, a cunning and ruthless colonizer who has invaded her people’s territory, exploited and destroyed the natural resources, and devastated the Native culture and way of life. In the beginning, for Kapesh, there was not a “terre neuve” but a place called “*innu-assia, c’est-à-dire terres indiennes*” (“Témoignage”). Kapesh’s autobiographical narrative offers a radically different version of the history of inu-assia/Québec. As Boudreau observes, the very structure of Kapesh’s autobiography is dictated by the order of the White man’s arrival and the subsequent phases of colonial exploitation and dispossession: first the missionaries, then the land brokers, the teachers, the police, the media (125-26).

It is from the space of the in-between—the space that opens up when Kapesh’s narrative is read alongside those by Lamonde, Van Rouey-Roux, and Hébert—that I would like to engage with a number of autobiographical narratives in Québec/Quebec. Approaching these texts as sites of individual and collective self-interrogation, I am interested in the ways in which they might help us reconstruct a more ambivalent narrative of nationness, one that perceives the nation as a space “marked by cultural difference and the heterogeneous histories of contending peoples, antagonistic authorities, and tense cultural locations” (Bhabha 299). Probyn discovers such a shifting landscape when she sets out to question what it means to belong in Québec; what she finds, “alongside the apparent universality of the nation,” are “striking images of singularity” (62). One would do well to attend to such singularities before rushing to say “we.”

III. Témoignage d’une Québécoise

As a corrective to an homogenizing discourse of the subject-nation one might thus turn to individual autobiographical narratives in order to solicit a different kind of testimony. Kapesh’s autobiographical text, written in Montagnais and first published in a bilingual Montagnais/French edition, invites us to rethink the relation between self, nation, and self-narration in this place. Kapesh opens her autobiography by boldly outlining the predicament her people find themselves in as a result of White colonization: “Après

être arrivé sur nos terres, en nous prenant pour nous enseigner son mode de vie à lui, le Blanc a pris du même coup nos enfants pour leur donner une éducation de Blanc, uniquement pour les gâcher et uniquement pour leur faire perdre leur culture et leur langue indienne” (15). What is at stake, above all, is identity and the materials out of which identity is fashioned: language, culture, a way of seeing the world. Had the Whiteman been honest, writes Kapesh, he would have told them that his true objective was to eradicate Native identity so that one day they would become strangers to themselves and to each other (27).

Kapesh's response to the threat of annihilation is to mobilize all the identitarian resources available to her, producing a narrative that integrates autobiography, autohistory, and autoethnography. A text like Kapesh's reminds us not only that autobiography is always also autohistory and autoethnography—all autobiographies are underwritten by the cultural and historical scripts within which their subjects are embedded—but also that the relative visibility of these elements and their role in the life-story are a function of two elements: the autobiographer's relative position within the dominant social order, and the reader's relative familiarity with the history and culture that inform the autobiographer's vision. John Paul Eakin has observed that “the self who writes is written” by the surrounding culture (94), but Kapesh seeks to unwrite a colonial idiom so that a different story of the self and the collectivity might be heard. Like other Native writers, Kapesh is concerned with both exposing colonial oppression and preserving a threatened Native culture, and as strategies of resistance, autoethnography and autohistory serve such ends well. They allow for the articulation of an indigenous “collective identity through the performance of language” (Lionnet 39), establishing a culturally and historically specific vocabulary for the indigenous subject's self-expression. Such strategies also enable a dialogue with the colonizing culture, through self-representations that “engage with the colonizer's own terms” (Pratt 7), and the writing of “Amerindian autohistory” in a manner that draws on “correspondences between Amerindian and non-Amerindian sources” (Sioui xx11), thus facilitating an exchange that is crucial if any change is to take place. In Kapesh's narrative, it is impossible to tell the self's story outside of the collectivity's history, and it is impossible to speak of either without calling upon multiple sources: the past and the present, Native and White ways, the said and the unsaid (Kapesh dramatizes the figure of *le Blanc* whom she makes speak the

colonizer's destructive intent). Writing as a mother, for example, Kapesh attests that "[a]ujourd'hui j'ai des problèmes avec mes enfants" (93). As her narrative makes clear, however, these problems cannot be separated from the history of residential schools and the forced White education that has estranged children from their parents and produced a generation that cannot fit in either world (83). From this personal and collective predicament arises the imperative that shapes Kapesh's autobiography: to reclaim and restore her native culture and language (93).

