Souveraines de corps frontaliers:  
Narrating Quebec’s Insurgent Girlhood

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation reconstructs a narrative trajectory of French-Canadian girlhood in the twentieth-century through literature and film, revealing the French-Canadian girl as temporary sovereign of the contested borderland of her own body. In the works studied in this project, the girl-body emerges as a corps frontalier, a gendered borderland between childhood and womanhood, a space of no-longer/not-yet-ness that disrupts stable, traditional structures of identity and subjectivity. The girl herself, inhabitant of that body, is a troublesome subject-in-process, a figure marked by ambivalence, uncertainty, fluidity, and potentiality. She resists categorization as either child or woman, seeking instead to claim sovereignty over the territory of her body and her destiny as a girl. In many ways, she is like French-Canadian society, perpetually and actively en devenir, always working to define herself. Life in that unstable zone is at once exhilarating and exhausting, and appears untenable – but must this be the case? Or can a new conception of girlhood align with new conceptions of Québécois(e) nationality to make it possible for both to retain the active potentiality of being mineur(e)?

In order to better understand the relationship between feminine adolescence and French-Canadian identity, this project traces the evolution of girlhood as narrated in a set of literary and cinematic works. Chapter 1, a
reading of Louis Hémon’s *Maria Chapdelaine* (1913) and Gabrielle Roy’s *Bonheur d’occasion* (1945), addresses the conflict between traditional notions of feminine destiny in French-Canadian culture and the more subversive individual desires of the girls expected to follow those notions, revealing the heavy expectation of almost literal self-effacement imposed upon girls as French-Canadian society prioritizes *survivance*. The second chapter brings together Anne Claire Poirier’s film *La fin des étés* (1964) and Anne Hébert’s novel *Kamouraska* (1970) to engage with the question of trauma involved in the erasure of the girlhood self, bringing in Derrida’s hauntology to explore the spectralization of the girl which results from her commodification in becoming a woman within traditional French-Canadian society. Chapter 3 studies the abjection of the mother in Quiet-Revolution girlhood as a violent, tragic process mirroring Quebec’s exodus from the Catholic Church along the same timeline, as expressed in Gabrielle Roy’s *La Route d’Altamont* (1966) and France Théoret’s *Une Belle Education* (2006). Finally, Chapter 4, a study of Anne Claire Poirier’s film *Tu as crié Let Me Go* (1997) and Nelly Arcan’s novel *Putain* (2001), reveals a sense of lostness, stagnation, or disillusionment which overshadowed feminine adolescence (and French-Canadian society) in the latter decades of the twentieth century.

As a whole, this project reveals both the tension and possibility inherent in girlhood as an identitary borderland within the in-between identitary space of French Canadian culture. While both the Quebec girl and
the Quebec nation seem to desire majority, or adult subjectivity, neither is willing to surrender her sovereignty or self-determination in order to attain it. If the French-Canadian girl is to become a “woman,” or if Quebec is to become a “nation,” it must be on their own terms.
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INTRODUCTION

Quebec’s insurgent girlhood

"The twentieth century was dominated, in cultural theory and popular culture, by a discourse on the Subject in crisis. Adolescence and femininity have been crucial instances of this popular and theoretical focus. The conjunction of these discourses on self and social formation in the figure of the girl has enabled the girl to figure as an image of change, crisis, and personal and cultural tensions."

(Catherine Driscoll, Girls, 305)

"What is perhaps unusual in Quebec is the continually unresolved nature of the identitary project itself ... As many Quebec writers have been heard to lament, ... the identity of the people of Quebec has been a struggle to survive, a continual process of becoming."

(Mary Jean Green, Women and Narrative Identity, 7)

"Pour la jeune fille, ... il y a divorce entre sa condition proprement humaine et sa vocation féminine. Et c'est pourquoi l'adolescence est pour la femme un moment si difficile et si décisif. Jusqu'alors elle était un individu autonome : il lui faut renoncer à sa souveraineté."

(Beauvoir, Le Deuxième Sexe II, 99)

This project began with a surprising realization: Girlhood and Quebec (as an identitary space) have a great deal in common, but scholarship to date has yet to address these commonalities. Girlhood studies, Quebec studies, and even Quebec women’s studies are thriving areas of research, but girlhood studies has yet to be applied to Quebec cultural production as a theoretical angle of inquiry, just as Quebec studies remains untapped as a potential source of new perspectives on the study of feminine adolescence. When I realized this, it piqued my curiosity, so I started digging. Little did I realize the extent of what I would find in the course of
my research. This dissertation draws girlhood studies and Quebec studies together to unveil what I consider a uniquely compelling parallel identitary trajectory: a dual quest for sovereignty, survivance, and subjectivity au féminin. The evolution of girlhood within Quebec, especially in this project’s temporal context of the twentieth century, closely resembles Quebec's struggle against its identity as a province (“conquered territory”) against national subalternity. Much scholarship has been devoted to the transformation of womanhood in Quebec over the past century, but far fewer scholars have addressed the situation of the girl in relation to these changes. As the presumed heiress of feminine identity within the framework of French-Canadian identity, how does the twentieth-century Quebec girl cope with the dramatic revolutions within both? If her supposed goal is to become a French-Canadian woman, what happens when the very definition of her identitary destination is in question? Delving into these questions proved to me that girlhood in Quebec, girlhood and Quebec, echo and reflect one another again and again across the pages and screens of Quebec’s narrative production in powerful ways.

My extensive previous research on Joan of Arc is what first brought me to girlhood studies within a Francophone identitary context. Joan’s unique trajectory helped me see the unique potential of the girl if she stepped outside of her expected role as one-becoming-a-woman. Her audacity in claiming the right to agency, even to sovereignty under her own authority (answerable only to God), truly rocked the world. More importantly, much of the power she wielded stemmed from her identity as a girl – a young, unmarried virgin, her body at once an unclaimed
territory and an icon of innocence, virtue, and divine right. This body, dressed in male clothing, was the vehicle for a truly radical national transformation. Historians may disagree over the true extent of Joan’s impact on the outcome of the Hundred Years’ War, but her significance as a national icon cannot be overstated, even six hundred years after she was burned at the stake. Joan’s story clearly demonstrates the power of the girl as an iconic figure and ideological vehicle in the construction of a coherent national identity. The revolutionary force of Joan’s girl-body captained by herself as individual sovereign (albeit under the authority of God and, perhaps, the King of France) catalyzed the birth of France itself as a coherent nation.

This image of a girl making powerful use of her own girlhood undoubtedly haunts this dissertation. However, I consider the true starting point of this particular project to be Maria Chapdelaine – the character and the eponymous novel. Louis Hémon’s surprisingly subversive construction of a naïve French-Canadian girl caught between almost innate submission to fate and truly innate, inconsolable dreaming of something more caught my attention immediately, and has stuck with me ever since. The irresolvable puzzle of her “choice” to follow a traditional path, which meant submitting to being “buried alive” on many levels as a would-be autonomous subject, sets the stage for the insurgency I trace in Quebec girlhood over the course of the twentieth century, as legible through its cultural production.

This project is rooted in the idea that girlhood, Quebec nationhood, and the evolution of girlhood within the national and cultural framework of French-
Canadian identity share a set of common features. At the heart of each of these three identititary trajectories is the pursuit of three goals: sovereignty, *survivance*, and subjectivity. Of these three, the first two are Quebec “buzzwords,” loaded with deep local significance. Sovereignty, meaning simply the supreme authority to govern oneself, has been a chronic longing of the French-Canadian nation throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and much of the twentieth centuries, ever since the French army’s capitulation to the English in 1763. *Survivance*, the fierce protection, preservation, and propagation of culture (in this case, French-Canadian culture) among a subaltern, colonized people, has for centuries been the French-Canadian way of life under Anglophone domination. To this day, it remains present in contemporary Quebec’s ardent defense of the French language, for example, but continues to evolve due to the inevitabilities of globalization. The continuing artificiality of the Quebec national identitary project, authentic and coherent at the outset, always recognizable in its features, but also propped up and protected through striking systems of protectionism, reveals a continuing insecurity within the nation. This insecurity is curiously paralleled by an indecision made manifest, for example, in the failure of the sovereignty referenda of 1980 and 1995. On the whole, twentieth-century Quebec’s efforts to establish a coherent national “subjectivity” bears many of the features of a prolonged collective adolescence. Moreover, as the French-Canadian community comes historically from a politically and economically subaltern position within Canada and North America, one might easily qualify that collective adolescence as *feminine*. 
On an individual level, the French-Canadian girl of the twentieth century is on a similar quest for sovereignty, *survivance*, and subjectivity. As my study will demonstrate, girlhood in this context changes due to an awakening to the injustice of the systematic erasure of generations of girls’ sovereign selfhood as a prerequisite to the inscription of acceptable adult *French-Canadian* femininity upon the girl-body as it becomes the body of a woman. All of the narrative works I include share a theme of resistance against outside forces – be it patriarchal society, national *survivance*, or the specter of Anglophone domination - that oppose the girl's achievement of these three goals. Like the twentieth-century girl, twentieth-century Quebec is struggling against a supposedly predetermined subaltern (read: feminine) position as a province, a conquered territory, economically dominated from without by Anglophone Canada and socially controlled from within by the Catholic Church and conservative, preservationist cultural ideals. It must surrender its sovereignty in order to continue to exist, but as a result, it is haunted by its former autonomous selfhood as the colonizing outpost of a sovereign nation, much like the girl as she is obliged to become a woman. Like Quiet-Revolution Quebec, the mid-twentieth century Quebec girl gradually moves from accepting this subalternity to questioning, resisting, and even escaping it on many levels. Perhaps most interestingly, both Quebec and its girls also share a sense of disorientation and identity crisis in the latter decades of the century. Across the board, the broad strokes of these evolving entities (Quebec and the Quebec girl) follow a strikingly similar trajectory over the course of the twentieth century.
In the sociocultural and political climate of 2017, when the progressive movements across the Western world seem to be meeting strong waves of opposition from conservative, populist, protectionist discourses, what it means to be(come) feminine continues to be ever more up for debate. As its meaning, purpose, and parameters continue to evolve, girlhood becomes ever more important to our collective understanding of the world. In such a context, it is particularly à propos to undertake a study of girlhood evolving within a culture that has historically a) leaned particularly on the girl as a pillar of its identitary framework; and b) fought to dissociate itself from the unwanted inscription of femininity onto its national body. Tracing Quebec's insurgent girlhood – both national and individual – illuminates both how the girl and her choices can catalyze social change, and conversely, how social change can be charted across the girl-body expressed through narrative. The interplay between the two is, I believe, revelatory of similar phenomena in other cultures.

Girlhood has also long been a point of contention in Western societies. The parameters set for "good" girlhood have been slow to evolve, just as the stakes attached to successful or unsuccessful performance or completion of the process of girlhood remain remarkably high. More so than the figure of the boy, the figure of the girl, especially the idealized image of the virginal, nubile, marriageable girl, has been held aloft for centuries as an idol or icon of a given society's dreams for its future – hopes for legitimacy, fertility, righteousness, and cultural survivance have long been embodied by the girl.
When I speak of “the girl” in this project, I am thinking primarily of definitions of girlhood in a Western and European context, as put forth by thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir and Catherine Driscoll. Driscoll describes the girl as a figure who “acts across a space between child and woman, both already ambivalent positions in relation to dominant models of subjectivity” (Girls 29). In the view of many scholars, including myself, girlhood becomes visible as a tense transitional space, a process, a fluid state through which an adolescent female must pass before she attains adult femininity.

Staking out the beginning and end points of girlhood is difficult, because individual girls living in different contexts can have vastly different experiences. It is more useful to consider girlhood as a set of attributes, chiefly: youth, an identity in flux, childlike dreams meeting adult-like ambitions, awakening sexuality or romantic desire, curiosity, and questioning of roles and expectations. Femaleness is key as girlhood’s overarching feature because it situates the girl as subaltern and imbues her with representative value. Ultimately, it is the girl’s undecided status – will she conform, or will she deviate? – that sets her apart. The potentiality that defines her reveals the shakiness of the structures in which her identity takes shape. “The girl marks the ambivalence of boundaries around crucial territories such as the State, the Mother, and the Law” (Girls 29); her fluid, incomplete identity challenges the fixity of these institutions and figures by revealing the interstitial space surrounding them, in which new forms of identity are – theoretically – possible. The
threatening instability and ambiguity of the girl has, historically, often led to efforts to shape individual girls into the Right Kind of Girl.

What do I mean by Right Kind of Girl? Of course, this varies to some extent from culture to culture, and has evolved over time. However, many scholars agree that such a girl is generally seen to have a set of features, and this across many contexts: she is virtuous, chaste, loyal to her family, and in the bloom of her youth (physically healthy, attractive, and relatively young); she is trained in obedience and in the tenets of her culture, be they religious or social; and she is prepared to live in submission to male authority, be it that of her father or of her husband. She is an individual uniting the uncomplicated inner world of a child with the sexual attractiveness and procreative potential of a woman – a strange, hybrid creature, self-contradictory and surreal.

Alongside this vision of “ideal” girlhood is the lived reality of flesh-and-blood girls, who are caught between childhood and womanhood. Their developing adolescent minds uncomfortably inhabit desirable, semi-adult bodies; they frequently feel alienated from their own corporeal selves. Moreover, they grow up faced with their culture’s vision of proper girlhood as a process toward a certain kind of femininity, and must either reconcile their own desires to those of their culture or risk disapproval, discord, or even discipline. Breaking the rules of acceptable girlhood by exploring their own sexuality, by being too curious or too forward, or by desiring a future other than that prescribed for them can have devastating consequences. At the same time, complying with the demands of their
society can be equally devastating to the sovereign selves girls sense secretly
growing within them. Within the context of a self-protecting society bent on cultural
survivance, like that of French Canada, these problems of girlhood are greatly
aggravated because of the girl’s perceived importance to furthering the survival of
the nation. Just as her good behavior and compliance could signal the successful
passage of the “torch” of true French-Canadian identity to the next generation, so
her deviance could represent the extinguishing of that same torch. Such a threat
could not be lightly ignored.

Essentially, the girl as I consider her in this project is a figure caught between
what she is supposed to be(come) and what she actually wants to be(come).

Historically, especially in Quebec, that tension has been resolved by the girl’s willing
surrender of her own desires, of her own sovereignty. However, the latter decades of
the twentieth century included a dramatic interrogation of that practice, and even a
concerted effort to subvert and destroy it. This project is an effort to trace the
trajectory of the Quebec girl from smothered sovereign doomed to bury herself alive
to defiant insurgent, bent on escaping that fate – determined to unearth herself.

