

LITERARY INFLUENCES OF NEGRITUDE AND OF DECOLONIZATION ON QUEBEC DURING THE NINETEEN-SIXTIES

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Abstract

This essay outlines the foreign influences on several of Quebec's most important writers and magazines during the 1960s. The literary and intellectual movement in Quebec during this decade saw significant changes as it helped shape a more progressive and modern Quebec. The overall global political climate of this time is outlined, but the essay particularly draws upon influences on Quebec by two major intellectual and social movements of this era: negritude and decolonization. Selected works of Michèle Lalonde, Paul Chamberland, and Gaston Miron are discussed as well as contextual evidence that restates the important literary influences of these movements. Linguistic alienation and the concept of a colonized state made these movements of cultural empowerment particularly accessible to Quebec as it searched for a national pride and identity. This essay focuses primarily on the influences of the negritude and decolonization movements and excludes influences on Quebec from other artistic and political movements and non-Francophone countries such as England and the United States. The essay also focuses on literature and excluded influences on visual and musical art in Quebec.

Résumé

Cet essai expose les influences étrangères exercées sur des écrivains et magazines québécois parmi les plus importants au cours des années 1960. Le courant littéraire et intellectuel québécois de cette décennie fut un acteur de changements importants, participant à la création d'un Québec plus progressif et plus moderne. L'essai offre un bref survol du climat politique global de cette période, mais se concentre sur l'influence exercée sur le Québec par deux courants intellectuels et sociaux majeurs de cette époque : la négritude et la décolonisation. Des œuvres choisies de Michèle Lalonde, Paul Chamberland et Gaston Miron y sont discutées ainsi que les preuves contextuelles qui réaffirment les influences littéraires importantes de ces courants. L'aliénation linguistique et le concept d'un état colonisé ont donné accès à ces courants d'appropriation culturelle au Québec pendant que ce dernier était à la recherche

d'une fierté et d'une identité nationales. Cet essai se penche principalement sur les influences des courants de négritude et de décolonisation. Il exclut les influences d'autres courants artistiques et politiques sur le Québec ainsi que celles des pays non francophones comme l'Angleterre et les États-Unis. Il traite de littérature et exclut les influences de ces courants sur les arts visuels et la musique au Québec.

Introduction

The nineteen-sixties were one of the most important and dynamic decades in the history of Quebec; it was, in short, a time of significant political and social change. Moreover, it encouraged a change in the identity of Quebec: French-Canadians became *Québécois*. As Quebec's intellectual movement orchestrated these changes, however, many of its influences came not from within the province itself but from abroad. The literary and artistic trends of Quebec at this time parallel those of negritude, while in a political and social sense, those of decolonization. Literary ideas of negritude influenced the works of Paul Chamberland and Gaston Miron and those published at *l'Hexagone*, while decolonization influenced writers such as André Major, Pierre Vallières, and the articles of *Parti pris* and *Le Devoir*. Negritude and decolonization therefore played vital roles in the literary and political settings of Quebec as it moved forward with the Quiet Revolution. Testimonies of exile, alienation, and the search for a collective identity are analogous among these movements. These influences are evident as Quebec searched for a national identity by promoting domestic literary works that led the society to embrace and ultimately adopt a Quebecois identity.

International political climate leading up to the 1960s

The end of the Second World War gave rise to an era of introspection and reform. The world would see the emergence of many new sovereign nation-states and consequently, many different cultures and respective political, economic, and social movements. The nations that would arise during this time would recount their histories of cultural and linguistic alienation as colonized societies, which would be read by the rest of the world.

The political climate of the world during the 1960s allowed Quebec to be deeply influenced by many revolutionary ideas and international inspirations. For example, the Cuban Revolution replaced its government with a revolutionary socialist state in 1959, showing that a small sum of resistance could lead to the displacement of social and

political oppression (Mills, 88–96). Cuban influence was facilitated by its strongly maintained, yet, politically delicate trade relations with Quebec throughout the 1960s (Kirk, 102–106). Soon after the Cuban Revolution, came the decolonization of the Democratic Republic of the Congo in June 1960 and the Algerian Revolution concluding in March 1962 with the mass exodus of French *pieds-noirs* and *harkis*. Furthermore, the writings of authors such as Frantz Fanon, Albert Camus, and Albert Memmi helped to diffuse the revolutionary political ideas of the third world to the Western first world countries.