Yet while Kapesh insists throughout on the cultural and historical specificity of her identity—reiterating “moi, une Indienne”—her articulation of this identity reveals it to be not a fixed entity but a series of negotiations and approximations. An indigenous subject in a post-contact world, Kapesh writes in vindication of her culture, but also acknowledges that it has been forever altered: “ma culture n'existe plus aujourd'hui" (183). Defending Native ways, she also recognizes the need to go outside them: retaining elements of her oral tradition, while deciding to write and agreeing to a translation. And while she declares “Dans mon livre, il n'y a pas de parole de Blanc,” her resistance consists precisely in appropriating this colonial idiom, reclaiming the pejorative “maudite Sauvagesse” in a gesture of self-naming (Postface). Speaking out of and in defense of the specificity of her culture, moreover, Kapesh chooses to frame her autobiography by articulating truths she views as universal; in her preface Kapesh speaks of the lessons her struggle has taught her: the need to maintain hope in the face of adversity, to persevere in following one's convictions. Most importantly, Kapesh concludes, it is now the turn of non-Natives to listen before they lay any further claims to *innu-assia*.

Autobiographical writing serves to remind us that the nation(-state) shows different faces to its differently positioned subjects. When Kapesh looks into the face of *le Blanc*, she sees the anxiety that his racism betrays, an anxiety born of the knowledge that her people lived on the land long before his arrival, and that their culture exceeds his grasp (Postface). When Manon Lafleur offers her *Témoignage d'une Québécoise* (1972), she opens her testimony with another kind of face, a “fesse” (3), the naked behind of the boy who molests her at the age of five, the first in a long line of abusive men that will include colleagues, bosses, and lovers. At first glance, Lafleur's autobiography seems to promise the fusion of individual identity and collective destiny envisioned by Lamonde, Van Rouey-Roux, and Hébert. The

title appears to declare it unequivocally, the publisher is Éditions québécoises, and it features a preface by Léandre Bergeron, the Marxist-nationalist militant who made a name for himself in the early 1970s with publications like *Pourquoi une révolution au Québec*. Since for Bergeron the quintessential Québécois is a member of the proletariat, Lafleur's life-story is a *témoignage d'une Québécoise* precisely because it is "l'histoire de mademoiselle Toulemonde": taught by the nuns to feel guilt and shame about sex, she enters the adult world disastrously unprepared; daughter to parents who have been deformed by poverty themselves, she is traded in the marriage market to a possessive and abusive husband.

It is not surprising, however, that Van Rouey-Roux does not single out the testimony of this Québécoise as exemplary, classifying it instead with other "autobiographies de victimes," and briefly characterizing it as depicting "la vie pénible des femmes de milieu pauvre" (116). The challenge that Lafleur's gendered and classed subject—and the social divisions it reveals—poses for Van Rouey-Roux's unitary model of the nation goes unacknowledged. What is indeed most striking about the autobiography itself is Lafleur's alienation both as a member of her society and as an existential subject. Lafleur's world is a world devoid of the warmth of human contact, and whatever there is of a sense of self can only find expression through the naming of lack: "Moi, je n'étais pas grande-chose. Je n'avais pas d'argent, je ne connaissais personne" (19)—no money, no social status: hence, no being. Lafleur's world is a far cry from the tradition-rich collective universe of "nos semblables" evoked by Van Rouey-Roux, or is it simply its ugly underside? Far from embracing a national collectivity, Lafleur concludes by reflecting on the ills of her society, and expressing her only wish: to be one day granted the most basic right of a human being, to be respected "comme un être humain" (94).

For some, it is a gendered "we" that constitutes the collectivity of the same to which the self belongs. A prominent feminist and social activist in Québec for fifty years until her death in 1993, Simonne Monet Chartrand opens *Ma vie comme rivière* (1982) by speaking of "les femmes québécoises," a group characterized by what she sees as the inescapable similarities in women's intimate lives; in spite of and beyond differences in personality, political views, lifestyles, marital or social status, "le vécu intime des femmes se ressemble beaucoup" (8). Martha Adams would no doubt disagree. When she looks at the world, she sees two kinds of people, not men

and women, but poor and rich; in her home town of Disraéli, “il y avait seulement deux classes de gens: les riches . . . et les pauvres” (119; ellipsis in text). Adams’s autobiography is an account of her life as a prostitute and then the Madame of a brothel. She opens and concludes this account by invoking the principal shaping force of her destiny—poverty—and condemning the social order that made her an outcast.

