

**From the “Great Darkness” to the “Quiet Revolution”:
Michel Tremblay’s Reinterpretation of the Frontier between the Francophone East and the Anglophone West of Montreal in *Some Night My Prince Will Come***

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“Throughout my childhood I hadn’t even known that Anglos existed, that Montreal was divided in two, with the east end belonging to us Francophones and the west to the Anglos, that there was a conflict between the two solitudes, as we used to say, a conflict dating back to the Conquest in 1760 and that it was doubtful we’d ever see a way out of it” (26).

“For a long time I’d thought it strange that there were two Santas, one, Francophone at Dupuis Frères, the other, Anglophone, at Eaton’s. Every December my mother took me to meet both of them and I asked each one for the same presents, in French, suspecting that the second didn’t understand me” (27).

Introduction

From 1944 to 1959, the province of Québec lived in an oppressive atmosphere called “période de la grande noirceur.” In this period of cultural, social, and sexual darkness, the Catholic Church controlled the government of Maurice Duplessis and the lives of countless Canadiens Français (the term Québécois was not used yet). Families were encouraged to procreate. Birth control was strictly forbidden. As a result, families of 10, 15, and even 20 children were common. Of course, most of those families were extremely poor and destitute. The Catholic Church also controlled what people could read and what people could watch. Books and movies that did not promote Catholic values were put “à l’index,” an expression that means they were only available under the table. Artists suffered under this clerical regime that denied freedom of expression. In 1959 Maurice Duplessis died. His death marked the beginning of a new era (1960-1966) that would reject the control of the Catholic Church. After the great darkness, the quiet revolution (Révolution tranquille) would encourage sexual and cultural freedom.

This paper discusses how Michel Tremblay’s autobiographical novel, *Some Night My Prince Will Come* (1995), explores the transition period in Québec history between the Grande Noirceur and the Révolution tranquille through a reinterpretation of the cultural and geographical frontier between the Francophone East and the Anglophone West of Montreal. Saint-Laurent or “La Main” is the street that divides Montreal between East (traditionally seen as working-class and Francophone) and West (wealthy and Anglophone). Leaving his Plateau Mont-Royal home (which is located on the eastern

side of Saint-Laurent) for one night, Tremblay's first-person narrator, who is 18 in 1960, becomes a Montreal version of Voltaire's *Candide* whose innocence is about to be shattered by the anticipation of debaucheries West of Saint-Laurent, the Anglo "capital" of Montreal. The narrator's entrance into the adult world coincides with the birth of the most important period in Québec history. Using his narrator's quest to lose his virginity as a parallel to the anticipated burgeoning of Québec society, Tremblay exposes the situation of the *grande noirceur* and projects its disappearance through the deconstruction and reconfiguration of values and stereotypes on each side of the Saint-Laurent "frontier."

The novel follows the move from an archaic and narrow-minded French-Canadian society controlled by the Catholic Church to a Québec nation who opens itself to the world by embracing modernity through a rejection of the Church. Initially, the narrator seeks to find in the Anglophone West the alternative lifestyle (gay clubs, beatnik cafés) and general art exposure that cannot exist where he comes from. This was the case because the Francophone East embodied the *grande noirceur* "ideals" of censorship. The Catholic Church put art and sex à l'index. Even though the narrator is torn between his nationalist impulses that make him resent the fact there is a place in Montreal that would not understand when he spoke French ("My nationalism was due among other things to how hard it was—the minute I'd crossed the frontier of St. Lawrence Boulevard—to go to movie theatres in the west end, to be served in French in my own city" (27)) and the desire to explore this "forbidden" Montreal of culture and sex, his nationalism does not prevent him from crossing the frontier. It is more important to have freedom of expression in English than a censored one in French. However, the symbolic and geographical crossing of Saint-Laurent Street from East to West does not confirm the stereotypes expected by the narrator. Rather, it allows for a reconfiguration of the stereotypes usually associated with Francophones and Anglophones by introducing the narrator to a different reality that overlooks language issues and barriers.

