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Paula Ruth Gilbert and Miléna Santoro, eds., *Transatlantic Passages: Literary and Cultural Relations between Quebec and Francophone Europe*. Montreal & Kingston (Canada) and Ithaca, N.Y.: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010. xii + 347 pp. \$95.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-7735-3787-3; \$34.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-7735-3790-3.

Review by Anthony Purdy, The University of Western Ontario.

The title is rich in promise, bringing to the public eye an area of more than apparent neglect. In recent times, transatlantic studies have tended to come out of black or postcolonial studies, while language based approaches have privileged anglophone, hispanophone or, occasionally, lusophone cultures. Within the framework of francophone studies, the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia all loom larger for European eyes than Quebec, as does the Caribbean in a transatlantic francophone context. For its part, Quebec has long been less than forthcoming in acknowledging in serious scholarly terms its profound and multivarious cultural relations with France, preferring to explore in recent decades the *américanité* of Quebec culture, first through a turn to the U.S., and then to a more plural Americas with an increasing focus on Latin America. Academic collaborations with francophone European scholars have at times seemed to be disproportionately with Belgian universities rather than French (though this has been changing in recent years), and there has sometimes been a sense that comparative studies between Quebec and Belgian literatures are somehow more appropriate than those involving France. The resulting shortage of English language studies of cultural relations between France and Quebec makes the publication of this wide-ranging volume by McGill-Queen's—which, while gesturing toward Belgium and Switzerland, in fact privileges France almost exclusively—a most welcome contribution to an understudied field.

That said, anyone turning to this collection of essays expecting a synthesizing historical study of cultural relations between Quebec and France (let alone francophone Europe) will be disappointed. It is simply not that kind of book. For one thing, the only essay to take a long historical perspective (pre-twentieth-century) is Pat Smart's engaging study of the autobiographical writings of four seventeenth-century women of New France. Indeed, the vast bulk of the essays take the period since the start of the Quiet Revolution to the present day as their object, with the occasional foray into the years between the end of World War II and the death of Maurice Duplessis in 1959.

Nor are the essays organized in any systematic way that might reflect an overarching vision of the subject. Instead, they follow a loose thematic division into five sections: "I. Women's History and Passages across the Atlantic"; "II. European Cultural Influences on Quebec Writers"; "III. The Theatrical Space of Exchange"; "IV. Franco-European Immigrant Voices in Quebec"; and "V. Contemporary Art Forms and Popular Culture." This organization presumably speaks to a post-hoc distribution of the essays received from invited participants. One suspects that, in the planning stages of the volume, there was an attempt to cover a reasonably wide variety of subjects with contributions from different disciplines. It is difficult, however, to agree with the claim made on page 12 that this makes for an "interdisciplinary" volume in any strong sense.

The volume's contents may indeed be multidisciplinary, but there is no truly interdisciplinary approach to the subject matter either in the book's conception or in the individual essays.

In lieu of a genuinely historical approach or a strong conceptual unity of purpose, the editors, Paula Ruth Gilbert and Miléna Santoro, seek coherence through a metaphor—the *passages* of the title. These, like any self-respecting metaphor deployed in a title, are plural and are duly listed on pages 4–5. Speaking for myself, the first thing the words *Transatlantic Passages* bring to mind is the nostalgic phrase “booking passage,” triggering a flurry of images of the great transatlantic ocean liners such as the *Ile de France*, whose first-class restaurant was recreated on the ninth floor of the old Montreal Eaton's department store, turning *le neuvième* into a stylish Montreal Art Deco landmark. But though the phrase itself is invoked on p. 5 (and again by Bonnie Baxter on p. 227), I looked in vain for any trace of either ships or Deco in the book's essays, where transatlantic crossings are usually either metaphorical or mentioned only in passing, and even Susan Ireland's fine study of “Transatlantic Crossings in the Work of Alice Parizeau and Naïm Kattan” conveys little sense of the actual voyage. What one will find instead are two epigraphs that situate the *passage* metaphor firmly on dry land. The first, taken from Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (the Paris arcades are, in French, known as *passages*), introduces the figure of the *flâneur* and the themes of desire and commodity fetishism. The second, taken from Gail Scott's *My Paris*, mentions Benjamin's writings on nineteenth-century Paris and the arcades and allows the editors to expatiate:

Just as Benjamin found in Paris the fuel for his reflections on modernity, so Scott, a contemporary *flâneuse*, finds in Benjamin's *Arcades Project* a structuring principle for her own postmodern text, a first-person narrative where the subject is never that of a verb but is rather expressed in infinitives, gerunds, and accumulated sentence fragments that convey her vision of an outsider's encounter with and passage through what remains an enduring nineteenth-century Parisian cityscape (p. 3).