While Monet Chartrand can say “we women,” and Martha Adams can say “us poor girls,” some subjects seem to have nowhere to go, no collective home to return to at the end of the day. Van Roey-Roux’s invocation of “nos semblables” is comforting indeed, but what if nobody recognizes you as their kin? What if the resemblance is, literally, not there? An emblematic narrative in this regard is Johanne Harrelle’s *Une leçon* (1980).¹⁰ Born and raised in French Montréal but growing up an orphan in a society that refuses to recognize her because of her skin color, Harrelle is left searching for her kin, pleading with different groups: “Aimez-moi, acceptez-moi, maintenant je vous ressemble” (214). Harrelle asks at the outset of her autobiography “Moi . . . oui, qui étais-je . . . ?” (23; ellipses in original), and is throughout her life haunted by mis-recognition¹¹ (she is often mistaken for an “Haïtienne” and ends up perpetuating the lie), suffers self-estrangement, and is plagued by debilitating self-questioning: “chaque pays visité sollicite une image de moi qui rend encore plus urgente la question de mon identité” (8). In the concluding pages Harrelle reflects on the lessons a life lived on the outside has taught her. She lies, she knows, in order not to be “orpheline,” in order to be loved and accepted, in order to belong (211).¹² For while she knows what her “légitime nationalité” is—“CANADA—QUÉBEC—MONTRÉAL; je le répète: mon pays” (215)—she also knows that in the eyes of others, she will always remain a stranger: “Je ne le comprends pas, on ne veut pas me reconnaître, je suis toujours une étrangère” (214).

IV. Être anglais/ Étranglés au Québec

In June 1989 the magazine *Liberté* published a special issue entitled “Strangers in Paradise/Étranglés au Québec” featuring invited essays and testimonials by sixteen “intellectuels anglophones.” The puns in “Étranglés” were, of course, intended, inviting a reflection on whether the equation *être anglais=étranger=étranglé* captures the experience of anglophones in Québec. In their introduction the editors ask: “Être anglais au Québec, cela se peut-il?” It is a question the writers discussed in this section have had to

address. Writing in the aftermath of the first referendum, George Tombs posed the question bluntly: "Are anglophones part of the Quebec 'Nation'?" (188). For Anglo-Quebeckers, Tombs concluded, "the idea of 'belonging' is still adrift somewhere in the distant future" (193). Two texts, both published in 1994, stand at opposite ends of the discourses on Anglo identity and belonging that are my concern here: Gary Caldwell's *La Question du Québec anglais* (a text written in English but published only in French translation) and Elspeth Probyn's *'Love in a Cold Climate': Queer Belongings in Quebec*.¹³ I read Probyn's as a critical autobiography, and Caldwell's as a cultural autobiography—a life-history that features a collectivity rather than an individual as its subject.

Caldwell appropriates the familiar tropes of traditional autobiography—(biological) origins; (linear) chronology and generational continuity; an immutable core identity—to present his polemic about collective identity. To answer the question "who is an Anglo?" Caldwell identifies the cultural group "anglophones" as the mirror image of the cultural group "francophones," both defined by language and descent, the only real criteria according to Caldwell (19). For Caldwell, only the anglophones and francophones so defined constitute real national collectivities with any legitimate claims to belonging; all the rest are mere "population" (12). To tell the collectivity's story, he begins with its confident past—firmly rooted, in his view, in Protestantism and British traditions—then traces its decline as a consequence of what he describes as a neo-liberal project that has left the state so disembodied that it has had to invent a secular religion of rights in order to create a common public sphere (104). With the advent of multiculturalism, according to Caldwell, we see a further erosion of the concept of community, so that what is left is not even "population," but "clientèle."