Using as a critical approach Lacan's theory of the subject and the "Other," I will analyze how Tremblay's narrator recognizes some parts of his Francophone self through his meeting and identification with an Anglophone other. The narrator's anticipated fear of being linguistically alienated is replaced by the recognition of familiar *points de repères* once on Anglophone soil. In fact, the beatnik café, *El Cortijo*, and the gay clubs, *Quatre Coins du Monde* and *The Tropical*, are Francophone bastions in the West. Tremblay's narrator, however, feels like an outsider in those French settings. Ironically, his only familiar *point de repère* on the West side of Saint-Laurent is found through the Anglophone, Alan. Both share the same innocence through their status as "virgins." Moreover, the stereotypes usually associated with Anglophones as being wealthy and

ignorant of French language and cultures are shattered when Alan turns out to be a poor Anglo who can speak French. The rejection of the Catholic Church and the embrace of the Révolution tranquille materialize at the end of the novel when the narrator brings his Anglo conquest east of Saint-Laurent. The loss of his virginity on the east side of Saint-Laurent rather than on the west side symbolically marks the beginning of a new era: the birth of Québec as a nation through a cultural and sexual revolution.

Historical and Social Context of Tremblay's autobiographical novel

Michel Tremblay grew up in Montreal during the “grande noirceur” (he was born in 1942). His works often deal with the transition period between the “grande noirceur” and the “révolution tranquille.” His characters are caught between obedience to the rules dictated by the Catholic Church and the temptation to see beyond that restrictive world. We only have to think of Tremblay's famous play, *Les Belles Soeurs*, as a powerful example of this representation. The sisters in law are shocked by whatever clashes with their Catholic values but at the same time they resent those same values that force them to be mothers and wives. They resent and envy the younger generation for being able to transgress those values. In *Some Night My Prince Will Come*, Tremblay's first-person narrator symbolizes this younger generation who embraces the Révolution tranquille. He needs, however, to let go of his “grande noirceur” upbringing. His “grande noirceur” upbringing would encourage him to find the right girl, to get married, and to have children. It would also encourage him to study the masculine trade of typography and presswork (like his father and brother). Tremblay's narrator feels guilty. He wants to find the right guy. He also wants to become a writer (looked down upon as a more feminine trade). Tremblay transposes the transition between the two historical periods and its effects on his narrator to the geographical division of Montreal between east and west.

The Frontier between the Francophone East and the Anglophone West of Montreal

Saint-Laurent or "La Main" is one of the most famous and cosmopolitan streets of Montreal. It divides the city between east and west. For a long time, people perceived this frontier as separating two homogeneous worlds that sheltered linguistic, social, and cultural stereotypes: The mostly Francophone, working-class and Catholic east end, and the mostly Anglophone, wealthy, and Protestant west end. Although this is less the case today as there are more and more Francophones living in the west end and vice versa, the stereotypes still persist. Tremblay's novel, which takes place in 1960, reproduces the traditional perception of the frontier between the two worlds. His narrator, who lives with his parents on the east side of Saint-Laurent, views this part of Montreal as “home.” This

familiar turf is comfortable and reassuring. For instance, while on the west side, the narrator cannot help thinking of “a cake [that] was waiting for [him] at home, or a rice pudding.” He also sees himself “in front of the TV, cozy and warm, a big glass of milk in [his] hand” (70). Needless to say that the west side of Saint-Laurent represents anything but “comfort food” to the narrator. Rather, it comes across as mysteriously different. Almost as if the narrator is discovering a new country: “For me, St. Catherine Street west of Peel (which is west of Saint-Laurent) was an unfathomable mystery that I had not yet tried to solve” (26). In fact, Tremblay’s narrator is extremely self-conscious of this difference as he worries over his entrance into the gay clubs of the west end: “[I was] positive that the moment I set foot inside the Tropical or the Quatre Coins du Monde, both of them in the west end of town, which was still the preserve of Montreal Anglophones, dozens of heads would turn in my direction and grimaces of disgust would spread through the bar at the sight of the vulgar incarnation of the east end that I was” (19). This “vulgar incarnation of the east end” pushes the narrator to be concerned about his clothes and about the way he smells: “Did my clothes proclaim my plebeian roots? Did I still smell of the leftover pea soup I’d eaten so greedily before I left the house?” (28) We see from the narrator’s self-deprecating remarks that he is ashamed of some aspects of his east end identity. The reference to “pea soup,” “plebeian roots,” and “vulgar” evokes his French-Canadian working-class background. This inferiority complex surfaces when he imagines himself amongst the wealthy Anglophones. What is familiar and acceptable for the narrator when he is at home becomes strange and shameful on the west side of Saint-Laurent.