Unfortunately this is not quite true, for though Gail Scott's text relies for the most part on the usual stylistic devices of the interior monologue outlined above, the penultimate sentence of the passage quoted in the epigraph does in fact contain a conjugated verb with a perfectly orthodox personal pronoun subject.[1] This is a small detail perhaps, but one which can scarcely escape the reader who has just read the epigraph and who will therefore feel a little less comfortable in the editors' scholarly hands than she or he might wish.[2] But if this is a quibble, a more salient point concerns the editors' decision to privilege Scott's work (rather than Benjamin's, which it so admires) as a structuring device for their own book. Indeed, quotations from *My Paris* serve as epigraphs not only to the Introduction but to each of the book's five sections. In addition, Lorna Irvine's enthusiastic contribution is devoted to Scott's text and is followed by a longer extract from it. In short, *My Paris* sets the rhythm for the whole book, which it dominates to an unusual degree. Instead of the little explosions of *Jetztzeit* that Benjamin's quotations are meant to produce, there is a monotonous and monologic quality to Scott's repetitive structures, especially her syntax, which makes for a curious reading experience as cultural and linguistic differences are rendered through a bizarre pidgin, accentuated by the inexorable accumulation of present participles presumably signifying simultaneity:

I telling how Madame X laughing. When I asking where to put what we calling *vidange*, garbage. They calling *poubelle*. Chez nous we also saying *oké*. Where they saying *d'accord*. *Bonjour* where they saying *au revoir*. Further leaving diphthongs slightly open. Inviting. They closing theirs up suavely. So we nasalizing pain, bread. Causing mockery in bakeries (p. 139).

One is left longing for the wry expressions of cultural *dépaysement* in Régine Robin's novel, *La Québécoise*, where the newly arrived immigrant from France is astonished to learn that, in

Montreal, the initials PC refer not to the *Parti Communiste* but to the Progressive Conservatives.[3] Scott's constellations of observations offer neither Robin's snapshot realism nor her stream of consciousness and convey neither defamiliarization nor culture shock. Instead, the overwhelming impression is of contrived artificiality and labored and gratuitous fragmentation:

Raining. Entering café lit by giant geometric teardrops. Suspended from ceiling. Smaller wall versions. Over curly-pawed tables. Pretty but unheated. So sitting far from window. R arriving almost simultaneously. *Le Nouvel Obs* in hand. On cover *Fifteen Leading Intellectuals*. Derrida. Lyotard. Deleuze. Etc. All worriedly reflecting on growing entrenchment of Right. Which Right they have spent lives striving to philosophically defeat. By *en principe* displacing. Deferring (p. 27).

I suspect that, paradoxically, *My Paris* does not lend itself well to the further fragmentation involved in short quotation in epigraph form. It depends instead on accumulation and repetition to produce its best effects, and here it is not allowed that luxury. As a structuring device for *Transatlantic Passages*, it doesn't really work. And that is a pity, because it distracts from the fact that what we have, under the editorial smokescreens, is a miscellany of often very strong essays by an unusual variety of contributors on a complex subject that merits attention. So let's return briefly, while turning a blind eye to the metaphor, to the "five distinct and yet linked 'emporia' of influences within which are congregated displays of luxurious intellectual goods" (p. 13).

The first section, "Women's History and Passages across the Atlantic," follows Pat Smart's historical account of women's autobiographical writing in New France with previously unpublished English translations of a radio piece by writer Monique Proulx and poems by Nicole Brossard. Sandwiched between them is a perceptive and very useful essay on the debates and exchanges between French and Quebec feminisms by Chantal Maillé, who argues that the legacy of Quebec nationalism and its construction of Quebec as colonized have allowed Quebec feminism to avoid an engagement with postcolonial thought and an examination of power relations among different groups of women.

In addition to Irvine's chapter on Scott, more poems by Brossard and an autobiographical piece by Louise Dupré, the second section, "European Cultural Influences on Quebec Writers," brings together essays by Patrick Coleman on the young Hubert Aquin and Mordecai Richler in Paris in the early fifties; Karen McPherson on the role of Switzerland in texts by Aquin and Brossard; Karen Gould on French and European intertexts in works by France Théoret; and Patrice Proulx on reworkings of aspects of Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* in Lise Gauvin's *Lettres d'une autre* and *Comment peut-on être français?* by Chahdortt Djavann, an Iranian writer living in France.