I will chart the negotiation of this tension as expressed through a set of
primary literary and filmic works, namely: Maria Chapdelaine (Louis Hémon, 1914);
Bonheur d’Occasion (Gabrielle Roy, 1945); La Fin des étés (Anne Claire Poirier,
1964); Kamouraska (Anne Hébert, 1970), La Route d’Altamont (Roy, 1966); Une
Belle Education (France Théorêt, 2006); Tu as crié LET ME GO (Poirier, 1997); and
Putain (Nelly Arcan, 2001). I have chosen these works primarily because they offer
compelling portraits of girlhood, and come from authors and filmmakers whose work has significantly contributed to national conversations on identity, femininity, and other key issues directly concerning girls. Secondly, they each also come from important points on the timeline of girlhood’s development over the course of the century, allowing me to show the broader narrative that links them together. In addition, I also selected these works for how they cohered – as chapter pairs and as building blocks of a shared narrative trajectory. While this is far from being an exhaustive list of girlhood narratives in Quebec literature, this set of works offers a sufficiently broad survey of the girl within the literary and cinematic landscape of Quebec for a project like mine, which seeks to delve into, rather than totally cover, a new area of inquiry.

My approach will incorporate theoretical tools from a variety of disciplines. I will consider the representation of girlhood in these works within the larger narrative of women’s and gender studies, to begin with, utilizing theories of femininity and feminine identity from Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler, among others. I will also situate each work within its sociohistorical context by incorporating thought from Quebec historians and cultural theorists such as Paul-Émile Roy, Michael Gauvreau, and Gérard Bouchard. Beyond this, I will also anchor my analysis within the field of Quebec literary and film studies, such as the work of Lori Saint-Martin, Mary Jean Green, and Janine Boynard-Frot. Finally, the core issue of erased sovereignty, denied subjectivity, and retreat into survivance on both an individual and a national level will bring me into
conversation with Jacques Derrida’s hauntology and scholarship related to that concept.

By bringing this array of theoretical areas together, I will be able to effectively investigate how French-Canadian girlhood is narrated in these texts, how that girlhood evolves alongside shifting notions of Quebec identity, and how my key notions of subjectivity, sovereignty, and *survivance* are being negotiated within and through each narrative.

In my first chapter, which covers *Maria Chapdelaine* and *Bonheur d’occasion*, I will use those two works to flesh out the vision of ideal girlhood in French-Canadian culture in the early part of the twentieth century. I will address how two individual French-Canadian girl-protagonists wrestled with that vision as it limited their own dreams of alternative futures. In both cases, the girl is forced to surrender her girlhood self – totally give up her own sovereignty – in order to remain integrated into French-Canadian society (whether rural or urban) as she becomes a woman. Both narratives incorporate disturbing accounts of the girl’s “choice” to self-immolate in this way; in both cases, the girl’s only real agency is in her ability to accept her fate. The surrender (or defeat?) of these two girl-figures signal deep tension under the surface of the seeming stability of the French-Canadian identititary framework, ultimately mapping questions of the very rightness or even purpose of French-Canadian ideals of cultural *survivance* across the girl-body.

My second chapter, which brings together the film *La fin des étés* and the novel *Kamouraska*, takes this theme several steps further, allowing me to investigate
the trauma of repressing the girl-self that is represented in these two works and to reveal the resultant haunting experienced by girls forced to put their girlhood selves to death in order to “survive” as women. Using Derrida’s hauntology as a springboard, I will unpack the hidden agency and subversive potential wrapped in the haunting presence of ghostly girlhood as represented in these two narratives. Both are heralds of an awakening and a coming change in the nature and experience of girlhood, a kind of new consciousness mirroring the rising tide of the Quiet Revolution in mid-century French-Canadian/Québécois culture.

In my third chapter, I will examine the tenets of a new feminine subjectivity emerging from (and alongside) the Quiet Revolution, modernity, and the women’s movement by analyzing La Route d’Altamont and Une Belle Education. These two works feature a radically different set of priorities for girlhood – priorities developed by girls themselves. Kristeva’s theories of abjection and subjectivity will guide my analysis of the girl-protagonists in these two novels, both of whom succeed in breaking the cycle of materno-womanhood that ensnared so many generations of French-Canadian women. These two girl-figures succeed by building a new ethical framework for girlhood, one predicated upon the abjection of the mother and on the championing of the girl’s sovereign individuality – features that powerfully reflect Quebec society’s departure from the Catholic Church during and after the Quiet Revolution, a shift that radically separated Quebec society from its collective maternal edifice. This chapter marks an important step for the girl and for Quebec culture: away from a predominantly collectivist, traditionalist, and
survivance-obsessed pattern of identitary protectionism and toward a much more individualist, modernist, and innovative mode of being.

Finally, my fourth chapter will analyze the film *Tu as crié Let Me Go* and the novel *Putain* in order to show how these two works address the aftermath of the Quiet Revolution and the radical changes to (feminine) subjectivity discussed in Chapter III. In both narratives, a deep sense of disorientation, disillusionment, and collective sickness pervades and haunts the girl and her society. *Tu as crié Let Me Go* addresses the problem of youth lost to drug use, violence, and disenchantment in the 1990s, while *Putain* aggressively questions the new hypocrisies of twenty-first-century femininity. Both focus on the girl and her girlhood in the latter decades of the twentieth century as a space of profound confusion. The dissolution of old models of femininity, the supposed identitary destination of generations of Quebec girls, leaves the girl-figures in these works free but adrift, trying to lay claim to new patterns of feminine subjectivity, but unable to truly extricate themselves from the contradictory messages they receive from their society.

As a whole, this project is a century-long story of repression, awakening, resistance, and escape – one whose “ending” is as simultaneously obvious and occulted as the end of girlhood itself. It is the story of the insurgence of the Quebec girl, as narrated (for the most part) by those who lived it. The narratives I have included all include elements of autobiography, focus on girl-figures and their process of girlhood, and reveal important information about both the Quebec girl and about Quebec itself as legible in its girlhood. Together, they bear witness to the
long, painful struggle of girls battling for sovereignty over their borderland, borderline bodies. These girls repeatedly resist the self-effacing imperatives of *survivance*, even though they are unable to see where the alternative paths they so ardently desire might lead.

Ever since the Filles du Roy came ashore in Quebec in the 1600s, the Right Kind of Girl – an entity in the process of becoming the Right Kind of Woman – has been a pillar of French-Canadian identitary stability, and yet also a source of continual worry, precisely because she is caught in the process of becoming that pillar, which throws her reliability into question. The girl-body has therefore always been a battleground in this context, a space to be claimed and controlled, a colonized territory – much like the province of Quebec itself. These narratives recount individual girls’ resistance against the obligation to be(come) the Right Kind of Girl, their hard-fought battle to win back their own bodies, and the deep uncertainties (and exhilarating possibilities!) that they encounter on the other side of that struggle. As we shall see, sovereignty, subjectivity, and *survivance* are anything but straightforward for either the French-Canadian girl or her nation.
CHAPTER 1

Reddition et survivance: Confronting the Borders of Girlhood in Maria Chapdelaine and Bonheur d’occasion

"Ce ne serait pas ce qu’elle avait imaginé. Mais c’était mille fois mieux que ce qui aurait pu lui arriver."

(Bonheur d’occasion, p. 125)

"Alors, je vais rester ici ... de même !"

(Maria Chapdelaine, p. 199)

The starting point I have chosen for this exploration of the trajectory of girlhood in Quebec during the first part of the twentieth century is a parallel reading of two larger-than-life features of Quebec’s literary landscape: Louis Hémon’s Maria Chapdelaine and Gabrielle Roy’s Bonheur d’occasion. Set in two relatively traditional iterations of French-Canadian society, these two works provide compelling portraits of the latter stages of feminine adolescence in this cultural framework: namely, marriageable girlhood. The two protagonists of these texts are on the cusp of womanhood, but have not yet arrived at that destination. For a brief moment, they find themselves possessors of an elusive, but undeniable, measure of sovereignty over their own lives: they are ready to choose husbands. As we shall see, this apparent power or freedom is heavily mitigated by not only social expectations, but
also the deeper, more sinister, even spectral presence of French Canada’s prerogative of *survivance*. In 1760, the French-Canadian people lost their sovereignty through the capitulation of Montreal in 1760, subsequently made official when France ceded the Quebec territory to the British in 1763¹.

This defeat and its aftermath forever destabilized the idea of the people of *La Nouvelle France* as a sovereign, colonizing people, making them instead into colonized *survivants* forced to submit in order to preserve some semblance of cultural continuity. In the same way, the girl in these two narratives is compelled to surrender her sovereignty just as she comes to see herself as a would-be autonomous subject in order to preserve her status as part of the only society she knows. In so doing, the girl relives her nation’s traumatic past within her own life. From 1763 on, traditional Quebec clings to the memory of its original self-image as bold, righteous colonizer of the New World, and jealously protects that memory beneath its subsequent imposed identity as a colonized people. An unfortunate consequence of the insecurity intrinsic to such a collective self-image is that within that narrative, the individual girl (like the woman) ceases to be co-sovereign and “helpmeet,” and instead becomes the last territory the compromised French-Canadian patriarchy can still colonize. Her body becomes the fertile new world

¹ The Treaty of Paris (1763), in which France concedes Quebec to the English at the close of the Seven Years’ War, stipulates that the conquered French-Canadian people has the right to continue practicing Catholicism under English control, and also offers emigration freedom to French loyalists who do not wish to live under British rule. See Treaty of Paris, 1763, Article IV.
waiting to be claimed for old France. For the individual girl as represented in these works, the results are devastating.

For Maria of *Maria Chapdelaine* and Florentine of *Bonheur d'occasion*, the weight of their culture's need for *survivance* becomes clear as they reach the end of their girlhood. It is their arrival at the threshold of adult femininity/womanhood that announces their doom: they are expected to put the needs and expectations of their society above their own desires. They are to efface themselves, become empty vessels, and be filled (literally) with both the past and future of their nation. They see, too late, that the intended destination of their girlhood — adult femininity/womanhood — is a dark tunnel at the end of the bright road before them. Therefore, whatever illusory hopes and dreams they each cultivate in these narratives must bloom in the face of an unspoken almost-certainty that they will never be realized. The construction of the Right Kind of Woman as a pillar of the preservation of French Canada’s national identity means that the girl, as one becoming a woman, must be systematically educated to replicate the features of that specific adult femininity. In this way, she is transformed (in her society’s view, without her full awareness or control) into an object — a fetish or idol (à la Marx) representing her society’s core values and its survival, or a territory for others to claim. She is the site of her culture’s reiteration, the national body in human form. Her colonized society’s imperative of *survivance* sentences her to be colonized on their behalf, and she has virtually no say in the matter.
Until she sealed that fate by becoming a wife and mother, however, the girl in these texts holds another—more potent, if less stable—identity: that of the marriageable girl. This situates the girl on a razor-edge of potential destinies. Will she submit, choose the right man, and perpetuate her culture’s *survivance*? Or will she harness the audacity of her youth, follow the desires of her heart, choose the wrong man, and tip the scale in favor of uncertainty for the future of the French-Canadian identity? The stakes could not be higher, either for the girl herself or for her society. Therefore, the marriageable girl navigates her passage into womanhood from within a matrix of competing desires—her own, hidden, taboo, but strong; and those of her community, overt, idealizing, and controlling. Whether she will make it out of her adolescence having retained any level of sovereignty or subjectivity is not the question posed by these two novels. Both heavily foreshadow the inevitable destiny of the girl in this cultural matrix. What is in question in both narratives, however, is the presumed complicity of the girl in this repeated narrative of feminine self-effacement. For both authors, the great mystery is not the woman’s colonized position within traditional French-Canadian society, but rather the late-adolescent girl’s moment of sovereignty before she takes on that position. In both cases, as we shall see, the many forces tugging at the girl position her as a figure in crisis—one slowly being crushed from without by the pressures exerted on her by her society even as she is slowly being consumed from within by her own repressed desires. The adolescent girl in both works is starkly aware of the fate her society expects for her, and despite her genuine love for her community and desire for
belonging, she does not want that destiny. How, then, does she end up accepting it anyway? The answer is surprising: in a way, neither actually does. Or, at least, neither truly has a choice.

For a time, both Maria and Florentine dare to imagine and even pursue alternate futures. They temporarily become insurgents, waging a ferocious underground battle for a chance to chart their own course through life. In this way, their girlhood becomes a battleground, a temporal, ideological, physical, and psychological space in which their own fate and the fate of the French-Canadian nation are violently contested, albeit underground. The common narrative of girlhood between these texts is of a period of lucidity, dreams, struggle, and audacious hope in the face of almost certain annihilation. Both texts depict girls as bold, fierce, transient sovereigns trapped in bodies that their society associates with passivity, complicity, and subalternity. More importantly, these texts situate the girl and her struggle for an already-foregone sovereignty at the center of larger negotiations of French-Canadian identity in two significant contexts – one rural, the other urban, both caught between tradition and modernity. In this way, Maria Chapdelaine and Bonheur d’occasion break new ground.

The centrality of the girl in both texts is truly striking. In two historical contexts that prized the virility of masculine youth, both authors set aside the overabundance of young single men in the novel, choosing instead to focus their narrative on a poor, simple, uneducated girl and her almost-impossible quest to determine her own future. Quebec scholar Mary Jean Green sees this focus on the
girl in *Maria Chapdelaine*, for example, as suggestive of a “complex and intriguing shift in vision” (WNI 55) within Quebec’s national and literary identitary narrative. In the context of a nation that bears deep scars from renouncing its own sovereignty in order to survive, passing from colonizer to colonized, the girl’s obligation to do the same does indeed provide a more powerful and accurate (albeit troubling) illustration of the pain and frustration written into Quebec’s identitary narrative than would a narrative of independent, self-making masculinity like that of a *bildungsroman*. The bitter taste of the submission imposed upon the girl, a flavor sharply reminiscent of the cruel taste of defeat repeated in Quebec’s past, is strongly present in both girlhood narratives featured in this chapter.

*Bonheur d’occasion* and *Maria Chapdelaine* take us into the heart of girlhood as an insurgency. Both protagonists sense their own strange power as marriageable girls, both seek to take ownership over that power and captain their own destinies, and both discover the strict borders of acceptable girlhood through their efforts at resistance. Trapped between the prerogatives of their society and their own independent desires, both girls must ultimately submit to the former in order to remain integrated into their societies – in order to survive. Between the insurgency and its end, which is really a very brief period of time, the girl and her body are caught in a ferocious struggle. In both narratives, the girl protagonist appears to have agency in the form of free will to decide her own destiny. However, the reader quickly understands that however deeply these two girl figures desire and even claim sovereignty over themselves and their futures, they will not succeed. Rather,
they are the chosen sacrifice of their societies. Their individualities will be erased – indeed, they will do the erasing themselves – and they will become *survivantes*, mere ghosts of their former selves. Their stories’ conclusions reveal that the only relevant agency girls could truly claim in this particular ideological context was the “freedom” to willingly accept their fate - the right to accept their *reddition* in the name of their culture’s *survivance* and their own.