The plot line of Caldwell's narrative is one dictated by the inevitable ethnic conflict between the two national groups. To resolve such a conflict, the minority Anglo culture, according to Caldwell, has four options: self-pity à la Richler's *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!*; self exile; assimilation; or a return to what he regards as Canadian identity proper. This last option, favoured by Caldwell, would entail creating an independent (Anglo-ethnic) economic infrastructure, and achieving a reconciliation with the majority by rejecting pluralism in favour of a turn towards the past and towards Anglo-British history, with both groups holding on to what he considers their shared heritage: "nos valeurs occidentales de traditions grecque et judéo-chrétienne" (73).

Caldwell concludes his narrative with an exhortation to the young generation of Anglos in the regions to carry on the old Protestant, English-Canadian nationalism of British inspiration (91), and to do battle with that false divinity, neo-liberalism (104-05).

At the other end of this discursive continuum is Elspeth Probyn's extended meditation on belonging in Québec. Inspired by writers like Walter Benjamin, Homi Bhabha, and Giorgio Agamben, Probyn seeks to articulate not a unitary identity, but an "inbetweenness of belonging" (2), a belonging not predicated on the "possession of an intrinsic quality" (3) but inflected by desire and singularity. Thus while Caldwell asks the categorical question *Do you belong?* Probyn inquires *How do you belong?* It is the latter, I believe, that opens up more possibilities. As Gail Scott writes in her own meditation on being an English Quebecker: "The more we grasp that in a sense all of us have a double, perhaps multiple relationship towards the culture that surrounds us, the more we will be able to acknowledge differences, oppressions, hierarchies" (54).

What kinds of belongings, then, in this place?

Probyn argues that an obsession with "la souche" (the source)," imagined as a fixed origin, can asphyxiate (63). But a source can be imagined differently. A source of water is the central image of another autobiography published in 1994, Laurel Buck's *Stream of Memory: Reflections of Megantic County*. Buck's ancestors came to the Megantic region in Québec from Ireland in the 1820s. The actual stream, running under the family's old farmhouse, becomes a trope for the autobiographer's search for her personal and collective identity. When Buck goes back to Megantic after an absence of years, she knows she is home: "I lay in the heart of my origins" (85). In the farmhouse, she recalls, a "[s]ense of place and belonging permeated the atmosphere. It was inconceivable that change could touch it" (27). But change would, of course, touch this place, as change had touched the lives of Buck's parents and grandparents, who were forced by economic hardship to leave Megantic, first for the States, then for Montréal, and as change had touched, before them, the generation of Buck's great-grandparents, who came to Megantic from Ireland. What Buck's journey down that stream of memory teaches her is a lesson about "be/longing" (Philip 22), about the longing to belong that is constitutive of being but is not an

essence or a possession. The experience of identity, Buck discovers, is the experience of difference from oneself (one of her chapter titles reads “The Senior Citizen that I am looks at the Me who was ten”); and home, she realizes, “can be transplanted again and again and again” (17). When Buck visits Ireland for the first time, she comes across an old abandoned house built over a runlet—the Irish model for the Megantic farmhouse built by her grandfather who was, by then, already four generations removed from the old country. This allows Buck an insight into her grandparents’ sense of identity: they were “quintessential exiles,” yet Megantic *was* their home (50).

The turn towards history, then, *pace* Caldwell, can reveal not essence (and inevitable conflict) but inflections of difference, just as Buck’s initially alienating experience of linguistic difference (her first contact with French) eventually gives rise to a vision of solidarity. When Buck returns to the farm, where René Pomerleau’s family now lives, she tries to explain to him her need to revisit the “sucrerie” where her grandfather had hung himself: “I found myself remembering my French” (82). Her interlocutor responds softly “Je comprends,” telling her of his own family history. This is the vision with which the book concludes, one that embraces both “je me souviens” and “je comprends,” insisting on the dual imperative of remembering one’s own complex history while recognizing such complexity in the lives of others.