These revolutionary post-war years also saw the emergence of the negritude and decolonization movements. Negritude was an artistic and literary movement in African and Antillean countries during the 1940s and 50s. For Aimé Césaire, one of the principal theorists of negritude, this was the rejection of the assimilation of African Francophone and Antillean cultures into Western culture. The word *négritude* was first used in 1936 by Léopold Senghor, another theorist of negritude, although the term was coined by Césaire. The French word *négritude* literally translates to “blackness” used in an artistic and culturally context. According to Césaire, negritude’s first traceable steps were in Haiti during the slave rebellion in 1791, although Haiti’s overall contribution to the negritude movement was minimal. Nonetheless, the negritude movement started in the 1930s, when Césaire, Senghor and Léon Damas met while studying in Paris (Assemblée Nationale). While Césaire claimed that the concept of negritude was not exclusive to certain ethnicities, the movement was predominantly in African and Caribbean countries (Césaire, 80). Negritude aimed to preserve the distinct literary identity for alienated African cultures; it promoted original arts and writing in order to change the social and cultural connotation of alienation and imitation (Dahouda). For this reason, intellectuals in Quebec felt a sense of solidarity with writers of negritude as both cultures sought to define and defend their own collective identities. This is reaffirmed with André Laurendeau’s publication of *La théorie du roi nègre*.

At the same time, across the world, the political influence of decolonization was growing in magnitude. Much like negritude, decolonization sought to preserve the cultures of colonized countries. However, philosophies of decolonization branched out to include political and economic systems unlike negritude, which remained strictly cultural and artistic in its goals. The economic ideology of Marxism that often followed decolonization movements also influenced many writers, particularly those in Quebec who made up “la revue *Parti pris* (Major, 31).” Furthermore, at the time, there were many struggles around the world against colonial powers. For example,

the Algerian Revolution, in which the well-known Martiniquais writer of decolonization, Frantz Fanon, played a large part, brought forth a new time for decolonization. Fanon, an influential writer by this time and a former student of Aimé Césaire, discussed the psychological complications of colonized societies and justified the utilization of violence in order to accomplish independence in his 1961 book, *Les Damnés de la Terre*.¹ This book would later deeply influence many Quebecois writers during the 1960s not only with the debate over the use of violence, but with psychological discourse of Quebec's alienation.

Quebecois Writers:

The Influence of Negritude and Decolonization

Linguistic and cultural alienation are defining themes that occupy and connect decolonization, negritude, and Quebecois literature. It is perhaps for this reason that the literary themes of negritude and decolonization were so prevalent in the Quebec during the 1960s. During such a revolutionary period punctuated by decolonization, Quebec's intellectuals contemplated the meaning of their own struggle against forced assimilation and would use these ideas as reinforcement.

Parti pris

One of the principal ways the ideology of decolonization was able to penetrate Quebec was through *Parti pris*, a political magazine founded in Montréal in 1963 by André Major, Paul Chamberland, and several other writers. The magazine was often referred to as the intellectual "front" in Quebec and the founders were extremely influenced by Marxist ideas associated with African decolonization struggles. Many of these writers also felt that Quebec as a whole was influenced by these ideas and strove for political reform in their favor. In his book *Parti pris: idéologies et littérature*, Robert Major writes: "Tout en se sentant très lié à l'évolution idéologique du Québec, *Parti pris*, dès le départ, s'est situé dans l'axe des trois courants idéologiques les plus importants de son temps: le marxisme, le socialisme décolonisateur et l'existentialisme sartrien (Major, 31)."² Major elaborates on the influences on *Parti pris* with:

C'est par Fanon que Major vient à *Parti pris*; c'est par Sartre que Chamberland en vient à s'intéresser au quotidien québécois; c'est à travers Memmi que les *partipristes* se voient objectivement pour la première fois comme êtres colonisés...c'est dans la voie du marxisme que *Parti pris* creusera toujours davantage (Major, 38-39).³

Here, Major references Albert Memmi, who achieved much recognition in Quebec, especially after his 1972 publication of "Les

Canadiens-français sont-ils des colonisés?”⁴ In 1962, André Major wrote “Les Damnés de la terre et nous” in *La Revue socialiste* with the subtitle “la bible de la décolonisation telle que vue par un représentant de la nouvelle jeunesse indépendantiste et socialiste du Québec.” While referencing Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la Terre*, Major explains that he holds Fanon’s ideas of decolonization and attempts “selon la dialecte la plus rigoureuse, de montrer que la situation qui les a suscitées est semblable en plusieurs points à la nôtre (Major, 34–39).”⁵