**Part I: Maria Chapdelaine – fille du terroir?**

We will begin our examination of this strange, grim narrative by examining Louis Hémon’s 1914 novel *Maria Chapdelaine*. This text stands out as a particularly significant – and controversial – work of Quebec fiction. Born of the experiences and imagination of its young, globetrotting, French author (born and raised in Bretagne), this unusual *roman du terroir* has long figured among lists of key works related to the concept of French-Canadian identity, viewed from within and beyond Quebec itself, in the twentieth century. The novel’s setting in the rural, almost mythic Lac Saint-Jean region of Québec; its depiction of rural, deeply traditional French-Canadian life; and its focus on the coming-of-age of a simple country girl within this context make it an excellent starting point for this project, as it offers an almost exaggerated (and certainly mythicized) vision of French-Canadian girlhood within this extremely unique sociocultural context. Hémon’s main character, Maria, will provide us with an essential layer of background information regarding what
girlhood was like at the outset of the twentieth century – its stakes, its borders, and its battles.

Briefly, the novel is an account of a roughly two-year period in the life of a young girl of marrying age (Maria) and her family, during which time Maria comes to a decision about which of three suitors she will marry. Her choices are François Paradis, the dashing but unpredictable fur trapper; Lorenzo Surprenant, the wealthy emigrant to industrial New England, or Eutrope Gagnon, the humble farmer next door. Maria falls shyly in love with the intrepid François, but he perishes in a blizzard while traveling through the forest to visit her for the New Year. Embittered against her homeland for snuffing out her true love, Maria then turns to the exotic Lorenzo as a means of escape from such a harsh, cyclical, lonely existence. However, just as she is about to commit to Lorenzo, Maria’s mother dies from a mysterious illness, leaving her (Maria) the “woman of the house.” Her priorities shifting, Maria grows hesitant about leaving with Lorenzo – but still plans to, until she hears a series of sinister Dickensian voices, which finally compel her to stay and marry Eutrope.

The tale Hémon tells of these figures is deceptively simple; caught between the lines is Hémon’s interrogation of the lifestyle he came to know during his stay in Quebec\(^2\). In order to best capture the ideological and social structures of the world he visited, Hémon chose to write his novel primarily in the form of a *roman du* ...

\(^2\) Hémon spent a year living and working on the farm of the Bouchard family, near Péribonka; his novel and characters are loosely based on his experiences there.
terroir. This genre is generally considered to be uniquely French-Canadian, and consists of a highly traditional framework rooted in the promotion of traditional values important to French-Canadian national identity: Catholic faith, family, the land, and the French language. Its features are at times reminiscent of frontier fiction such as the Laura Ingalls Wilder stories or Willa Cather’s writing in Anglophone American writing of the same period, but it retains unique features that make it particularly Québécois.

Among the dozens of romans du terroir produced in Quebec between 1860 and 1970, titles and authors that stand out along with Maria Chapdelaine and Hénon are Marie-Didace or Le Survenant by Germaine Guèvremont (1946 and 1966, respectively), La Terre paternelle by Patrice Lacombe (1912), and Menaud maître-draveur by Félix-Antoine Savard (1968). My selection of Maria Chapdelaine from among these is not a reflection of their inadequacy for demonstrating the role of the girl as depicted in this literary genre. Rather, I chose to use Hémon’s novel mainly because of the prominence of the text in the Quebec literary landscape and because of the uniquely interesting features of Hémon’s girl-protagonist and girlhood narrative. In addition, the blend of fidelity to and deviation from the tropes of the roman du terroir genre that can be found in Hémon’s novel make it particularly worthy of study. Among the more significant choices Hémon makes – one which is unusual, though not unheard-of, in the roman du terroir – is his “anomalous” (Green

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3 For an enlightening, extensive, thorough examination of the roman du terroir, see Un matriarcat en procès by Janine Boynard-Frot (1982).
50) choice to center his novel on a female protagonist⁴. Finally, Hémon’s status as an outsider situates him at an ethnographic vantage point not unlike that of Gabrielle Roy in *Bonheur d’occasion*, a point I will address in the second section of this chapter.

As mentioned above, Louis Hémon built his narrative based on his observations of (extremely) rural French-Canadian life over a one-year period, during which he lived and worked on the farm of the Bédard family in Péribonka, a tiny town on the shores of the Lac Saint-Jean in northern Quebec. After completing his manuscript in 1912, Hémon sent his best-seller to France to be published, but never got to see the result; struck down by a train in Ontario in July of 1913, he passed away before the publisher could let him know his novel had been accepted for publication as a *feuilleton*. *Maria Chapdelaine* first appeared in daily episodes in *Le Temps* from January 27 to February 19, 1914⁵. It was finally published as a novel in 1921, and was an almost immediate bestseller in France. In the years following its initial publication, it went on to become an international sensation, appearing in over a dozen languages. Maria and her family quickly emerged as mythic figures representing the virtues of hard work, sacrifice, fidelity, and faith. In Quebec, the novel met with some resistance, but was eventually brought to bear as a rallying point for the defenders of the idea(l) of French Canada as a colonizing project. In

⁴ *Maria Chapdelaine* is not the only *roman du terroir* to feature a female protagonist, but it is certainly in the minority. Hémon’s particular choice to center his story on Maria’s choice of a husband is striking.

⁵ Archiv.umontreal.ca/exposition/louis_hemon/index.html. For this biographical sketch, I am indebted to the site of the University of Montreal’s online archive of Louis Hémon’s life and works. Visited Jan 2016.
their eyes, and in the eyes of much of Hémon’s readership around the world, Maria became

“toutes les braves filles de colon qui ont suivi dans la solitude la vocation et la volonté de leurs pères, qui ont subi leur rude et grandiose destin et qui, après avoir entrevu un monde meilleur à travers les prismes de l’illusion et dans la magie des mots entendus, se résignent finalement à suivre une terrible et sainte tradition”

(Author unnamed - my emphasis).

The Montreal journalist who penned this critique in the 1920s uses words with all the glorifying romanticism of Hémon’s writing, as well as the proud paternalistic nationalism of the roman du terroir. He also artfully evokes the rather bleak nature of the ending of Hémon’s novel. However, his romantic reading elides the many subversive elements of Maria Chapdelaine; he does not see the critical perspicacity and wry, almost cynical fatalism lacing Hémon’s narration, nor does he question Maria’s resignation to the “terrible et sainte tradition” he mentions – that of sacrificing her own desires in order to serve the expectations of her family and community. As I will show, Maria’s seeming “choice” to se résigner (submit, accept; to resign oneself) is all but forcibly coerced, and the righteousness of that “tradition” is clearly interrogated in the novel.

Using Maria Chapdelaine as a starting point for this project was a complex decision. At first glance, Hémon’s mythic roman du terroir seems too Other to cohere with the rest of the works in my central corpus. Its foreign author, flowery romantic

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6 Excerpt from an archived newspaper article from the 1920s, viewed at <http://www.archiv.umontreal.ca/exposition/louis_hemon/oeuvre/oeuvre_page2-6.html>
style, preachy depiction of traditional values, and absurdly subdued heroine evoke anything but ideas of insurgency or authentic identity. However, the structure and tropes this novel borrows from the roman du terroir provide a clear portrait of both the ideal image and the limits of Quebec girlhood within the context of the bitter battle for cultural preservation of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Moreover, as I mentioned above, the outward elements of Hémon’s novel hide a much more complex, subversive subtext: the story of a girl who desired a destiny beyond that prepared for her, pursued that destiny in defiance of what her culture expected of her, and was brought summarily back in line by a set of mysterious, omnipotent forces beyond her control. Most critics articulate Maria’s story as that of a girl who chooses to follow in her mother’s footsteps, or who is willfully complicit in her own unglamorous destiny; however, I contend that the element of choice or will necessary to such readings is absent from the text. Maria’s sovereignty, too valuable and volatile to be recognized, is taken from her, and she (as an individual) disappears. This is the foundational narrative of Quebec girlhood upon which the rest of my analyses will build: that of the would-be sovereign female subject who is conquered, colonized, and essentially denied true subjectivity.

**Maria’s “border-body” as contested territory**

How and why does this disenfranchisement happen? What threat do Maria’s naïve, seemingly innocuous girlhood desires pose to her world, to the point that the voice of Quebec itself must intervene? In order to answer these questions, we must
first understand the stakes and limits of proper passage through girlhood in Maria’s world.

In Maria’s small, isolated universe, that of the simultaneously colonizing and colonized, a stubborn outpost of French Canadian sovereignty scraping a rough existence out of the ruthless wilderness of the North, girlhood has markedly narrow, fixed set of features due to the high value placed upon the Right Kind of Girl (as evoked in my introduction) in French-Canadian society. Janine Boynard-Frot, an esteemed expert on this genre, remarks that the female “sujette” in the roman du terroir is expected to follow one trajectory: “la transformation de son état de célibataire en phase initiale à celui de mariée en séquence finale” (Matriarcat 99). Girls’ identities are strictly circumscribed by their expected roles as daughters, wives- and mothers-to-be – always obedient, always serving, their agency undercut by its contingency on another’s approval, their evanescent individuality dissolved as soon as they take on the mantle of traditional French-Canadian femininity. Their personalities are corralled by firm Catholic education transmitted through the Church and at home by the mother. They are expected to be *simple* – virtuous, unambitious, disciplined, trustworthy, submissive, dutiful, untroubled by dreams or desires. This is because adult women were “the guardians of the hearth and the faith, the preservers of the French language and its cultural traditions” (Forsyth 45). Their fidelity to a pattern of francophone, Catholic, nation-oriented femininity had to remain perfect in order to be successfully carried into the following generation.
Indeed, any behavior not consistent with this pattern was cause for alarm in this world held together by its religious beliefs. As independent scholar Elizabeth Evasdaughter remarks in her study of Catholic girlhood narratives from the twentieth century: "... many Catholic adults fear the female in girls and would like to suppress it permanently. They expect Catholic girls to express their entire life-force in the forms and customs of femininity." (139) Selfhood, individual ambitions, aspirations after individual sovereignty, all are practically heretical ideas in this context, as they threaten the stable continuity of the Catholic family unit, which formed the basis for Maria Chapdelaine’s rural society in particular but also for much of French Canada at this point in history.

This is not to say that male adolescence or the decisions of young men have no importance in this context. However, male youth as characterized in this story in particular is defined by work; boys and young men can access subjectivity by contributing their labor and becoming active participants in the economic sphere. Their work brings profit, which gives them power and mobility. They can own property as adults, or they can wander freely throughout the backcountry as woodcutters or fur trappers, which gives them a high level of sovereignty over their own lives. Indeed, such industriousness and self-determination are key to ideals of French-Canadian masculinity in this context.

For example, in his description of Maria’s younger brother Tit’Bé, a baby-faced fourteen-year-old with “traits indécis” who holds his own among the adult men, Hémon states that “au pays de Québec les garçons sont traités en hommes dès
qu’ils prennent part au travail des hommes” (26). Tit’Bé is barely more than a child, and yet he already has a clearer and more independent subjectivity among his community than the older Maria. The ability to work infuses male adolescence with a different kind of potentiality than that of girlhood, one marked by ever-increasing mobility and agency. Maria also has two older brothers, Esdras and Da’Bé, but they work in logging camps far from home, and seem untroubled by any obligation to stay and preserve the family legacy through farming the land. François Paradis and Lorenzo Surprenant, two of Maria’s three suitors, are able to leave behind their parents’ way of life and seek out new ways of being, thus threatening the stability of the agrarian-colonizing model of French Canadian life, but their seeming betrayals are auxiliary to the core of the story. Significantly, their deviance only seems to matter if Maria chooses to attach herself to it.

In contrast to his representation of masculine adolescence, Hémon’s portrait of feminine adolescence is of a period in which girls cannot carve out destinies for themselves; the best they can do is detach themselves from their family and attach to the best possible husband. Rather than seeking her own individual destiny, the girl of this context is expected to willingly forego her self in exchange for obediently assuming an identity indissoluble from her representative function. Driscoll points out that “While masculine adolescence is a progress to Subjectivity, feminine adolescence ideally awaits moments of transformation from girl to Woman” (Girls 57,
my italics). Within the framework of the roman du terroir, this is particularly true. Accordingly, in the typical roman du terroir, "dès que la sujette 'a compris', elle adopte la posture du don [de soi] et connaît le bonheur" (Boynard-Frot 173), and her individual self "se dissout" (107) into the others-focused role of wife- and motherhood. This reveals the patriarchal structure of Quebec society, in which girls and women are viewed as passive creatures, expected to accept their role as objects of exchange rather than act as subjects crafting their own destinies.

Within the roman du terroir, therefore, femininity can be neatly divided into Luce Irigaray’s three categories of mother, virgin, and prostitute (This Sex 185-86). Maria, as an unmarried girl, is of course the “virgin” in this triad, a figure embodying “pure exchange value;” in Irigaray’s words, “In and of herself, she does not exist” (This Sex 186). As an object of exchange, the French-Canadian girl as depicted Maria Chapdelaine is therefore merchandise in the Marxist sense of the term. She is a placeholder, a representative shell containing the promise of her society’s survival.

This fetishizing of an object when it is assigned exchange value is directly applicable to Hémon’s girlhood narrative. In Maria’s story, we see that her society does not see the girl’s individuality; instead, it fetishizes her, makes her into an idol rather than a living entity. Forces beyond the girl’s control come together to forestall her arrival.

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7 Boynard-Frot explains that “le roman [du terroir] inculque l'idée que le don de soi est inné chez la femme” (171). Quebec scholar Mary Jean Green concurs with this observation, citing the “capacity for self-sacrifice” as “central to the role of women” (WNI 33).

8 See Derrida Spectres de Marx for analysis of “le caractère mystique ou le devenir-fétiche de la marchandise” (Spectres 236). More to come in Chapter II.
at full, adult, coherent subjectivity, denying her sovereignty and replacing it with an imperative to *bear* rather than create meaning in her world.

However, in *Maria Chapdelaine*, we also see that the girl as would-be female subject manifests resistance to this process, expressing her own opinion vis-à-vis her society's expectations. Inwardly, she is no robot, no passive specter – not yet, at least. Even without help, she has cultivated a nascent sense of self in opposition to her predetermined present and future roles in society. For a period of time, however brief, the girl comes into possession of a kind of subjectivity. Awareness of her own tenuous sovereignty through her supposed right to choose brings, in Maria's case, awareness of a desire for a different future than that chosen by the previous generation. This discrepancy between desires for social continuity and desires for alternative futures marks out girlhood as a true border-space, the moment in time between the non-personhood of childhood and the expected self-effacing acceptance of wife- and motherhood through marriage. The expression of girls' conflict between quiescence and defiance empowers the girl (whether she sees that power or not) as a potential agent of social change. For a quiet farm girl, then, Maria is a surprisingly subversive figure.

Within its pages, *Maria Chapdelaine* reveals a set of unique features for traditional, even slightly caricaturesque, French-Canadian girlhood within a culture pursuing *survivance*. While other *romans du terroir* may present female characters or even protagonists who question their seeming destiny or who rebel against their community's wishes, this is often depicted from without. Hémon's novel
exceptionally dedicates vast quantities of page space to the narration of Maria’s thoughts and feelings, carefully and completely fleshing out her interiority and her negotiation of the conflict between her own desires (that surprise even her) and those of her community. This internal view counterbalances the gaze of other figures in the novel, who construct her as an iconic figure rather than a simple human girl. Together, these insider and outsider perspectives reveal just how much dissonance there is between the perception of girlhood and the reality of its experience in this case. Maria’s insurgency takes place at the confluence of these gazes.