As with the French-language writings discussed in the previous section, English-language personal narratives in Québec demonstrate a diverse range of self-positionings in relation to the national collectivity. In her contribution to the *Liberté* issue mentioned earlier, writer Merrily Weisbord reflects on her family’s experience in Québec, noting that “Notre relation avec le Québec est à la fois simple et formidablement compliquée” (24). Thinking back to her maternal great-grandfather, who was chief Rabbi of Quebec City, remembering the Jewish quotas in Anglo institutions in earlier decades, and contemplating the future for her daughters whose bilingualism leaves them out in the cold (longing to belong to one side or the other), she nonetheless affirms: “Nous habitons ici, ma famille et moi, et sommes liés au sol, puisque nous y avons, pour le meilleur comme pour le pire, pris racine” (24). As Clifton Ruggles documents in *Outsider Blues* (1996), racism can indeed have a great deal to do with the sense of being “déraciné.” A generically hybrid narrative that seeks to articulate the personal within the social, *Outsider Blues* recalls other Black Canadian autobiographies,

such as Carrie Best's *That Lonesome Road* (1977) and Carol Talbot's *Growing Up Black in Canada* (1984). For Ruggles, as for Kapesh, the distinction is not so much that between Canada and Quebec, as that between a White, racializing, dominant culture, and those othered by it. In the autobiographical title-essay Ruggles writes: "As a Black Canadian with an Amerindian heritage, I go back many generations in the history of North America—[yet] I am still made to feel that I do not belong" (14). While he is made an outsider, Ruggles nonetheless makes his own belonging in Quebec and Canada, drawing on many sources: a "collective Black memory" (4); his family's history "down-home" in Nova Scotia; the mixed race friendships of his growing up years on Barclay Street in Montreal; *Black Pride*; the family he has created with his wife Olivia Rovinescu, a Romanian Jew, and their children (12). Ruggles describes himself moving "chameleon-like through different cultural terrains," seeking to give voice to those "who have remained invisible for too long" (11, 14).

Since identity is formed at the intersection of individual psychological development and community affiliation, to ask "where is home?" is ultimately to interrogate what "ties the emotional to the political" (Thompson xiv). Writing about being an English Quebecker, Gail Scott reflects on the complex character of belonging, suggesting that it involves more than a collectivity's particular and shared version of history, springing from "a deeply emotional place where our personal, social, political cultures meet" (45). In three critical-autobiographical essays in *Spaces like Stairs* (1989) Scott explores the place she writes from. In "Virginia and Colette" her reflections on her friendship with France Théoret become an occasion for interrogating the meaning of being "a minority anglophone in a largely French milieu," in the context of a "mutually antagonistic rapport [existing] between [the two] national cultures" (30-31). Important insights emerge from the experience of that relationship, allowing Scott, for example, to examine that "attraction-repulsion attitude towards the other that is both at the root of racism and of certain *grandes passions*. The other is what we lack—or fear we lack—in self" (31). Such insights, in turn, facilitate the unmaking of the mythologies of both cultures and the shedding of clichés, and open up a space within the selfsame, thereby enabling "the writer's most important tasks: a constant, rigorous criticism of her nation's dominant culture" (30).

"Everyone wants to be themselves," Anita Allen reflects, "but no one

wants to be without some group basis for sustaining identity and moral self-esteem” (123). Successful navigation of the rapids of identity and belonging, Scott adds, involves a necessary relation to the past, for “without memory (the thinking back) there can be no sense of self” (22); but she also points out that any turn or return to the past is necessarily in the service of the present and the future, “creating a conspiracy between remembering and one’s desire to move forward” (20). Belonging is thus the bridge that takes us from the past into the future; one might do well, then, to look both ways before crossing—somebody’s idea of the past might not be your idea of a future.

V. This just in

Identity discourses are the very air we breathe as subjects, they are the medium and idiom of our self-fashionings as both interpellated selves and subjects capable of agency. I have argued here that as identity narratives, autobiographies are continuous with other discourses and practices of identity that populate the social and political sphere. One of the powers that such identity discourses (whether autobiographical or political/polemical) carry is the power to effect that shift from “I” to “we” that is a necessary condition for the articulation of a collectivity. For this reason, the nation, as Anthony Cohen has observed, has to be “mediated through the self” (146). As I write, such (competing) solicitations of the individual citizen, of the individual-as-citizen, continue to define the public discourse in Québec/Quebec. Yesterday, June 7, 2001, we saw the release of the report of the *Commission des états généraux sur la situation et l’avenir de la langue française au Québec*—the committee before whom Yves Michaud presented the brief discussed at the beginning of this paper. One of the principal recommendations of the report is the establishment of a Québec citizenship founded on the French language as “un facteur d’intégration et de participation à la société” (21). Since, for the national narrative to take hold, its representation of the nation has to be experienced as “deeply personal and intimate” (McCrone VIII), one is not surprised to find that the report appeals to the individual citizen to recognize his/her responsibility in safeguarding the French language as the “bien commun” (11).