Post-colonial and post-national perspectives are to the fore in the essays by Louise Forsyth and Jane Moss that open section three, "The Theatrical Space of Exchange." Forsyth focuses on questions of identity in Marie Cardinal's work, while Moss looks at forty years of Quebec writers taking their plays to France and their reception there. The section closes with a short piece by French actor and director Michel Cochet on staging plays by Quebec playwright Larry Tremblay.

Section four, "Franco-European Immigrant Voices in Quebec," gathers essays by Mary Jean Green on Robin, Ireland on Parizeau and Kattan, and Rachel Killick on Swiss filmmaker Léa Pool. The turn to Switzerland is reinforced by an engaging interview with Werner Nold, a Swiss-born film editor who immigrated to Quebec and participated from the start in the evolution of the national film industry.

The book closes with an adventurous fifth section (my favorite) on “Contemporary Art Forms and Popular Culture.” Multi-media artist Bonnie Baxter sets a lively tone with a personal and thoroughly enjoyable memoir of her time with Jean Paul Riopelle, one of Quebec’s best known painters. François Morelli, a Quebec performance artist, then chronicles in words and images one set of installations/performances in France in 2004. Alisa Bélanger’s beautifully illustrated critical essay explores the artist’s book as a site of collaboration between Quebec poets and European artists, while Brian Thompson’s piece on the Quebec *chansonniers* and song connections between France and Quebec is appropriately complemented by a translation of singer Robert Charlebois’s “Ce soir je chante à l’Olympia.” The last word falls to Guy Spielmann, whose study of the transatlantic exchange of popular culture homes in on comic books (BD), television, and internet productions.

As the editors acknowledge, their volume “only begins to chart the richness of the field of Francophone transatlantic studies” (p. 22). The essays they have brought together will serve to whet the appetite, and it is to be hoped that further studies will follow, perhaps with a tighter focus and a more rigorous approach to the questions and problems they choose to pose.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Introduction:

Paula Ruth Gilbert and Miléna Santoro, “On ‘Passages,’ Passeurs and Passeuses in Paris and Montreal”

Patricia Smart, “Women’s History and Passages across the Atlantic
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Monique Proulx, “Time, Sir”

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Gail Scott, “My Paris (excerpt)”

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Louise H. Forsyth, "The Theatrical Space of Exchange"
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Jane Moss, "(Post)Colonial Performances: Nationalist and Post-nationalist
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Alisa Belanger, "A Quiet Evolution: Artist's Books in Quebec and France (Beausoleil, Dorion,
Desautels)"

Brian Thompson, "La Chanson québécoise: Not the Same Old (French) Song"

Robert Charlebois, "Ce soir je chante à l'Olympia/Tonight I'm Singing at the Olympia"

Guy Spielmann, "(Not so) Separate but Unequal: On the Circulation of Popular Culture Items
between France and Quebec"

NOTES

[1] Or flip forward to the epigraph to the second section on p. 65, which contains at least four conjugated verbs with subjects and a number of marginal examples where there is a simple conversational ellipsis of the subject.

[2] The notes to the editors' Introduction do little to allay any misgivings the reader might be feeling, as one of them cites *Wiktionary* as its only source for definitions of "passage" and another turns to *Wikipedia* for a definition of "phantasmogoria" in the historical sense of a kind of magic lantern show. I have nothing against consulting such sources when information is needed in a hurry, but it is annoying to find them quoted authoritatively in a scholarly work when a little legwork might have resulted, for example, in Max Milner's fine essay, *La Fantasmagorie: essai sur l'optique fantastique* (Paris: Presse Universitaire de France, 1982), being brought to the attention of readers, many of whom will be students. Similarly, the section on "*Flânerie* in Paris" (pp. 6-8), like the Introduction as a whole, misses an opportunity to complicate and interrogate critically both the metaphor in general as it is used here—the page as shop window, *flânerie* as reading of urban space, the editors as *flâneuses* in geographic, cultural and textual space (pp. 12,

6)—and the much debated notion of the *flâneuse* in particular, through reference to the extensive and lively critical literature that has seen the light of day since Janet Wolff's pioneering essay in the eighties.

[3] Régine Robin, *La Québécoise* (Montréal: Québec/Amérique, 1983), p. 176.

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