In the opening pages of the novel, Hémon introduces Maria to the reader through the comments of the young men who see her passing through town on her way home. Although at first they boldly talk about her as a "belle grosse fille" (6) and lament the fact that she lives so far away, they quiet down when she approaches, and are struck with a feeling of hesitant reverence, sensing that there is “entre elle et eux quelque chose de plus que la rivière à traverser et douze milles de mauvais chemins dans les bois” (7). She is at once clearly desirable and yet somehow untouchable, marked out for a specific, sacred destiny. Without making any effort to manipulate or control, Maria takes on the status of an icon. Her suitors need only look at her to be sure that she is the Right Kind of Girl.

This iconic identity comes with surprising power, although Maria again makes no real attempt to wield it. When she is first being courted, we see that her marriageable girlhood has made her the focus of the inhabitants of her world;
“tous les regards convergent sur Maria” (63). Moreover, she holds an arcane power over her three suitors: “dans la maison de bois emplie de boucane âcre, un sortilège impéreux flottait aussi avec la fumée et parait de grâces inconcevables, aux yeux de trois jeunes hommes, une belle fille simple qui regardait à terre” (66).

Although she remains totally passive, not even lifting her eyes to look at the men who would marry her, she holds them spellbound. Her very body, distinct from her inner self and apart from any action on her part, commands attention and provokes desire. She is clearly "classée parmi les natures féeriques ou angéliques" (Boynard-Frot 139), endowed with the ability to renew the promise of her society. Much like the Filles du Roy were intended to draw would-be coureurs de bois back into the more acceptable and controllable structures of French colonial civilization, Maria is painted as an inexplicably mesmerizing “créature” (6) capable of holding supernatural sway over the young men who desire her. After doing barely more than looking at her, François is overcome by a “grande faim d’elle” (69), and Lorenzo is struck with love for her just by gazing at her face in profile and her outer garments (142). They desire “ce qu’ils pressent[ent] de son coeur limpide et honnête” (151); they seem convinced that they can and do know everything they need to know about her just by looking at her.

This is indeed what complicates Maria’s influential, superhuman presence in the novel: the fact that it happens without any deliberate effort on her part. Maria is no coquette, and seems as surprised as everyone else about her effect on the people around her. Indeed, within, she is fragile, uncertain, conflicted; conscious of her own importance and strange power, but frustrated and baffled by them. Hémon’s
narrative reveals a fluid, dreamy, almost unstable Maria living beneath the veneer of her own supreme respectability. She is altogether alienated from her corporeal self, the self that others see, and also somehow from her inner self. Hémon repeatedly describes her emotional state as *confuse* (distressed, embarrassed, upset, confused) and *émue* (emotionally moved or upset). She does not comprehend or fully accept her own desires, even as she feels compelled by them; she fears being led into sin even as she is swept up in timid exultation. Resistant to her destiny and divided against herself, Maria is anything but simple, even in her great simplicité. It is her indecision that drives the narrative, as well as what gives her a form of agency. While her world holds its breath, wondering what she will decide, Maria holds all the cards, whether she likes it or not.

The complex, divided nature of Maria’s experience situates her firmly within the space of girlhood. At once desiring to please others through compliance and to please herself through revolt, Maria is immobilized by her own inability or unwillingness to choose. In her analysis of feminine adolescence in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Beauvoir states: “C’est là le trait qui caractérise la jeune fille ... elle n’accepte pas le destin que la nature et la société lui assignent ; et cependant, elle ne le répudie pas positivement : elle est intérieurement trop divisée pour entrer en lutte avec le monde” (DS II, 122). As Hémon’s novel eventually illustrates, the inner confliction of girlhood is both its most powerful and its most self-damning feature. Divided against herself, Maria is ultimately unable to combat the outside forces that are driving her into a very orthodox feminine destiny: laying down her own individual
identity – essentially, destroying or killing herself – in order to accept her role as selfless vessel meant to bear the future of her culture.

Hémon’s narration insists upon Maria’s girlhood as a moment of crisis. He writes that: "toute sa forte jeunesse, sa patience et sa simplicité sont venues aboutir à cela : à ce jaillissement d’espoir et de désir, à cette prescience d’un contentement miraculeux qui vient" (81). Maria glimpses true happiness bending down to reachable distance, if only she dares take hold of it. Such a burst of hope ought to have been cause for celebration, but the development of the storyline reveals that this dream of self-definition is in fact both a threat and an illusion. It is a threat because Maria’s choice has significance beyond her own individual destiny. It is an illusion because, as the novel quickly reveals, there is only one right answer, and Maria’s whole world will come together to make sure she does not deviate from the path predestined for her.

The threat of Maria’s insurrection

Due to Hémon’s ethnographic perspective and motivations, it is particularly important to see how he (re)constructs the girl as the locus of collective anxiety for the future of the nation and how he sets his heroine up as a figure locked in a doomed struggle against Quebec itself. By situating Maria at the center of his story, confining his storyline to the period of her girlhood, and of course making her name the title of his novel, Hémon unequivocally emphasizes his protagonist’s life as important. More specifically, he highlights the importance of her choice of a future.
While the metaphorical significance of her three prétendants is transparent, what is less clear, and therefore a richer object of study, is the way she goes about “choosing” her husband.

We have seen how Hémon sets Maria up as a sacred figure (an idol, so a sublime object) in the eyes of her own people, and how she herself is deeply conflicted about that sacred status – caught between it and her own experience of herself as a human girl subject to independent dreams and desires. We know that the novel’s storyline is confined to the temporal space of the last stage of Maria’s girlhood, which makes that period of primordial importance to her existence (or not) as a subject. Maria’s audacious dreams put her in opposition to her expected destiny, pitting her against Quebec itself in a surprisingly titanic struggle over her future.

This battle becomes legible in Maria’s complex relationship to the forest, an anthropomorphic or even supernatural presence in the novel, as well as in the subversive depiction of Maria’s faith, which appears to situate Quebec (as at once Land and Culture – the Nation as a people and a place) as the deciding force in all of this, rather than the God of the Catholic faith. The tragic futility of Maria’s prayers is anomalous to say the least in the roman du terroir and in Quebec literature of this period, and seems to indicate that it is obedience to the prerogatives of the nation that takes primacy; prayers that go against those prerogatives will simply not be answered. In this way, two other pillars of the French-Canadian identity conspire to beat a third (the girl-becoming-woman) into submission. Altogether, the
orchestration of Maria’s ultimate submission sends a decidedly sinister message about the nature of girlhood within this context, and also offers a troubling reading of the present and future of Maria’s world.

The fact is that Maria’s position as a young girl on the cusp of womanhood not only makes her a Mary-like icon of sacred destiny, but also situates her beneath her own Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, a new Eve with the power to disobey and bring about the destruction of the way of life in which she was raised. The awakening of her curiosity and her desire, simultaneous with the awakening of the procreative potential of her body, makes her as dangerous as she is desirable. In 1866, ardent defender of the French-Canadian identity and bishop Louis-François Laflèche admonished his readers that “la passion, seule, mène ordinairement au doute” (129). This sentiment is echoed in the words of the priest in the novel, who insists that “il ne faut pas se révolter ni se plaindre” despite the death of Maria’s would-be lover François Paradis, and insists that Maria should forget about “un garçon qui ne t’était rien” (MC 126) because her grief is discouraging to her family. Maria’s duty is not to her own heart; she must set aside her passion in favor of duty.

Such thinking corresponds to a historic vision of Catholic femininity that preached that “although a good Catholic woman is expected to reproduce as often as God wishes, her sexual pleasure is considered somehow connected to the Fall of

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9 See Louis-François Laflèche’s *Quelques considérations sur les rapports de la société civile avec la religion et la famille* (1866) in which he (the bishop of Trois-Rivières from 1867-1898) warns of the threats facing the traditional French-Canadian value system. He warns that “C’est par la femme que l’épreuve commence, c’est-à-dire par la partie la plus faible de l’humanité” (128).
Man and, therefore, to be evil” (Evasdaughter 20), a view still propounded well into the twentieth century. This way of thinking about women (and, consequently, girls) is just one of the many elements of Catholic teachings that would eventually be rejected in Quebec during the Quiet Revolution, but was still heavily present in Maria’s time.

What we see in Hémon’s novel is that the nucleus of the muffled turbulence of this novel is the ferocious battle between individual desire and collective conscience, and, more importantly, Hémon’s earnest questioning of the actual necessity of opposition between the two. Maria, the girl, is the perfect site for this battle: she embodies a troublesome confusion of desire and virtue, of purity and uncertainty. Girlhood itself is not the only moment in which passion and desire can cast doubt on a person’s way forward, but in this case in particular, it is a moment at which this doubt is perceived to be particularly dangerous. As a result, Maria’s passion and desire must be contained, disciplined, and, if possible, overcome.

This prerogative comes across most clearly in the deaths of François Paradis and Laura Chapdelaine. These two events do much more than simply remove characters from the cast or shut down possible plot paths. François’s death at the “hands” of the merciless forest indicates condemnation of his chaotic, freewheeling way of life, perpetuates the “eternel malentendu des deux races” (MC 35)\(^\text{10}\), and

\(^{10}\) Meaning the conflict between the two oldest “types” of French-Canadian males from the colonial age: the coureur des bois, wild, adventurous, unfettered, and unruly; and the habitant, tough, persistent, intrepid, but also compliant, stable, and committed to the colonial project. The coureur des bois was just as likely to disappear into the forest as he was to put down roots, whereas the habitant was explicitly devoted to building a French-Canadian community in the wilderness, complete with the orderliness and continuity of French society.
rules out passion as an acceptable motivation for life decisions. It also signals the
death of part of Maria’s self, and begins the closure of her girlhood by heightening
her uncertainty, thus sharpening her need for closure, and by cutting off her one
dream before it could grow, thus diminishing her idealism. The priest’s pragmatic
intervention after François’s death makes it clear that sentimentality, perhaps
ironically, has no place in the mission of cultural preservation. When Maria’s mother
in turn meets her end, her absence creates a vacuum that Maria knows she is
expected to fill. This event pushes Maria to the point at which she knows she
absolutely must make her decision. For Maria, losing her mother means losing the
last buffer between herself and womanhood. Now, with her little sister looking to
her for maternal guidance and her father’s household leaning on her, Maria is
catatapulted forward on her trajectory to complete femininity, resist and hesitate
though she might.

Indeed, these two deaths are more than plot events. They are acts of
narrative violence inflicted upon Maria. No character in the novel explicitly attempts
to drive Maria’s decision process, with even the priest and her parents giving only
vague encouragements or discouragements. Even Maria’s suitors give no passionate
pleas, and barely dare to ask her to marry them at all. Rather, it is the structure of
the novel, using Nature as its primary vehicle, that closes in to bring the process of
Maria’s girlhood to the “right” conclusion.

The final battle takes place in the wilderness of Maria’s own mind, the last
frontier to be colonized by her society. Ever outwardly docile, ever seemingly
submissive, Maria plots her escape as she knits by the fire ... but this cannot stand. While quietly peering out her window across the snow at “la barre lointaine de la forêt” (192), Maria is visited by three “voix” in a scene that illustrates why Maria was taken up post-publication as a sort of Jeanne d'Arc Québécoise, divinely submitted to a patriotic mission in defense of French Catholic identity. What differentiates these two figures, besides the fact that one is historical and one is fictitious, is that Joan of Arc chose to renounce her femininity in order to lay claim to active subjectivity and autonomous agency, whereas Maria chose to renounce whatever agency she had in order to assume full, dutiful, self-annihilating femininity. Both became saintly martyr-figures, heroines of their nations, but only when the deviant indecision of their identities was consumed as their ultimate sacrifice on the altar of obedience. Only at the price of their girlhood. In Maria’s case, as we shall see in this final section, the battle for national identity is won when Maria plays her only card as an agency-wielding girl: she submits.

**Plus d’histoire – the end of Maria’s girlhood as the demise of her subjectivity**

Our exploration of this text up until this point has revealed the key features of Maria’s girlhood: its troublesome situation as a border-space between childhood and adulthood, between iconic status and frank humanity, between duty and desire, between Nature and civilization. Maria herself is a bundle of questions, doubts, possibilities, expectations, and dreams, seemingly impossible to resolve. We have seen how acceptable femininity looms over Maria’s head, forcing her to work
through her girlhood as quickly as possible. Moreover, we have confirmed the notion that, according to the ideology of the *roman du terroir*, a good woman "n'est... valorisée que dans la mesure où elle se dépouille de ses désirs" (Boynard-Frot 167); even Maria’s shy passions and understated desires run counter to her society’s value system, and cannot be accepted. The only acceptable way for Maria to exit girlhood and access womanhood is to lay down any claim she might have laid to her own right to individual fulfillment or satisfaction.

Even for a “good girl” like Maria, this is hard to take; all the way until the final pages, Maria’s resistance to assuming her expected role in society only grows. While this increases her individual chances of a happy ending, it puts her society’s future in doubt; the more she wavers, the more pressure she endures – pressure to decide her own fate, pressure to choose the correct path. All eyes do indeed converge upon Maria; in response, she retreats deeper within herself, searching in vain for a way to reconcile herself to her fate. How, then, does Hémon bring about a workable resolution to the combined question of his girl-protagonist’s destiny and that of her people and way of life?

The answer is, frankly, rather grim: Hémon forces Maria’s hand. In true *roman du terroir* fashion, Maria passes out of girlhood by surrendering her agency, her dreams, her desires; in short, by putting an end to the uncertainty that made her a (potential) subject. What is striking about this particular example is that Maria’s actual moment of decision is almost entirely erased from the text.
The scene of the visiting voices unfolds within Maria’s mind; although stirred by the emotional appeals of the first two voices, Maria remains adamant. However, her attitude completely changes after the final voice, the insistent voice of Quebec itself, takes its turn. Hémon calls it the expression of “l’âme de la province,” resonant with “la solennité chère du vieux culte, la douceur de la vieille langue jalousement gardée, la splendeur et la force barbare du pays neuf où une race ancienne a retrouvé son adolescence” (197). Solemnity, piety, sweetness, splendor, raw strength, newness, and adolescence – this description of the soul of the province might as well be a description of Maria herself. The voice insists that “au pays de Québec rien ne doit mourir et rien ne doit changer” (198) – a grim pronouncement indeed. Essentially, this phrase is Quebec’s statement of claim over Maria’s body and destiny. It demands that she “sit” and “stay.”

Our would-be revolutionary’s response? “Alors je vais rester ici ... de même!” (199) – no question mark, no hesitation, no qualification at all. More significantly: no decision process; merely mute transition from undecided to decided. Maria has just been informed of her own destiny. “Commandé[e]” by these voices, she is left with nothing more than “un peu de regret pathétique,” a few “souvenirs tristes” (199), and her own freshly-internalized immobility.