Pierre Vallières

Pierre Vallières was another important intellectual associated with *Parti pris*. In 1968, the magazine published Vallières’ autobiography titled *Nègres blancs d’Amérique*.⁶ The title expressed the alienation of Quebec, which had become a collective feeling among Quebecois intellectuals during the 1960s. This expression emphasized the oppression and alienation of Quebecois language and identity. *Nègres blancs d’Amérique* was written by Vallières in a Manhattan prison after his arrest for association with the death of Jean Corbo, a Front de libération du Québec (FLQ) member attempting to deliver a bomb. The book illustrates Vallières’ ideological composition of Marxism, third-world decolonization, and struggle against alienation. In his autobiography, Vallières expresses his unrest sparked by the Algerian war during his stay in France as well as his resentment toward Quebec’s association and categorization in U.S.-Canada relations. He shows his influences when he says “As for me, a Quebecois, proletarian, white nigger of America, one of the ‘wretched of the earth,’ to take responsibility for our history was, inevitably, to begin by denouncing and exposing the inhuman conditions of our existence...” Here he not only reaffirms the comparison of Quebecois to people of African ancestry, but he quotes *Les Damnés de la Terre*. Vallières describes his extreme Marxist bias with “When I discovered Marxism, I felt as if I had found what I had always been seeking...a truth, their truth...the only thing that is really worth living for—the overthrow of capitalism, and the building of egalitarian social structures.” He continues:

As I became reconciled with the world and with ‘other people,’ I became reconciled with the Quebecois French nation, not the one that for centuries had been ‘blessed’ with poverty, ignorance, and religion, but the one that is at last beginning to say ‘no’ to exploitation...(Vallières, 198–202).

Vallières expresses his use of Marxism as a vehicle of denunciation of the stifling religious morals imposed on the French-Canadians during the “Great Darkness” and before.

In addition to *Parti pris*, negritude and decolonization inspired major figures in Quebec's literary and intellectual movement. Negritude influenced the works of many Quebecois writers in the 1960s, specifically those of Gaston Miron, Paul Chamberland, and Michèle Lalonde. These Quebecois authors contributed greatly to social and political *engagement* of Quebecois literature. Their participation in writing groups and magazines helped to make up the Quebecois *littérature engagée*, with the purpose of seeking political reform through writing.

Gaston Miron

Gaston Miron was another renowned Quebecois writer profoundly influenced by decolonization and negritude. Miron played an important political role in Quebec during the 1960s and the Quiet Revolution, becoming politically involved at a young age. Throughout his career, he campaigned for socialism and the independence of Quebec. Miron was especially influenced by the writings of Albert Memmi and Jacques Berques about alienation on a national level. Miron took these ideas and developed a more precise elaboration in the context of Quebec: the alienation of the Quebecois language. Miron is quoted in Pierre Nepveu's biography *Gaston Miron : la vie d'un homme* as saying that although the Quebecois do not share the same situation with the African people, they share a common condition. There he speaks of their common condition of alienation. Miron maintains this idea of a shared condition throughout many of his works. He would express this idea in his classic *L'Homme rapaillé*, known as one of the most important works in the history of Quebecois literature (Biron 380).

In "Monologues de l'aliénation délirante," Miron says "or je suis dans la ville opulente, la grande St. Catherine Street galope et claque... moi je gis, muré dans la boîte crânienne dépoétisé dans ma langue et mon appartenance déphasé et décentré dans ma coïncidence."⁷ Here, he references "St. Catherine Street" in English, illustrating how "la rue Sainte-Catherine" is commonly referred to. This shows the pressure exerted on Francophones by the English language in one of the most important cities in Quebec, Montréal. He also describes how he is limited in his own language and the language of Quebec. He continues with "Je m'identifie depuis ma condition d'humilié, je le jure sur l'obscur respiration commune, je veux que les hommes sachent que nous savons,"⁸ speaking about the humiliating condition of his alienated language. Then he continues with "salut de même humanité des hommes lointains, malgré vous malgré nous je m'entête à exister, salut à la saumure d'homme."⁹ Here, Miron refers to the struggle against alienation and the solidarity among distant decolonized Francophone societies in Africa and abroad. The solidarity among

the alienated societies allows them to continue the resistance against assimilation and inspires them to move forward. Later, in “Dans la résistance à l’amère décomposition viscérale et ethnique de la mort des peuples drainés” Miron means to say that the culture and language of Quebec are being alienated by the pressure of Anglophones. Miron offers a distinction among the colonized situations with “à partir de la blanche agonie de père en fils à la consigne de la chair et des âmes (Miron, 58–60).” With “blanche agonie,”¹⁰ Miron underlines the ethnic and sociological distinction between the black African and white Québécois situations. Although their causes are similar in their condition, they differ in their socio-economic and political situations.