The east end image that is problematic to the narrator when he is visiting the western side of Saint-Laurent reflects a more general situation with French-Canadian identity. Before 1960 the term “Canadiens-Français,” or just “Canadiens,” was used to designate the people from Québec. The term, “Canadiens-Français,” evokes dependence and submission through the former status of the province of Québec as a French colony (Nouvelle-France). It also refers to a historical period when the British controlled and dominated Lower Canada (region that now includes the province of Québec.) Sylvie Chapat’s historical novel, *Isabelle’s Notebooks*, uses as a background the Patriots rebellions of 1837-1838, in which the “Canadiens” tried to resist the British assault. Her main protagonist’s reflection on the relationship between her people and the British brings up this feeling of being second-class citizens:

There is no shame, we believe, in having been defeated by England. Its long-standing rivalry with France leads us to see the British as an enemy that is every bit a match for us. Have they not many times triumphed over France and has not France beaten them many times as well? Are we not the heirs of a history in every

way as glorious as their own? Are we not their equals? (...) But in truth, they disdain us, for they see us as mere colonists and well below the French themselves in stature. (98-99)

This quotation brings up the main inferiority complex that “Canadiens Français” still continued to experience during the “période de la Grande Noirceur”: the feeling of being “bastardized” versions of the French from France because the British thought so.

I would like to argue that Tremblay’s east end symbolizes the low self-esteem of “Canadiens-Français” and their general status as “subjects” during the “Grande Noirceur.” The “dictatorship” of the Catholic Church, its intrusion into the personal lives of French-Canadians, pushes some individuals to seek a way out of this oppressive lifestyle. Tremblay’s narrator might be proud of certain aspects of his east end background, such as his French language, but the lack of cultural venues and clubs on the east side of Saint-Laurent encourages him to cross the frontier to find what he is craving for. His resentment towards Anglos because he feels that he needs to speak English when in the west is softened by the realization that this side of the city allows him to explore other aspects of his identity. In a strange way, the west side of Saint-Laurent symbolizes characteristics that are often associated with the “Révolution Tranquille,” the period that followed the “Grande Noirceur.” During the Révolution Tranquille, which started in 1960 with the end of Maurice Duplessis’s authoritative government and the beginning of Jean Lesage’s liberal reign, the province of Québec entered the modern world and started to challenge the influence of the Catholic Church. As a result, art no longer had to be filtered and cut to fit in with the values promoted by the Church. Taboos associated with sexuality were also lifted. After the Quiet Révolution the term “Québécois” replaced “Canadiens-Français.” This change of label erased the ambivalence of being split between two identities: The French from France and the British heritage of the rest of Canada. With the erasure of a reference to the subject position of a culture caught between two Empires, the notion of shame that went along the knowledge of being “bastardized” versions of the French disappears. The term “Québécois” evokes pride and independence.

The Frontier between Self and Other: Tremblay, Lacan and the Mirror-Stage

Lacan considers the self as something constituted in the Other. This aspect of Lacan’s theory helps to understand Tremblay’s representation of his narrator’s identity as well as the more general identity of the province of Québec. This is why I think the Saint-Laurent street “frontier” that divides the city of Montreal between East and West is more than a geographical and cultural division for Tremblay. It also represents the symbolical frontier

between his “Canadien-Français” background, which would stand for his narrator’s “Self,” and a newly acquired Québécois identity that would be more associated with his “Other.” The Other can be associated with the image outside oneself perceived and identified within the Mirror-stage. The Mirror-stage is a drama “whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation—and which manufactures for the subject . . . the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image . . . to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity” (4). While on the east side of Saint-Laurent, the narrator experiences insufficiency because he cannot live openly his homosexuality in an oppressive French-Canadian and Catholic context. He also experiences insufficiency because this same context discourages artistic innovation and creativity. This leads him to go through a succession of phantasies that includes “being” the character who sings along during the listening of his favourite operas in his family’s living room (“I’m even the conductor . . . or . . . a mute character who witnesses with sadistic joy the woes of others” (13)) or “being” Deborah Kerr who receives Burt Lancaster’s kisses (in his bedroom): “All that time, of course, Deborah Kerr was decked out in a lovely tire around her waist, her bathing suit didn’t have a top and she sported a Roman haircut as well as the beginning of a most becoming moustache . . .” (20). In both cases, the narrator’s “fragmented body-image” leads to “the armour of an alienating identity.” My own interpretation of the narrator’s situation is that the pressure to live up to the Catholic standards of his French-Canadian background is such that it pushes him (consciously or not) to look for another identity. This could explain why the Anglophone west lures him. His anticipation of an unfamiliar world where the different language and values would allow him to detach himself from “home” is, however, replaced by the discovery of a world closer to that same “home.”