What we see here is that despite all of the buildup to Maria’s decision, Maria does not in fact decide her fate at all; Quebec decides for her, and she surrenders. A mere paragraph follows her capitulation to close the penultimate chapter; all that remains after that is a characteristically spare dialogue between Maria and Eutrope.
Gagnon in which she accepts his proposal. Much like other heroines of the roman du terroir, "by the end of the novel, she attains an attitude of resignation but never one of transcendence" (Green WNI 34). The utter finality of this resignation is underlined by the fact that Maria’s acceptance brings the novel to a dramatically abrupt halt. There is no happily-ever-after, no judgment of her decision, no projection into the future. The girl has surrendered, the cycle will continue; apparently, no more need be said. She has become like the evergreens “qui triomphèrent, pareils à des femmes emplies d’une sagesse amère, qui auraient échangé pour une vie éternelle leur droit à la beauté” (89). She has laid down her dreams of faraway lands or Prince Charming in favor of (re)entry into the cyclical destiny of her world. The greater good of survivance propounded by her culture has won out, deemed by all – even Maria – to hold primacy over even Maria’s individual right to happiness.

As a result, Maria’s subversive desires must be and are inevitably quashed, and with their dismissal, Maria’s selfhood is evacuated from the novel. With that, the interest of her story evaporates, and the narrative ends. "Mariée, la femme n’a plus d’histoire." (Boynard-Frot 106); once the girl (the young, marriageable virgin girl) marries, she is sublimated under her role of wife/mother and can no longer have a story of her own or be the subject of her own story. Just like colonial New France’s bold identitary narrative of colonization evanesced with the Treaty of Paris in 1763, Maria’s moment of sovereignty as a marriageable girl vanishes with her acquiescence to Eutrope and all that marrying him implies.
The broader ramifications of Maria’s self-effacement

The conclusion of Hémon’s novel leaves us with a good deal to think about. We have observed that this story charts the process of the erasure of an individual girl’s subjectivity and the sublimation of her individual identity under the roles she ultimately accepts. The privileged place of this process as the core narrative of the story reveals its importance; Maria’s obedience or rebellion really mattered, on both an individual and a collective level. The choice made by this apparently poor, obscure, simple girl living on the edge of the world represented much more than the deciding of one individual’s fate. Indeed, this girl innocently but inevitably bumps up against the unseen and unspoken borders of her culture. She "engages with threats to [cultural] continuity" and "locates points of fragility" (Driscoll 68) in her native ideological framework. Even her small dreams of romance and adventure are enough to bring the wrath of Quebec itself down upon her, proving the irreducibility of the four tenets of the ideology promoted by the roman du terroir: Catholic faith, family values, the French language, and commitment to the land. It is not enough for Maria to be a “good girl,” marry a French-Canadian, and raise a large, Catholic family if she plans to abandon the land. François and Lorenzo did not bring the right configuration of values to the table; regardless of Maria’s desires for passion or escape, Quebec had to defend its mission, and therefore, it could not allow Maria to marry either of them. This is so irrational that Hémon felt the need to use mysterious, supernatural voices to explain the eventual suppression of Maria’s
seemingly-innocuous yet deviant desires. Of course this is outlandish; after all, why in the world should Maria be obliged to submit to an ancestral destiny when other doors have been opened to her? Why could this figure of hope and potential not pursue alternate paths to lead her world into a better future, carrying their values into other milieux?

Moreover, whose story and whose figure is this? There are multiple narrative forces at work in this novel, but Maria is not one of them, even though she is the story’s focal point and her decision process drives the plot forward. Her voice, rarely heard, has no power to shape the outcome of the narrative; even the strange sorcery of her ultra-desirable girlhood cannot liberate her from the other forces dictating her life’s dénouement. Nature herself, then the voice of Quebec, the brief intervention of the priest, and always the overarching framing discourse of the narrator – all have their say, all contribute to ultimately decide Maria’s fate, but Maria herself can only inwardly rail and weep, never outwardly resist with any level of success. Despite all the criticism and acclaim Maria has received over the past century for her “sacrifice” or her “choice,” the fact is that Maria was sacrificed; was chosen – she never explicitly does anything more than acknowledge the fate assigned to her, saying, “Alors, je vais rester ici – de même!” (199); the narrator even recognizes that “en vérité c’étaient les voix qui lui avaient enseigné le chemin” (199). With this in mind, we as readers must see Maria Chapdelaine as a deeply troubling girlhood or coming-of-age narrative: one whose core message is the
inevitable surrender of the girl’s agency and subjectivity. While the novel hinges on Maria’s supposed “choice,” in the end, she never even makes that choice.

What does this say to us about French-Canadian girlhood (or, indeed, the French-Canadian nation) as an identitary space? In my view, Maria Chapdelaine reveals that under the glittering surface of a supposed narrative of noble sacrifice, one frequently interpreted as an allegorical representation of the French-Canadian desire for survivance, there runs a bitter undercurrent: an understanding that survivance, which supposedly connotes defiant survival and rejection of victimhood, is in fact predicated upon the destruction (actually, the deliberate self-annihilation) of its girlhood self – the individual girlhood selves of generations of French-Canadian women, and the collective “girlhood self” of the French-Canadian nation: that streak of rebellious, innovative, nonconforming dreamers who were supposed to be tamed by the civilizing influence of proper French-Canadian femininity, just like the early colonists-turned-coureurs-de-bois were tamed by the Filles du Roy.

Essentially, Maria Chapdelaine points to the deep conflict at the heart of French-Canadian identity: a deep desire for sovereign selfhood that (supposedly) must be suppressed in order for the “race” to collectively survive as such. François Paradis is a compelling figure, mythic even; Lorenzo Surprenant’s comfortable life in New England is powerfully attractive; but both represent unstable paths – both put the French-Canadian identitary tradition in jeopardy. Maria, who represents the literal and figurative bearer of the next generation of French Canada, must not be allowed to pursue those futures. If that means that her agency, her very self, must be snuffed
out, then so be it. At this point in Quebec history, *reddition* and *survivance* remain central to Quebec’s identity as a nation, and the girl-body is the battleground on which that narrative is reinscribed over and over again.

As we move on to analyze our second girlhood narrative, *Bonheur d’occasion*, we will see that these prerogatives persist deep into the middle decades of the twentieth century. Despite the change in décor, despite the modernity seeping into and necessarily altering the shape of French-Canadian identity, the core narrative of Roy’s novel remains strikingly equivalent to that of Hémon’s: once again, we will see that for the girl, the only acceptable way into adult womanhood within this identititary framework is through the *reddition* of her body as sovereign territory in the name of *survivance*.

**Part II: Desire versus survivance in Bonheur d’occasion**

Thirty years after Louis Hémon wrote *Maria Chapdelaine*, the young Manitoban writer Gabrielle Roy wrote another instant classic: her novel *Bonheur d’occasion*. Roy’s unique personal history and formidable talent as a writer – recognized across the Francophone world\(^1\) – come together to fuel a fascinating ethnographic and literary project in this novel. The prominence, complexity, and context of this novel make it a key piece of Quebec literature, and its focus on a girl

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\(^1\) Roy has won numerous literary prizes, and her work is read around the world to this day as part of school curricula, etc. A quote from her can be found on the Canadian $20 bill.
protagonist makes it highly relevant to this project. Moreover, as we shall see, it provides a compelling, challenging parallel to *Maria Chapdelaine*.

Born in the French-speaking Saint-Boniface neighborhood of Winnipeg, MB, Gabrielle Roy grew up acutely aware of the tenuous nature of French-Canadian identity within the larger framework of predominately Anglophone Canada and North America. After spending time in Europe as a young adult, Roy returned to Quebec, where she spent a great deal of time closely studying (and getting to know) Montreal’s French-Canadian population, their way of life, and their system of values and priorities. Roy’s background as part of a linguistic and cultural minority in Manitoba, her subsequent travels, and her “outsider” perspective on the world she portrays give her a uniquely nuanced perspective.

Roy’s gritty, brooding, perspicacious novel centers on the fate of a poor family from the French-speaking Saint-Henri neighborhood of Montreal in the first years of World War II’s eruption in Europe. The narrative is lengthy and episodic, and follows multiple characters over the same timeline. In turns, Roy gives voice to several of the Lacasse family members, including her girl-protagonist, Florentine. She also lends page space to Florentine’s two love interests and to a few other auxiliary figures. Together, these episodes form a tapestry-like depiction of life in Saint-Henri at a moment that finds its inhabitants on the verge of great change on many levels.

Among Roy’s democratic shifts in focus, which offer a broad variety of perspectives, the most discernible central plotline is the story of Florentine Lacasse
and her navigation of the last stages of her adolescence, especially her love affairs with two young men: the cynical, ambitious loner, Jean Lévesque, and the naïve, idealistic soldier, Emmanuel Létourneau.

Although the concrete and steel of the city in Bonheur d’occasion hardly evokes the hardy rural austerity of the roman du terroir, many critics have nevertheless pointed out that it is the tropes of that genre that Roy artfully transposes onto this new context in order to reflect the turbulent state of Quebec’s ongoing struggle for a firm national identity at that time. In essence, both Maria Chapdelaine and Bonheur d’occasion ask the same fundamental question, and even use similar techniques. The question seems to be: Will the French-Canadian people ever escape their subaltern status (their “feminine” destiny) as a nation?

The pretext for exploring this question in both novels is charting the coming-of-age of a girl on the edge of adulthood, making her passage from girlhood toward womanhood an allegorical representation of that of her community or even of her nation’s passage through stages of tenuous, contested nationhood. In Roy’s novel as in Hémon’s, it is the girl, rather than the boy or young man, who resurfaces as the locus of these questions. Her struggle to assert herself between a past that must be escaped, a turbulent present, and a future at once luminous with possibility and tenebrous with uncertainty, offers a dramatic depiction of the French-Canadian nation’s struggle along those same lines throughout its history of proud, frustrated survivance as a colonized people, always secretly hoping for a successful revolt.
Although Roy’s take on the girl is radically different from Hémon’s, due to the differences in generation, gender, social location, agenda, and nationality between the two authors, both of these novelists use their girl-figures to suggest the same problem: a deepening anxiety surrounding the future of both the French-Canadian girl and the French-Canadian nation as coherent identities in the early part of the twentieth century.

Roy’s central girl-figure is the eldest daughter of the Lacasse family, a nineteen-year-old waitress named Florentine. Although many characters find themselves similarly at points of crisis, likewise engaged in choosing from multiple possible futures, the core of Roy’s narrative centers on Florentine, and it is Florentine’s story that both shapes and drives the novel’s development. Like Maria Chapdelaine, this story opens with its girl-protagonist’s romantic awakening and closes when she chooses a husband, although Bonheur d’occasion does carry the story a few days past Florentine’s wedding. This makes Florentine’s girlhood narrative the chronological frame for Roy’s novel. In addition, Florentine’s trajectory is the core story of the novel; the other characters whose perspectives Roy explores are auxiliary, serving to flesh out the context of Florentine’s current situation on a broader scale and to offer clarification as to how others perceive her. As in Maria Chapdelaine, the key struggle of the novel is essentially whether the central girl-figure can break the cycle of old-stock French-Canadian feminine destiny – whether she can avoid following in her mother’s footsteps, and escape the seemingly
inevitable erasure of her sovereign girlhood self to make room for the inscription of proper French-Canadian femininity across her girl-body.

What sets Roy’s novel apart from Hémon’s is that Roy’s girl-figure appears to have a strong level of agency and will, making it apparently possible, although still highly improbable, for her to escape her fate. However, what brings the narratives back together is that both Maria and Florentine must ultimately admit defeat, surrender their desires as unattainable, and accept a destiny other than what they truly want – one that restores them to their “rightful place” within the social structure of their community. While girlhood is markedly different in some ways between the novels, it is clear that the expectations and values associated with proper girlhood and its expected outcome, a certain kind of proper femininity, remain almost entirely unchanged between 1912 and 1945. However deeply these two girl-figures and the society they represent might hunger for new destinies, and however hard they might try to attain them, these stories reveal that there are undeniable limits to how much a girl’s desire and drive alone can accomplish in this context.

The girl at the center of *Bonheur d’occasion*, herself *en évolution*, is its ideal engine, providing all the restless energy and combustible desire necessary to express the state of life in 1940s Quebec. Roy’s omniscient third-person narrative style allows her reader a rich, nuanced view of Florentine’s interiority, revealing that Florentine is a hall of mirrors, fractured, layered, incoherent and at times incomprehensible – a puzzle even to herself at times. Roy’s narration also
exhaustively examines how Florentine is perceived and constructed by her family and entourage – how she is at once icon and human, princess and sorceress, child and woman, daughter and mother, and much more. Conflicted, ambitious, and struggling, Roy’s girl-protagonist stands as the most ambivalent, compelling, and unpredictable figure of her world. As she navigates the final stages of her girlhood, Florentine fights to stake out the borders of her own selfhood with an urgency that crackles across the page – the urgency of her nation’s hunger to survive, of her family’s extreme precarity, of her own life on a razor’s edge between complicity and revolt, between the radical self-definition and the unthinkable self-annihilation her world demands of her.

In my analysis of Bonheur d’occasion, I will again focus on three main ideas: how Florentine’s self is splintered through the prism of multiple gazes, how her choices are set up as vitally important to her world, and how the outcome of her story reveals the impossibility of her accession to individual sovereignty, despite her best efforts – how once again, resistance is ultimately futile. This will allow me to show that in spite of the new features and possibilities of girlhood in the city, thirty years after Maria Chapdelaine, Florentine Lacasse still faces the same unthinkable fate: surrendering her individual sovereignty in order to “survive.” As we shall see, despite her furious resistance, Florentine too must ultimately face her fate: to comply, “de même.”
Elle serait leur salut\textsuperscript{12}: the many faces of Florentine Lacasse

Gabrielle Roy’s masterful character development makes it very difficult to put together a concise, coherent portrait of Florentine Lacasse. Throughout the novel, she vacillates between her several chosen and expected identities as daughter, lover, sister, employee, woman-in-process, and friend, all the while grappling with a furious desire for coherent, sovereign subjectivity. Like Maria Chapdelaine, Florentine’s narrative reveals that she is “performing the desired and incoherent body of one becoming a woman” (Driscoll 62). Roy’s narrator describes Florentine as “cette inconnue d’elle-même” (118), and uses a multiplicity of gazes to convey her identity as the moving target that it is.

Although Florentine has a distinct personality and set of goals, her priorities shift, and her vision of herself is continually renegotiated. As we shall see, mobility, incompleteness, process, and a deep-seated frustration are all apt descriptors of Florentine’s struggle to assert her subjectivity; coupled with her relationship to her mother and to her own anticipated maternity, these aspects of Florentine’s character come together to mark her clearly (if momentarily) as an exemplary girl—no longer a child, but not yet a woman— for the duration of the novel. At the same time, she and her fate remain irreducibly bound to her society’s survivance. For her family and her suitors, Florentine’s girl-body represents the hope of an ideal future,

\textsuperscript{12} “She would be their salvation” – Referencing a thought from Florentine’s mother: “Florentine, si débrouillarde, si assurée, serait leur salut” (Bonheur 168)
whereas for Florentine herself, it is a trap waiting to stop her from surpassing that fixed destiny.