The individual so solicited, then, cannot but take the nation-narrative personally. I am heartened by the clear insistence, in the estates-general report, on the pluralistic definition of the québécois nation and the impera-

tive to break with “l’approche ethnique” (58). But I also wonder about the selves and self-narratives that disappear in the slippage enacted by the report as it moves from the naming of differences, to the celebration of “l’interpénétration de toutes ces cultures,” only to close with a coded reference to the more monolithic vision of a “vouloir-vivre collectif en français” (12). The dialogue between self and nation in this place, I know, has to continue.

NOTES

- 1 This, then, can be seen as another modality of what Susanna Egan has described as the autobiographical genres of “mirror talk,” in which “interaction between people, among genres, and between writers and readers” becomes constitutive of the experience of subjectivity (12).
- 2 I draw here on Althusser’s understanding of the individual subject as interpellated by ideology and ideological state apparatuses: “I shall then suggest that ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’” (174).
- 3 A number of recent publications illustrate the discursive potential of the nexus nation/self-narration. Bell’s *Scotland’s Century* is an exemplary instance of the mobilization of personal narratives for the project of nation-building. While Bell leaves unexamined the question of how one could construct a singular nation from the widely diverse life experiences his subjects report, studies such as Watson’s *Of Self and Nation* and Hunsaker’s *Autobiography and National Identity* turn to individual autobiographies in order to explore precisely such questions. I address similar issues in “The Subject and the Nation” and “Minnie Aodla Freeman’s *Life*.”
- 4 Lamonde’s recent bibliographic study cites 874 titles published between 1980 and 2000. The interested reader will find discussions of a wide range of autobiographical texts from Québec in the critical studies by Van Rouey-Roux, Hébert, Raoul, Boudreau, and Hunsaker (who has a chapter on Pierre Vallières’s 1968 *Nègres blancs d’Amérique*). Journal articles tend to favour the more literary or canonical writers (many of them women), such as Claire Martin, Jovette Marchessault, and France Théoret.
- 5 See Elmer and Abramson for the ways in which ethnicity, while functioning as an organizing concept of the national question in Québec, has been “at once ubiquitous and absent” (13).
- 6 K.P. Stich, for example, writes that autobiographies “give an inner life to individual Canadians and add life to Canada’s psyche or soul” (x).
- 7 However, feminist scholarship on women’s autobiography in Québec—echoing Claire Martin’s critique of her society in two compelling autobiographical volumes *Dans un gant de fer* (1965) and *La joue droite* (1966)—has problematized the relation of the gendered subject to her collectivity; see, for example, Raoul; Green; and the special issue of

- Voix et Images* on “Effets autobiographiques au féminin” edited by Havercroft and LeBlanc. For a more general feminist critique of the nationalist project in Québec see the essays in the volume edited by Lamoureux, Maillé, and Sève.
- 8 Hébert is here quoting Jean-Charles Harvey, *Les Demi-civilisés* (Montréal: 1968) 39.
 - 9 National and nationalist politics enter Lafleur’s narrative with a poignant irony: she speculates that Monsieur L., the employer who rapes her, was never apprehended because of his family contacts—a brother in the Ministry of Education, and another in the Parti Québécois (33).
 - 10 Space does not permit me to examine a related auto/biographical representation, Claude Jutra’s largely autobiographical film *À tout prendre* (1966), in which he and Harrelle play themselves.
 - 11 Leigh Gilmore (drawing on Althusser, Foucault, and de Lauretis) coins “nonrecognition” to refer to an act of resistance, the subject’s refusal to recognize him/herself “within dominant representations and self-representations” (20). Harrelle’s sense of being mis-recognized by her society—her awareness that others’ interpellations of her do not coincide with her self-knowledge—is perhaps a necessary first step towards such resistance.
 - 12 For my exploration of lying as a strategy of self-construction in another Québec autobiography, see “The Interpellated Subject Lies Back.”
 - 13 The text was subsequently integrated into Probyn’s *Outside Belongings*.

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