The alienation of Francophones that Miron talks about in “Les années de dérélition” is also consistent with the theme of negritude literature. He writes: “perdu la mémoire à force de misère et d’usure... perdu la dignité à force de devoir me rabaisser et le respect de moi-même à force de dérision (Miron, 81–82).”¹¹

Gaston Miron was also poetically inspired by the works of Césaire and negritude. One can deduce Césaire’s influences on Miron simply by his citations. For example, in 1956, Miron confesses to Claude Haeffely:

Je suis dans l’échec par-dessus la tête...Certaines œuvres que j’ai lues depuis un an, comme celle de Césaire par exemple, m’écrasent par l’effarante parenté que je ressens à leur endroit...J’ai peur de ne plus savoir qui je suis, que mon pouls ne se distingue plus du leur.¹²

Miron later stated in 1958: “Toute ma poésie est une poésie de coïncidences. Aimé Césaire, par exemple, a rendu bon à rien tout ce que je puis écrire (Selao).”¹³

Paul Chamberland

Paul Chamberland is an author also very attached to the “négritude blanche”¹⁴ and writers of decolonization. In 1965, Chamberland said in *Parti pris* that “son projet était emprunté au poète martiniquais: J’accomplis ce que Césaire appelle un ‘retour au pays natal’ (Selao).”¹⁵ As Chamberland references Césaire’s renowned *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*, he references the author’s poetic nationalism toward his African culture and identity. Inspired by this awareness and embrace of Césaire’s identity and heritage, Chamberland feels solidarity in his cultural journey to collective identification. Chamberland is also quoted as having said “je suis cubain yankee non je suis nègre je lave les planchers dans un bordel du Texas (Biron, 371).”¹⁶ Moreover, one sees Césaire’s influences on Chamberland since his first works with *Terre Québec*. In fact, Chamberland dedicated one of his first poems to

Césaire entitled “Méridien de la colère” as he said Césaire had aided him to enter “a poetic state of mind (Selao).”

Michèle Lalonde

In Michèle Lalonde’s extremely renowned 1968 “Speak White,” one sees a plethora of comparisons between Quebecois alienation and the alienation of other Francophone countries that were a part of the decolonization and negritude movements. “Speak white and loud qu’on vous entende de Saint-Henri à Saint-Domingue.” Here she speaks of the alienation of the Francophones in the French colony of Saint-Domingue. Although her poem was inspired by the alienation of Quebecois Francophones, she eludes to the solidarity felt among international societies alienated by powerful Anglophone countries such as Britain and the United States. She writes “... et comme le sang se mêle à la poussière des rues d’Alger ou de Little Rock,” mentioning the formerly-colonized Algerian capital, Algiers, and Little Rock, the location of the historical ‘Little Rock Nine’ and implementation of desegregation in the United States. She speaks of linguistic alienation again when she says “parlez un français pur et atrocement blanc comme au Viêt-Nam au Congo”. She continues saying “nous savons que la liberté est un mot noir comme la misère est nègre...nous savons que nous ne sommes pas seuls (Poulin-Mignault, 195–197).” Here, as she emphasizes the alienation suffered by other Francophone countries, she illustrates the common struggle against assimilation of decolonizing and negritude societies and that of Quebec.

In *Terre des Hommes*, Lalonde invokes imagery similar to that of negritude and decolonization literature. She writes “saison sèche de stuc de palmes de terre cuite, le soleil bat la peau tendue de l’afrique, tam-tam de la colère de l’espoir...”¹⁷ Later she says “...l’amérique la belle blanche se pave d’empocher la pleine lune comme une pièce de monnaie, tout ce qui brille est argent, et le nègre compte pour un sou noir (Lalonde, 23–27).”¹⁸ Here she’s speaking about the greed and economic domination in Quebec by English Canada and the United States. As she uses imagery associated with negritude poetry, she describes the common economic and cultural struggles that are maintained in decolonizing societies and literature.