At its heart, this novel is a story of desire: the fervent wish of one girl to be free, and the opposing prerogatives of her family, her romantic interests, and her society that combine to outmaneuver her pursuit of her deviant dreams. Within the context of a Quebec nation struggling to situate itself within a rapidly changing, war-torn world, this narrative of impossible desires is especially complicated and important, and makes Florentine a compelling representative of her nation.

As an individual girl and as an embodiment of her nation, Florentine reveals the profound identity crisis looming on the horizon for Quebec with the advent of modernity. Destabilization of previous ideas of truth, subjectivity, and the very meaning of life that rocked the Western world in the mid-twentieth century are legible in many features of Florentine’s narrative. Perhaps the clearest of these is the manner in which Florentine’s developing subjectivity is represented through a multiplicity of gazes in the novel. In order to grasp the narrative of girlhood within this text, we will now unravel this tapestry of perspectives. Although the novel actually opens with Florentine’s own perspective, it is illuminating to observe first how she is viewed from without, and then compare that with how she sees herself.

For her parents, both of whom are figures deeply inscribed with abjection through their poverty, immobility, and seeming decrepitude, Florentine is the great hope of the family. She embodies the potential that they once held themselves, and so they imagine that one day, she will attain status and stability, and reach back to
rescue them all. This is particularly true of her mother, Rose-Anna, who is certain that “Florentine, si débrouillarde, si assurée, serait leur salut” (168). Rose-Anna considers her daughter to “s’être élevée bien au-dessus d’eux” (122) – whether she has raised herself above the family, her parents, or even the community is unclear, but her dedication to her work, however inglorious, and her growing independence, however tenuous, give her value in her parents’ eyes. Although Florentine has a grown brother almost her age, and several other siblings, she holds the same mystical prestige as Maria Chapdelaine within her family.

However, Florentine’s mother also expresses a fear that as her beloved eldest daughter is growing up, she is also growing away from her. There is a tense relationship of guilt and widening separation between mother and daughter in the novel, that comes to a head when Florentine sleeps with Jean and becomes pregnant. While she never tells her mother about either event, her mother secretly guesses (without ever being sure), and the secret looms like a ghostly wall between them, rendering them incomprehensible to one another. Florentine deeply fears both becoming a mother and becoming her mother, of course; Rose-Anna also fears her daughter’s unhappiness, sadly rueing that “Un jour, [Florentine] aussi serait abandonnée à la souffrance et à l’humiliation du corps ...” (362). The strange complicity mixed with enmity that alienates mother from daughter is inextricably bound to the girl-body. The more Florentine moves toward becoming a woman, the less, strangely, she belongs to Rose-Anna. This idea comes across all the more clearly in a scene when Rose-Anna notices with mingled joy and sorrow that
Florentine’s little sister Yvonne is entering puberty. The gaze of Florentine’s family anchors her within girlhood, and inscribes her girl-body with an almost messianic role in her nation’s future.

This inscription becomes clearer and more nuanced through the competing gazes of Florentine’s two suitors: Jean Lévesque and Emmanuel Létourneau. These two young men “read” Florentine in very different ways. For his part, the defiantly unattached Jean struggles with an intense sort of love-hate sentiment toward her. Because he over-identifies with her, seeing his own naked ambition in her trademark “avidité”, Jean holds Florentine at arm’s length, treating her fixation on him with a mixture of cynicism and contempt. During an early encounter with her at the restaurant where she works, Jean notices her “regard mordoré, prudent, attentif et extraordinairement avide” (13). He bears no illusions of her as innocent or angelic, even if she is naïve and inexperienced. However, he also finds himself compellingly attracted to her; his desire and her attempts to manipulate that feeling intensely frustrate him. As their relationship develops, he finds that “plus il la désirait, moins il gardait d’illusions sur elle, moins au fond peut-être il l’aimait” (188). Caught between desire and loathing, Jean cannot get Florentine out of his head any more than she can get him out of hers.

Coming from a figure embodying individualistic, capitalist forms of ambition, one pursuing a very bildungsroman-like path toward attaining sovereign

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13 “Sous le vêtement de nuit, Rose-Anna venait de sentir les formes naissantes, toutes gracieuses, de sa fille. ‘Déjà!’ se dit-elle. Et elle ne sut pas tout de suite si cette pensée lui donnait de la joie ou l’accablait davantage” (Bonheur 353).

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subjectivity as a person, this mixture of attraction and repulsion is particularly interesting. Much as François Paradis and Lorenzo Surprenant represented alternative futures for Maria Chapdelaine (who arguably represented the French-Canadian people), Jean Lévesque can easily be read as a representation of the materialistic, modern, anti-traditional cultural trends on the rise in urban Quebec – forces that clearly threatened the set patterns of French-Canadian identity. Jean sees Florentine as a doomed figure, flailing in furious rage against her fate, but already in a free-fall toward entrapment in a mundane, traditionally-minded life. Indeed, at one point, he muses that she has “du diable dans le corps comme un chat qui se noie” (68). He sees her imminent (self-)destruction on the horizon as clearly as she does, if not more so, and refuses to get caught up in it, however much he might pity or desire her at the same time. In spite of herself, Florentine embodies exactly the subaltern, tied-down, self-effacing destiny that Jean desperately wants to escape. If Jean is the masculine ideal of Quebec forging a new identity in the modern world, the Florentine (in his eyes) is the weak, feminized, colonized past and present identity he must shed in order to be free. Florentine can never just be a person for Jean; her body, her language, her clothing – everything about her is inscribed with meaning in his eyes, and he cannot separate her as an individual from what she represents to him. Just as Florentine is an icon of hope for her family, she is an emblem of doom and guilt, an impending albatross, to the ambitious Jean.

14 “Florentine elle-même personnifiait ce genre de vie miserable contre laquelle tout son être se soulevait … Elle était sa misère, sa solitude, son enfance triste, sa jeunesse solitaire; elle était tout ce qu’il avait hai, ce qu’il reniait et aussi ce qui restait le plus profondément lié à lui-même” (Bonheur 209).
Jean’s friend Emmanuel Létourneau, on the other hand, sees Florentine very differently. He is not blind to her flaws, such as her obsession with appearance, her mercurial personality, and her lack of authenticity; rather, he sees these parts of her as features thrust upon her by her circumstances, and pities her for being obligated to behave in those ways. To this idealistic young man, Roy’s girl-protagonist is at once a troubled, tragic figure in need of saving and an image of hope for the future to which he can cling as he goes off into the maelstrom of war.

Emmanuel explicitly dreams of finding “une vraie jeune fille” (67), and so Florentine’s artificiality troubles him. He seems to see (or want to see) something better glimmering under the surface of her hardened veneer, and wishes to bring it out. “Qu’on la laisse donc tranquille! Qu’elle soit naturelle et n’ait plus dans les yeux ce regard de défense et d’avidité aussi” (111, my emphasis). Avidité, which means greed, eagerness, or keen desire, is one of Florentine’s enduring features, as we have seen. Jean saw this and understood it, half-respecting and half-despising it. For his part, Emmanuel wishes for her to set aside that part of herself – to bring her to conform to his own ideal: that of an authentic, “natural” girl. Later on, when Florentine comes to a party at his parents’ home, they dance together, and suddenly she shows a new “docilité,” “soumission,” and “abandon” (134) that are quite at odds with her usual persona. After the party, everyone goes to mass, and Emmanuel actually feels “une paix, une détente, comme il n’en avait jamais ressentî” (141) as he walks arm-in-arm with the exhausted Florentine. Whereas Jean read Florentine as a threat, Emmanuel makes her his refuge.
Indeed, it is the peace or reassurance which Emmanuel ascribes to Florentine that becomes her most important feature (and function) as part of his dreams for the future. Emmanuel is a young soldier about to head off to war, and he is thirsty for an icon of hope to carry with him on his grim journey. As his departure approaches, “il voulait auparavant s’accorder quelques journées d’entièere détente. Alors il rappela à lui la douce image de Florentine” (300). Knowing what we do about Florentine’s hard-edged personality, as readers, we know that Emmanuel is only seeing what he wants to see, and not the real Florentine. He remains convinced that Florentine is a “vraie jeune fille” – indeed, to him, “elle était mieux que distinguée. Elle était la vie elle-même, avec son expérience de la pauvreté, et sa révolte contre la pauvreté, avec ses longs cheveux flottants et son petit nez déterminé, et ses mots bizarres, durs parfois, ses mots de vérité” (303, my emphasis). What Jean sees as artifice and manipulation, Emmanuel reads as raw reality, the unhappy but expected fruit of a hard life. He sees Florentine as a diamond in the rough, as an icon of the possibility of a better future – one that he will help to make.

Jean Lévesque’s resistance to Florentine is a forward-oriented reaction that can be read as an interrogation of the relevance of national identity (especially French-Canadian identity) in a new, increasingly global world. Emmanuel Létourneau’s idealization of Florentine moves in the other direction, back toward a Maria Chapdelaine-esque dream of survivance and the original French-Canadian colonial project. In both cases, Florentine is the specter of Quebec’s past for her
would-be lovers. Both believe they see the “real” Florentine, but neither is truly able to separate her from what she represents to them. Just like Maria, Florentine is doomed to bear an iconic identity that she did not create and from which she is ultimately powerless to truly disengage herself.

However, despite the stark feminine destiny looming on the horizon (in a very similar manner to that which we observed in *Maria Chapdelaine*), Florentine’s girlhood viewed from her own perspective is a brave insurgency against the very spectral identity her lovers and parents assign to her: that of one-becoming-the-Right-Kind-of-Woman, that of proper French-Canadian femininity.

Arguably the most striking distinction between Louis Hémon’s depiction of Maria Chapdelaine and Roy’s characterization of Florentine Lacasse is in the treatment of the two girls’ desires. While Hémon’s narrative opens by constructing Maria from the outside, making her a superhuman figure in the admiring eyes of the young men of Peribonka, Roy’s novel begins by doing the opposite, immediately foregrounding her girl-protagonist’s desire as the primary driving force of the plot. The very first sentence of *Bonheur d’occasion* reads: “À cette heure, Florentine s’était prise à guetter la venue du jeune homme qui, la veille, entre tant de propos railleurs, lui avait laissé entendre qu’il la trouvait jolie” (11). The simplicity of the sentence’s subject matter, a girl’s interest piqued by a boy’s interest, is belied by the structural tortuousness of the phrase. Grammatically, the line’s layers of disruptive multiple clauses and verb tenses convey the mixture of confusion and focus that characterize Florentine’s navigation of her own girlhood.
The jumbled pieces of the sentence bring attention to the timeline – À cette heure, la veille, the covert intentionality of the young man’s insinuations – entre tant de propos railleurs, avait laissé entendre, and to Florentine’s self-conscious and conflicted act of watching – s’était prise à guetter. Moreover, by ending the sentence with the words il la trouvait jolie, and then jumping to a new paragraph, Roy efficiently unveils her girl-protagonist’s greatest obsession: being desired. Florentine knows she has caught this young man’s eye, and intends to make the most of it. Her youthful curiosity, implied insecurity, and clear desire for recognition form the basis of the definition of girlhood given in this novel. On top of that, Florentine’s romantic, even sexual, desire for connection with Jean Lévesque is openly foregrounded in Bonheur d’occasion, rather than prudishly implied, as in Maria Chapdelaine. This combination of desires and ambitions is the driving force of Florentine’s urgent quest for individual sovereignty as a would-be autonomous female subject.

Florentine is undeniably more proactive, even aggressive, in the pursuit of her desires than Maria ever dreamed of being. She also has access to new forms of agency and mobility that Maria could not have claimed. In fact, Florentine has access to enough agency to believe that she can really shape her own future. Beyond the power she, like Maria, holds as a marriageable girl, with her body becoming the locus of multiple desires, a contested territory that she temporarily “governs”, she also has mobility in that she is employed, and financially supports not only herself but also her family. At first glance, it appears that Florentine might actually have a
say in the shaping of her destiny. Furthermore, what makes her most different from Maria is that she is not only aware of the power she has, but also fully prepared to deploy it to her own advantage. Her strong sense of individual ambition makes her an altogether different kind of girl.

What counterbalances Florentine's mobility and drive are the narrow limits of her world, further inhibited by her minimal education. Although she is determined to make a move, so to speak, she is unable to see clearly either what that move should be or even what moves are possible. As a result, she spends the novel struggling with a sense of being trapped in an “attente exaspérée” (11), endowed with wings of ambition and vision but simultaneously crippled by a strange passivity mixed with fatalism that smacks much more of Maria Chapdelaine and her ilk than of the calculating Florentine. Roy’s narration allows the reader to sense Florentine's truly girl-like feelings of simultaneous acceleration and immobility. Time, biology, and multiple desires combine to compel her to charge forward toward adult materno-womanhood, but convention, obligation, and uncertainty keep her trapped in limbo at the same time.

Florentine’s angst stems from girlhood conditions like those Beauvoir describes in *Le Deuxième Sexe*:

C’est une pénible condition que de se savoir passive et dépendante à l’âge de l’espoir et de l’ambition, à l’âge où s’exalte la volonté de vivre et de prendre une place sur terre ; c’est dans cet âge conquérant que la femme apprend qu’aucune conquête ne lui est permise, qu’elle doit se renier, que son avenir dépend du bon plaisir des hommes (132).
Beauvoir’s description accurately pinpoints the core problem for both Florentine and Maria: the denial of their agency, their sovereignty, within the framework of their society. As we observed in our reading of *Maria Chapdelaine*, unlike the adolescent males in their lives, these adolescent females, however intelligent, driven, or audacious, have no right to self-determination – indeed, are discouraged from pursuing it. Both inwardly burn with frustration. Roy eloquently describes how Florentine rails within against her fate: “elle éprouvait, ... un indicible mépris pour sa condition de femme, une inimitié envers elle-même qui la déroutait” (253). Florentine sees her imminent arrival at adult femininity dangling like the sword of Damocles over her head, and shakes her fist at it. She swears that “J’aurai pas de misère comme sa mère” (90), even though she knows that "s’échapper, elle seule, de leur vie, c’était déjà beaucoup, c’était déjà très difficile" (125).

Florentine’s identity crisis and quest for a different future is comparable to the growing identity crisis within Quebec Catholicism during the war and postwar years. Historian Michael Gauvreau considers the developing sense of a “generational gap” between Catholic schools of thought related to marriage and gender roles during this period in his contribution to the book *The Church Confronts Modernity* (ed. Tentler 2012). He argues that within the Church, many clerics involved in education and social services feared the arrival of “a state of cultural adolescence, a perpetual identity crisis that would affect not only the individual, but because of the public character of the family, the wider Quebec society” (75). Quebec, like Florentine, was caught up in a decision process related to who and what it desired
to be(come), and whether arrival at such a destination was even possible as a coherent, cohesive nation. The importance of such a decision process cannot be overstated; choosing a course for the future, an identity to pursue, would potentially make or break Quebec as a would-be sovereign nation, just as Florentine’s pursuit of an alternative future might seal her fate as a would-be sovereign subject.