When Tremblay’s narrator crosses the Saint-Laurent threshold and finds himself in the west, he expects to be destabilized by new experiences. Apart from illustrating the narrator’s progressive exposition to this new world, each visited place confronts the narrator with his own cultural assumptions about his Francophone identity not only in relation to Anglophones, but also in relation to fellow Francophones who stand out from the norm because of their adherence to subculture (see detailed description of the narrator’s nightly journey below). The narrator’s assumption that the west is exclusively Anglophone is challenged through his meeting with Alan. The overtly nationalist narrator, who is usually offended if he is not served in his own language, does not even hesitate to speak to Alan in English. When Alan replies in French to something the narrator also said in French, the latter is shocked: “I thought you only spoke in English. We’ve always talked English till now.” Alan: « Si t’yu m’avais pârlé français, j’t’ôrais répondu en français » (111) (if you had spoken French to me, I would have answered in

French). Another assumption that is shattered through the narrator's meeting with Alan is the idea of an Anglophone west that is exclusively wealthy. The narrator thinks that Alan's Anglophone background makes him rich and that he lives in Outremont or Westmount (wealthy neighbourhoods located on the west side of Saint-Laurent). He fantasizes that Alan would carry him away to his château in the west, but he turns out to be a poor Anglo from Pointe Saint-Charles (also on the west side). The narrator discovers that Anglophones can also share his working-class background and that the west is not exclusively wealthy. Another discovery that awaits our young protagonist on the western side of Saint-Laurent is his introduction to Québécois culture. His meeting with "chansonniers" (folk-singers), playwrights, and actors from his own cultural background anticipates the emergence of a new cultural voice. Tremblay himself participated in this cultural revolution through his *Belles Soeurs* (the first Québécois play that used local slang).

Tremblay uses the west side of Saint-Laurent to expose his narrator to a new cultural and social reality for Québec in the 1960s. Leaving his own familiar territory behind, the narrator crosses apprehensively the Saint-Laurent frontier expecting to meet the stereotypes of the "other." In this sense, he is representative of a French-Canadian mentality that is very closed off from the world and is very suspicious of people who do not come from a Catholic background. However, the narrator's realization that his east of Saint-Laurent background is an identity that is also constituted in the "Other" western side of Saint-Laurent, symbolizes a new Québécois way of thinking that opens itself more to the world.

Map of the narrator's nightly journey

Tremblay goes beyond the mere mentioning of places by specifying the exact location of each establishment his narrator happens to visit. This close attention to details emphasizes the narrator's progress towards adulthood as well as his gradual discovery of a "new" Québec.

1. Narrator's house: corner of Cartier and Mont-Royal. (**East** of Saint-Laurent)
2. Her Majesty's theatre where Pierrette Alarie sings Juliet in Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet*: Ste-Catherine Street West of Peel, Corner of Guy. (**West** of Saint-Laurent.) This is where the narrator meets the Anglophone, Alan.
3. El Cortijo (beatnik Francophone café): Clark Street just down from Sherbrooke. (**West** of Saint-Laurent.) This is where the narrator is introduced to the emergence of a distinctive Québec culture through the *chansonniers* or folk-singers of the

- 1960s. Although the narrator is thunderstruck by this revelation of a culture that no longer imitates the French from France, he has a hard time fitting in with the crowd: “Did I belong here with these modern bohemians fuelled by double espressos? Did I even want to carve out a place for myself?”(83)
4. Quatre Coins du Monde (Gay club): corner of Ste-Catherine and Stanley. (**West** of Saint-Laurent). This “[I]ong narrow space in the semi-basement of an old building” (103), marks the narrator’s first time into a gay club: “I felt myself being weighed, appraised, and quickly classified as "ordinary"” (104).
 5. The Tropical (Gay club/Drag performances): Peel Street north of Sainte-Catherine (**West** of Saint-Laurent). Building that didn’t look like much. Carmen, “the fake James Dean [who] wore girls boots with stiletto heels” (124) introduces the place to the narrator and his friends: “Gentlemen—pandemonium, the capital of hell!” (124) This is where the narrator sees transvestites for the first time. At first, he wonders, “what all those women were doing in a homosexual bar.” Then, “I didn’t know you could dress up like that in real life, just for fun on a Saturday night, to go dancing downtown! What a bizarre idea!” (128)
 6. Back to the El Cortijo (**West** of Saint-Laurent)
 7. Tourist Room on Carré Saint-Louis: Saint-Denis Street. This is where Tremblay’s narrator finally loses his virginity. (**East** of Saint-Laurent)
 8. The Sélect (24 hour diner): Northwest corner of Saint-Denis and Sainte-Catherine (**East** of Saint-Laurent) “Everybody who scores on Saturday night goes to the Sélect at noon on Sunday to show off their trophies” (172).
 9. Back to narrator’s house (East of Saint-Laurent)

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