Lalonde later used the concept and imagery of decolonization in a different way in her 1979 *Défense et illustration de la langue québécoise*. In “Le Jupon du système: Réflexion sur les rapports entre homes et femmes dans la situation coloniale québécoise,” Lalonde compares the relation between men and women and a colonized society. Referring to Albert Memmi’s *Portrait du colonisé, précédé du portrait du colonisateur*, she says:

'Toute colonisation est relative. Toute colonisation est spécifique' a dit Albert Memmi. Cela s'applique on ne peut mieux à notre sujet, et fait venir certaines interrogations à l'esprit : on a souvent comparé la sujétion de la femme par l'homme à une colonisation...Qu'advient-il donc de cette analogie quand on essaie de l'appliquer à la condition féminine au sein d'une société réellement colonisée ou globalement infériorisée?...Y a-t-il dans ce cas particulier, un premier degré et un second degré de colonisation féminine?¹⁹ (Lalonde, 201)

This statement illustrates Lalonde's unique usage of colonization when talking about Quebec. Not only does she clearly state her consideration of Quebec as a colonized society, but she uses the relationship of colonization to address societal questions regarding feminism.

Conclusion

Among many influences in Quebec during the 1960s, one recognizes the reoccurring themes of negritude and decolonization in the literature of Gaston Miron, Paul Chamberland, and Michèle Lalonde. With countless references within the works of these classic writers, the immense influence of these movements on Quebec is undeniable. The documented statements of these writers reinforce this idea. Quebec's self-association with these movements was possible because the nature or "condition" of Quebec's struggle paralleled that of African and decolonized societies. Furthermore, negritude and decolonization philosophies also helped politically and economically orient Quebecois intellectuals through *Parti pris* and vital works of Pierre Vallières and André Major. Indeed, while Quebecois have a long history of struggle against assimilation, decolonization and negritude literature were instrumental in inspiring Quebec's struggle in the globalizing world of the 1960s.

ENDNOTES

- 1 *The Wretched of the Earth* (translation by Richard Philcox).
- 2 "While feeling closely tied to the ideological evolution of Quebec, *Parti pris*, from the start, was situated in the axis of the three most important ideological movements of the time: Marxism, Social Decolonization, and Sartrean Existentialism" (author's translation).
- 3 It's because of Fanon that Major came to *Parti pris*, it's because of Sartre that Chamberland came to be interested in Quebec's daily newspaper, and it's through [Albert] Memmi that the *partipristes* objectively saw themselves for the first time as colonized beings..." (author's translation).

- 4 "French-Canadians are they colonized?" (author's translation).
- 5 "According to the most rigorous dialect, to show that the situation that provoked them is similar, in several aspects, to ours" (author's translation).
- 6 White Niggers of America (translation by Joan Pinkham).
- 7 "I'm in the opulent city, the great Saint Catherine Street gallops and cracks...me, I lie, closed off in my cranium, depoetized in my language, out of sync with my membership and off-centered in my coincidence" (author's translation).
- 8 "I identify with my humiliated condition; I swear on the obscure common breath, I only want the men to know what we know" (author's translation).
- 9 "Salvation from the same humanity of distant men, despite you, despite us, I persist to exist, salvation to the brine of man" (author's translation).
- 10 "White agony" (author's translation).
- 11 "Lost my memory by force of misery and wear...lost my dignity by force of putting me down and self-respect by force of ridicule" (author's translation).
- 12 "I'm in failure above my head...certain works that I've read this year, like that of Aimé Césaire for example, crush me by the frightening kinship that I feel toward them...I fear that I know longer know who I am, that my pulse is no longer distinguishable from theirs" (author's translation).
- 13 "All my poetry is poetry of coincidence. Aimé Césaire for example, makes good for nothing everything that I can write" (author's translation).
- 14 White negritude.
- 15 His intension was borrowed from the Martiniquais poet:
"I've accomplished what Aimé Césaire calls 'a return to my native country'" (author's translation).
- 16 "I'm a Cuban Yankee no, I'm a Negro, and I wash the floors of a brothel in Texas" (author's translation).
- 17 "The dry season of palm clay stucco, the sun beats the taut skin of Africa, drum of the anger of hope" (author's translation).
- 18 "America the beautiful white aims to pocket the full moon like a coin, everything that shines is money, and the Negro is worth a black penny" (author's translation).
- 19 "'All colonization is relative. All colonization is specific' said Albert Memmi. That couldn't apply more to us, and brings some questions to mind: we often compare the subjugation of the women by the man to a colonization...What come of this analogy when we try to apply it to the feminine condition in the middle of a truly colonized

and globally inferior society?...Are there in this particular case, a first degree or second degree of feminine colonization?" (author's translation).

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