For the Church and for Quebec society, like for Florentine, a moment of change looms on the horizon; indeed: “il fallait jouer maintenant, immédiatement, tout ce qu’elle était encore, tout son charme physique dans un terrible enjeu pour le bonheur” (20). The stakes are high, the goal – happiness, liberty, subjectivity – almost unattainable, the game unbearable, but Florentine is determined to at least give it a go. After all, “elle était Florentine, elle dansait sa vie, elle la bravait sa vie, elle la dépensait sa vie, elle la brûlait sa vie, et d’autres vies aussi brûleraient avec la sienne” (135).

Unwilling as Maria Chapdelaine to accept her mother’s model of self-immolation, Florentine does her utmost to avoid submitting to the seemingly inevitable, cyclical destiny implicitly prescribed to her. However, although Florentine’s determination causes her to push harder where Maria conceded, in the end, even Florentine admits defeat.

_Florentine’s pragmatic girlhood “exit”: Trading revolt for survivance_

The crux of Roy’s narrative is an idea of a better future confronting the seemingly immutable “reality” of its unattainability. Like in _Maria Chapdelaine_, an
entire people’s effort toward progress is mapped across the body of a girl on the verge of womanhood, and her choice of a husband becomes an allegory for her nation’s identity crisis. Maria’s choice was between fidelity to either her own passion (personified in François Paradis, the charming but doomed woodsman), progress (represented by the slick, citified Lorenzo Surprenant), or tradition (in the form of the humble neighbor farmer Eutrope Gagnon), can be read as an allegory for old-stock and rural Quebec culture’s situation. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the French-Canadian nation found itself at a crossroads between possible futures: pursuit of an impossible will-o-the-wisp life on the frontier, pursuit of the new dreams of industrialization, or the perpetuation of a time-honored but hardscrabble agrarian life.

Roy’s girl-protagonist has two suitors instead of three. Florentine’s negotiation of romantic relationships with the ambitious individualist, Jean Lévesque, and the naïve communitarian, Emmanuel Létourneau, is an image of her generation’s need to choose between individual and collective modes of pursuing progress in the increasingly modern urban sphere.

In both of these novels, the girl and her navigation of the last stage of her girlhood becomes a privileged site upon which national identity questions are asked, if not answered. These girls’ processes of exiting girlhood unveil troubling undercurrents of repression and self-destruction that seem to be requisite for the survival of a certain way of life. Both must make significant concessions in order to reach, if not happiness, stability upon exiting girlhood. It is clear that the figure of
the girl a key personification of Quebec’s ongoing quest for self-determination and a coherent national identity in *Bonheur d’occasion* like in *Maria Chapdelaine*.

Essentially, Florentine inhabits a *corps frontalier*, a no-man’s-land between stable, acceptable identitary categories. Her becoming-woman (which signifies “un-becoming-subject” or “becoming-object”) is an embodiment of the continual renegotiation of her society’s *survivance* as such. Just like Maria Chapdelaine, she holds the keys to her society’s future. Unlike Maria, her struggle is further complicated by her physical situation in the urban context of Montréal. The city, a space of encounters, possibilities, ambiguities, and power negotiations, heightens the tension between past and present, individualism and collectivism, in the novel. In a 1966 article, Quebec historian Maurice Lemire comments on Florentine’s complicated situation. He sees her as inhabiting an impossible in-between space, caught between her parents’ attachment to the land and her own desired but unattainable integration into the city: “elle ne se rattache plus à la campagne, mais elle n’appartient pas encore à la ville” – indeed, “cette impossibilité de se situer constitue tout son drame” (32). There are clear parallels between Florentine’s untenable no longer/not yet identity – a border space on multiple levels – and that of the increasingly urban French-Canadian working class, the descendants of the struggling *habitants* of Maria Chapdelaine’s world. Both Florentine and her people are caught in a period of transition that they cannot really control.

Like Lemire, I see Florentine and Rose-Anna as “des types à travers desquels le drame de tout un peuple se joue” (35); however, I consider Florentine in
particular as the privileged representative of her struggling people, and moreover, I view her status as a girl as the key feature allowing her to function as such.

Just as in Maria Chapdeliane we observed Maria’s consciousness of her iconic (representative) status as a burdensome companion to her individual self, we have observed Florentine’s sense of almost insurmountable pressure and urgency hanging on her pursuit of a better future. What is new in Bonheur d’occasion is that instead of peering out into the darkness in silent supplication, hoping for a new future to arrive on her doorstep, Florentine turns her gaze toward herself in her daring quest for transcendence. While Maria harbored dreams of passion, excitement, and new life, Florentine is actively engaged in an effort to remake herself into something altogether different.

Roy expresses this in part through Florentine’s obsession with her exteriority. She spies on herself in every mirror she passes, hungry for “a new image of herself” (Green WNI 70). She cakes on makeup in an effort to alter herself by her own power, constantly reevaluating the effectiveness of her performativity, incessantly monitoring her own “identity tenuously constituted in time” (Butler 519). Florentine intently studies her own process of becoming a woman, tracking the progression of her own girlhood, always on the lookout for her chance to jump the rails and take a new direction that might lead her to happiness. She measures herself against her own desires and her desirability in the eyes of others, seeking to gain an edge through the fragile power stemming from her sex appeal. Florentine is hungry to see herself clearly, and to like what she sees. Until she can, she continues
to adjust, strategize, and deploy every ounce of her creativity. Unlike Maria, Florentine demonstrates intentionality and agency in her effort to subvert her own impending colonization as woman-to-be through deliberate exertion of her tenuous sovereignty over the territory of her girl-body.

Her first target is, of course, Jean Lévesque. His inaccessibility torments her; she is determined to make him desire her and to bring him under her control. However, while she manages to fascinate him, as we saw, their relationship is always doomed by Jean's insuperable ambition to escape the very life Florentine represents (to him). The impossibility of the relationship frustrates Florentine, but nevertheless, she prays fervently yet cryptically (again echoing Maria Chapdelaine) to “rester enivrée d’un mauvais rêve” (144), and promises a Maria-like “neuvaine” if her wish is granted. Her alternative, Emmanuel, is repugnant to her – much in the same way as she is repugnant to Jean. Emmanuel represents continuity with her mother's way of life rather than departure from it, stability rather than (re)volution.

When he boldly kisses her goodbye at the end of their time together, she feels “à la fois une envie de rire et de pleurer” (147). On the surface, she scorns his simple affection and resents the fact that she can so easily draw Emmanuel when Jean seems so frustratingly unattainable even to her best efforts. However, at the same time, perhaps she also senses his place in her future, and laughs and cries at the intolerable predictability of it all. Jean might be able to escape, but Florentine never will.
In the end, although Florentine succeeds in seducing Jean, he disappears soon after, and she is left pregnant and alone. Desperate, she turns to Emmanuel for rescue, carefully snares his heart, and manages to secure a comfortable living and a respectable reputation thanks in large part to her habileté. However, doing so, she ends up married and pregnant, living in the same city, and plans to continue working at the diner as long as she can to earn more money – stuck in the very life she fought so hard to escape. “Oh, qu’elle haïssait le piège dans lequel elle était tombée!” (344).

While Maria surrendered her sovereignty for the “greater good” of the French-Canadian identitary mission, Florentine surrenders hers in a play for stability and status. The resulting message is decidedly harsher. Maria Chapdelaine was held aloft for decades as an icon of respectability and self-sacrifice. Florentine, however, stands more as a cautionary tale or critique of the illusory nature of those values, as well as their high cost for the girls and women expected to embody them. This indicates what Mary Jean Green calls “the failure of a feminine ideal that occupied a key position within traditional culture” (Green WNI 73). There can be little doubt that Maria, like Florentine, “éprouvait, plus fort encore que sa peur, un indicible mépris pour sa condition de femme, une inimitié envers elle-même qui la déroutait” (253). The collapse of old ideals of French-Canadian femininity and the rising rage of the girls expected to perpetuate it come together to open up the way for the period of turmoil, questioning, revolt, and revolution coming soon to Quebec.
Florentine marshals an arsenal of ruses and manipulations in the hopes of claiming sovereign ownership over herself as a coveted territory, but in the end, she is forced to compromise, and allow herself to be subsumed under the auspices of her husband's authority and name in order to save face. She maintains covert resistance after the fact, remaining “ambitieuse et secrètement solidaire des siens” (384), but true sovereignty is already a dead dream. Here again, Florentine beautifully models the destiny of the would-be-sovereign Quebec nation: ambitious, secretly loyal to one another, but forced by necessity into a supported but subordinate position under Anglophone institutional power. In other words, always already subaltern – much like the girls in these texts.

*From girls to ghosts: The fate of French-Canadian girlhood in Maria Chapdelaine and Bonheur d’occasion*

The conflict between the girl’s individual identity and the iconic identity ascribed to her by her society places her in an impossible situation. Either she evades the role her society expects her to play, and dares a deviance that could lead to ostracism, poverty, or even death, or she represses her own desires, and surrenders both her sovereignty and her subjectivity in order to survive as part of her own society (and allow her culture to survive as such). In both of the works we have studied here, the element of *choice* implied in this tension between desires is in fact evacuated from the girl's life. Both Maria and Florentine believe they have the right to choose their own destinies, but in reality, neither is ultimately allowed to
make her own choice. Instead, their fate is decided for them: They will annihilate themselves.

This compulsory auto-destruction of the girl has a clear pattern in these works. Both Florentine and Maria manifest strong desires for other destinies. Both pursue those alternate paths with all the strength they can muster. Both sense that their desires are somehow “forbidden,” that they must either be hidden or justified somehow, and both face opposition from their societies in the form of (usually) implicit resistance from family and (explicit) resistance from force majeure narrative “violence.” Both ultimately must face the fact that their iconic status as girls supersedes their individuality, and that they will be made to surrender their individual selves in the service of something “greater.” Both in the end surrender ... but neither really has a choice. The last stages of French-Canadian feminine adolescence in this traditional, survivant identitary framework brings clarity, even disillusionment, but no real ability to alter one’s rapid course toward adult femininity.

If we accept these girls as representatives of the French-Canadian nation, then we can push these conclusions to another level. These two girls are colonized by their societies, their bodies appropriated into the familial social structure desired by their community. Their futures are colonized by the adult femininity increasingly ascribed to (inscribed upon) them. This happens on economic, social, and religious grounds, with a logic of preservationism (survivance) at its heart. This negation of a previously sovereign subjectivity, which must now accept subaltern status,
reiterates the surrender of Quebec in 1763 and even defeat of the Patriots in 1837-38.

Moreover, I contend that these two girls in particular demonstrate how the Quebec girl can uniquely, powerfully be construed as the volksgeist of the Quebec people (à la Marx and Derrida) in ways that commonly-cited figures such as the intrepid coureur de bois or doomed-but-glorious (male) patriote cannot. Other scholars have glimpsed this particular pertinence of the girl; Maurice Lemire and Mary Jean Green, among others, recognize that “the drama of struggle and survival enacted by the daughters in these novels ... provide an apt representation of the situation of French Canadians in a period of profound social change” (Green WNI 60). Green cites the “disarray of the Quebec people” at this time and notes the importance of the “marginal status of the female protagonists” to “mirror” the marginalization of French-Canadian society (Green WNI 60-61). However, what these scholars do not meaningfully address is that despite the usefulness and accuracy of reading women’s subalternt status as representative of that of the nation, these two figures are girls, not women, and the distinction is enormously important. The girl’s unique features as one becoming a woman is able to embody the subalternity, uncertainty, potentiality, and hunger for sovereign subjectivity coursing furiously under the surface of survivant French-Canadian culture. Girls, more so than women, personify the ambivalent, untenable, irresolvable status of the once-colonizing, now-colonized French-Canadian people, who exist, like the girl, as a sort of borderland on many levels. Girls inhabit “already ambivalent positions in
relation to dominant models of subjectivity,” their bodies marking out “the ambivalence of boundaries around crucial territories such as the State, the Mother, and the Law” (Driscoll 29). The choice of these two authors to situate individual girls nearing the end of their processes of girlhood at the center of their narratives is powerful because of the special significance of the girl as both icon of possibility and harbinger of the threat of change.

The points of resonance between Maria and Florentine, as they battle between holding iconic status without and being subjects-in-process (or in crisis) within, help to underline the coherent idea of the girl that emerges from the intertext between these two novels. While some critics, such as Mary Jean Green, see Florentine as “opposite” to Maria Chapdelaine, arguing that Maria “consciously [chose] to repeat her mother’s life” (WNI 68), this is simply not the case. As we have seen, Hémon’s narrative builds tension and resistance between his protagonist and her seemingly inevitable destiny to the point that when Maria reaches her crisis point, and is staring down the barrel of “une longue vie terne et dure,” her decision is explicitly that “Non, elle ne voulait pas vivre comme cela” (MC 150). This last phrase is its own paragraph, a stand-alone sentence, underlining its finality and insisting on it as an earnest affirmation. Hémon’s protagonist explicitly rejects following in her mother’s footsteps quite as clearly as Florentine, who declares that “j’aurai pas de misère comme sa mère” (90). Through their parallel emotional distress – both are frequently described as confused, unsure of themselves and caught up in their own émoi or inner turmoil – and parallel ambivalence on many levels, a
strong drive to break a seemingly unbreakable cycle of materno-womanhood as
destiny is their clearest and most enduring shared trait.

Together, these two girl figures allow us to clearly see the core questions of
the evolving French-Canadian (soon to be Québécois) national identity through the
lens of the evolving identities of its girlhood. We see in these works that while the
cultural pillars have not yet fallen - family and community values have hung on,
Catholic doctrine remains central, and the French language is still being spoken - the
half-blind and heavily-romanticized confidence of Maria Chapdelaine is undeniably
eroding by the time Bonheur d’occasion appears. Hémon’s novel left us with Maria’s
final surrender; Roy’s narrative concludes with an image of a sickly tree clinging to
life in the polluted, overcrowded city as storm clouds loom on the horizon, evoking
images of blighted youth, false promises, and a turbulent future. Neither image is
hopeful. Both conclusions signal defeat, their apparently happy endings rendered
ambiguous at least through form and word choice. The girl, icon of either hope or
doom, mysteriously metamorphoses into the woman, image in this context of self-
sacrifice in the name of convention. Despite the illusory agency she thought was
hers, she is ultimately compelled to sign over her sovereignty in order to remain a
part of her people, because there simply is no other option open to her. For the
French-Canadian girl, at least through the first half of the twentieth century, it
appears that the only plane of existence available to her is that of the survivante-
revenante, an existence between life and death.
This portrait of the French-Canadian girl as a temporary sovereign doomed to surrender her selfhood is grim indeed. However, the failed insurgencies of Maria and Florentine point toward a restlessness, a hunger for change, rising up within the French-Canadian people in the mid-twentieth century. As we shall see, the systematic suppression of the girl and especially of her voice simply could not go on uncontested. In what follows, we will see how the next generation of girlhood narratives begins the work of subverting the process of “ghosting” the girl, a rebellion resonant with the new transformative energy of the coming Quiet Revolution. The first stage in the evolution of Quebec girlhood in the twentieth century was an awakening to the crushing ramifications of traditional patterns of becoming feminine in French-Canadian society. While this brought inner turmoil and some efforts at resistance, it would take another generation to take that discontent and channel it into more forceful, change-inducing resistance. The next stage, as we shall see, involves the liberation of the girl-voice, the subversion of the girl's compulsory “ghosting”, and a strong, open critique of the patterns of femininity illustrated in Maria Chapdelaine and Bonheur d'occasion.
CHAPTER 2

Insurgent memory: The subversive specter of girlhood in *La fin des étés* and *Kamouraska*

"Now women return from afar, from always: from ‘without,’ from the heath where witches are kept alive; from below, from beyond ‘culture’; from their childhood which men have been trying desperately to make them forget, condemning it to ‘eternal rest.’ The little girls and their ‘ill-mannered’ bodies immured, well-preserved, intact unto themselves, in the mirror. Frigidified. But are they ever seething underneath!"

(Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, p. 877)

In the middle decades of the twentieth century, Quebec and its people developed a complex love-hate relationship to the past. On one hand, *Je me souviens*, the provincial motto, is inscribed on myriad surfaces as a call to the French-Canadian people to remember their belonging to a proud national heritage – that of colonizers, bearers of a legacy of a sacred mission on behalf of a sovereign power. On the other hand, that same motto also implies over two centuries of existence as second-class citizens inhabiting the same territory they once claimed for themselves. This second memory marks the past as stale, oppressive, and poisonous – to be thrown off at all costs.
Where women are concerned within Quebec, *Je me souviens* is a troubling statement. On one hand, as we saw in the previous chapter, women historically performed the major work of memory in Quebec society, perpetuating the pillars of French-Canadian identity from their traditional place in the home. On the other, that traditional place in the home was predicated upon the complete evacuation of each woman’s girlhood self upon her entrance into a marital contract. A woman was supposed to be a self-sacrificing being who lived for others, subsuming her own desires under the auspices of family unity and a happy home as the foundation of national unity. For Quebec literary scholar Anne Ancrenat, this meant that: "Il a fallu qu’une moitié du genre humain s’oublie" (MDF 288, original emphasis). Adult femininity, an indispensable part of French Canadian identitary preservation, necessitated the repeated annihilation of the girl. In the previous chapter, we saw the toll that took on girls themselves, but we also saw how Maria Chapdelaine and Florentine Lacasse accepted their castigation, ultimately recognizing their self-effacement as the cost of preserving the identitary borders of their culture. But what if they had objected?

The two works we will examine in this chapter explore a new generation of girlhood in revolt from within a nation in the midst of its own revolution. By the 1960s, the era of Quebec’s Quiet Revolution, the feminine condition represented in works like *Bonheur d’occasion* or *Maria Chapdelaine* was already evolving; women and girls could now work outside the home for pay, vote, and enjoy greater legal autonomy. However, just because the girl was no longer simply the wifemother-to-
be does not mean that she lost her symbolic significance overnight. Just as the girl stood as the icon for the renewal of old covenants of national belonging in the previous chapter, in this chapter, the palimpsestic figure of the girl remains a key battleground in Quebec’s ideological struggle for a coherent national self, and the representation of girls and their girlhood remains a telling reflection of the particular nature of twentieth-century Quebec identity politics.

University of Ottawa scholar E. Martin Meunier argues that "Ce qu’il faut impérieusement conserver de la Révolution tranquille, c’est non seulement l’idée de solidarité sociale, mais aussi l’idée que le Québec était un projet. Le Québec allait quelque part" (Côté 2010, NP). This quest for a coherent, autonomous national identity was the central preoccupation of Quebec artists and intellectuals, especially writers, during the 1960s. However, the many women who sought to involve themselves in this process often found themselves at once unable to fully participate (because of their womanhood) and unable to fully express themselves. As a result, a split between feminism and nationalism emerges in Quebec literature of the time. As Isabelle Boisclair points out in her book _Ouvrir la voie/x_ (2004), “si, pour les hommes, [le] besoin [de definition identitaire] s’exprime en termes de quête du pays, pour les femmes, cette quête d’identité et d’affirmation de soi se traduit par l’énonciation d’une identité féminine, ... transcendant les frontières” (214). The

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Incidentally, the author of this article, Roch Côté (journalist, b. 1941), has a long history of antifeminist leanings, from his responses to feminist literature in _Le Devoir_ to his infamous _Manifeste d’un salaud_ in 1991 and beyond. Yet another instance of the strange conflict between national and feminine identity negotiations in this period!
efforts to reaffirm Quebec nationality in new ways had many subversive elements, but at its heart, Quebec nationalism – whether conservative or liberal – still leaned on patriarchal structures of identity in order to affirm the Quebec nation as its own sovereign subject. This had the effect of once again banishing Quebec women and their concerns to a secondary position, which left Québécoise writers alienated and even reviled as distractors. Most historians agree the ultimate effect of Quiet Revolution-era nationalism on the women's movement in Quebec is that it was delayed (in relation to parallel women's movements happening in Europe and the United States) for as much as a decade. As a result, writing by women in 1960s Quebec most consistently expresses “un désir de se reconnaître femme contre toutes les identifications nationales” (Boisclair 214). This desire was truly the driving force behind their work, and came to set them on a totally separate path from that of the nationalist movement.

That being said, it is not useful or realistic to totally uproot these two works from their context, nor is it the goal of this chapter; on the contrary. Instead, my analysis of these two works will lean on the fact that these two narratives of girlhood and the trials of becoming woman arise from the territory of Quebec and belong meaningfully to it. Moreover, as we shall see, the elements of girlhood that come out most strongly in these two texts in fact provide useful mirrors for the state of the Quebec nation.

The two works we will explore in this chapter will primarily allow us to better understand the relationship between memory, girlhood, and the desire for
coherent, sovereign forms of identity – both nationally and au féminin – within Quebec. First, I will bring La fin des étés, Anne Claire Poirier’s second film (released in 1964), out of the shadows of its relative obscurity to reveal how it eloquently expresses the psychological state of the girl as a figure caught between past and present, unable to make her voice heard over the insistence of still-dominant masculine discourses of progress and transcendence. Then, I will reveal how this mostly forgotten film can in fact be read meaningfully in parallel with the much more prominent novel Kamouraska (Anne Hébert, 1970), which can also be read as an expression of repressed, disavowed, alienated femininity as well as an effort to reclaim and revisit problems in Quebec’s history through a feminine perspective.

These works remain fascinated with the figure of the girl and the space of girlhood as crucial elements of their (re)negotiations and (re)constitutions of identity and subjectivity. They also share a flashback-ridden, time-traveling style of storytelling driven by an adult female narrator who expresses an enduring sense of being haunted, a revelatory concept in an era preoccupied with memory and forgetting. This haunting in fact becomes the primary link between women storytellers and the girl(hood) that belongs to their past. The strikingly similar structures of these two works demonstrate the shared sense of fracture, disorientation, and trauma reverberating through Quiet Revolution Quebec. They also serve to anchor those ideas to an unequivocally feminine perspective.

I have chosen these texts for several reasons. La fin des étés is a film that I consider under-studied. It was obscure when it appeared in 1964, and rarely
emerges except in passing in critical evaluations of Poirier’s corpus. It was out of place in its time, a highly stylized psychological drama about a well-to-do young woman with only the loosest links to Quebec and not even a hint of nationalist interest appearing at a time when cinéma-direct explorations of Québécois identity were more the order of the day. It is a low-budget beginner’s film, strange and a bit clumsy. However, once one has taken that closer look, it becomes evident that this film in fact presents a compelling expression of the effervescence of the female voice coming up against the weight of competing masculine concerns 16. Pairing my reading of this film with Anne Hébert’s Kamouraska is doubly interesting: Not only do the points of resonance between the two in a way “legitimize” La fin des étés as a relevant, significant film, but these points of resonance also shed new light on certain elements of the much-studied Kamouraska, especially its representations of girlhood. Reading these narratives in tandem will help us to see the role of the girl within artistic representations of the feminist concerns roiling under the surface of nation-obsessed Quiet Revolution Quebec.

In my view, the palpable tension visible at the heart of these concurrent movements and especially in the space between them is best summed up in the terms Meunier used: process and project, which to my ear immediately evoke key elements of girlhood and features of the girl as a figure. Driscoll notes that “the difficulty of becoming a subject … has continued to be perceived as considerably

16 La Fin des étés is also important because of its director, a crucial figure in 1970s Quebec feminism. Along with La Fin des étés, Poirier’s later films prove her mettle as a perspicacious and dedicated explorer of the feminine condition through film. We will see this further developed, of course, in Chapter IV.
greater for girls” (Girls 50). All growing up can be seen as a process and a project, but centuries of convention place special hindrances in the path of girls as they struggle for subjectivity. This struggle is not so different from that faced by both the Quebec nation and the Quebec woman in the twentieth century.

As we shall see, the nascent sense of the legitimization of individual ambition, prioritization of forward movement, and emphasis on progressive thinking that we observed in the figures of Jean Lévesque and Florentine Lacasse in Bonheur d’occasion in fact foreshadowed the new paradigms of self-actualization that came to the surface during the Quiet Revolution. The spirit at the heart of this Revolution was out with the old, in with the new; this nullified the former expectations placed on the girl and the woman in regard to memory. Once expected to be the bearers and transmitters of their culture’s legacy, girls and women suddenly found themselves liberated from that burden.

With this in mind, this chapter’s exploration girlhood as represented in two Quiet-Revolution-era narrative works, the film La fin des étés and the novel Kamouraska, can be seen as both an examination of new female/feminine modes of expression, including form, preoccupations, and perspectives, and as an investigation of a culture caught in the throes of its own collective adolescence – no longer its former self, but not yet fully arrived at a new, coherent, adult-like subjectivity.

On a formal level, we will see how these two exemplary women’s narratives demonstrate the new features of feminist storytelling during the 1960s and early
1970s – not a separate ècriture féminine, but rather an expression of the feminine experience transmitted through “une interaction ou ce que le terme anglais définit par ‘empathy’, (soit une capacité intuitive de comprendre et de partager les sentiments de l’autre)” (Boisclair 218) – they incorporate an intense, intentional use of emotional engagement into their work that sets them apart from traditional or masculine modes of storytelling. They also employ challenging, elliptical narrative structures that are characteristic of the period; many women writers deployed such formal “play” in order to further express their “questionnement constant” of all masculine/patriarchal/institutional structures, even language and traditional narrative forms (Boisclair 158).

In terms of content, both La fin des étés and Kamouraska also share a focus on memory, especially on re-membering a past and a former self that has been lost. These two works are obsessively focused on girlhood as a utopian space of authentic, fulfilled selfhood, ardently desired on the part of the girl (and later the adult woman she becomes), but utterly incompatible with the identitary structures and trajectories of her society. Pushed out of their girlhood and driven to accept womanhood, the protagonists of these texts find themselves forced to do violence to their past selves in order to obey the demands of their world. Passage to womanhood in these texts is traumatic and destructive, and leaves the female subject fractured. As a result, the protagonist-narrators of these works experience a fractured, yet powerfully fluid and creative relationship to time and memory. For them, “le passé, le présent et le futur se fusionnent pour former une temporalité,
celle de la conscience” (Lemieux 102). As they negotiate between girlhood and womanhood, these figures are actually able to outplay the laws of time and space, expressing new, subversive perspectives.

In their representations of girlhood, these works share three important features: first, the use of haunting as a way to give voice to the suppressed girl and as a means of expressing both the adult woman’s and the nation’s troubled relationship with the past in Quiet-Revolution-era Quebec. Secondly, a markedly palimpsestuous representation of the girl, who appears in these works a figure who must be scrubbed of her own identitary text in order to be inscribed with the attitudes and conventions of acceptable adult femininity. Finally, a reiteration – strongly contested this time – of the same complicity of women in their own Self-destruction that we observed in the previous chapter, which makes girls the agents of their own silencing and subjugation. In all of these cases, we will observe what I see as clear connections between the attitudes expressed in these texts and the ideologies and debates in operation during the QR in 1960s Quebec relative to memory and self-definition.

At the same time, on many levels, both of these works serve to destabilize traditional discourses of femininity. In and of themselves, they are their own powerful expressions of the female voice, and provide a critical, compassionate, complex view of the dark sides of girls and their girlhood. Ultimately, these two works demonstrate in their form and content that the cost of transformation and progress, of a pragmatic, linear, masculine narrative, and of the protection of
dominant discourses of being in Quebec society, is always predicated upon the obedient submission and self-effacement of the girl and then the woman. Furthermore, they reveal that such seemingly unilateral sacrifice in fact requires damning acts of violence whose guilt belongs to society as a whole.

**Part I: Facing terminal girlhood in La fin des étés**

I am delighted to have the opportunity to better acquaint my readers with Anne Claire Poirier’s film *La fin des étés* through this chapter, especially as it provides a fascinating expression of becoming feminine in 1960s Quebec. Scholarship and critical reception for *La fin des étés* are very sparse, and critics are far from agreeing on its merits or significance. Some have viewed the film as ill-timed and poorly-made. More than a decade after it appeared, the *Dictionnaire du Cinéma Québécois* of 1978 criticized Poirier’s film of “un total déracinement de la réalité Québécoise” (249), and in 1984, film critic Francine Prévost dismissed the film as a typical beginner fiction film, falling into the trap of “maniérisme” (16). However, others are more appreciative of the film. For instance, prominent cinema scholar Yves Lever calls the film “un film représentatif de l’esprit de la Révolution tranquille” (NP).

My opinion of the film is that all of these statements are at least partly right. Regarding the first statement, *La fin des étés* is undoubtedly “uprooted” from *la réalité Québécoise* if we take that concept to mean the reality of everyday citizens or the reality of a nation in crisis. The film is set in a sort of fairy-land of bourgeois
wealth out in the country, and virtually nothing even places the film within the geographic context of Quebec. However, if we view *la réalité Québécoise* – conveniently *au féminin* – as a term that can extend more broadly to include the personal concerns of figures who happen to be Québécois(e), especially those of women, then this criticism falls rather flat. What the *Dictionnaire*’s remark does tell us is that Poirier’s film goes against the grain for its sociohistorical context, which is true; *La fin des étés* is much more concerned with women’s psychology and feminine subjectivity than with being Québécois. This fact anchors *La fin des étés* within the literary tradition outlined by Boisclair and others. With regard to Prévost’s critique, yes, the film’s cinematography is clumsy, its acting is stilted, and its effects are very basic; however, I contend that this does not detract from the film, but rather has the effect of making it more honest, and at times even renders the film more effective. The transparency of the film’s illusions even creates another level of spectrality in the film: the conspicuous presence of the film’s creator. Finally, Lever’s strong characterization of the film is perhaps excessive, but it does take into account the undeniable groundedness of the film within the historical context of its apparition, and underscores the value of studying the film for that reason.\(^{17}\)

On many levels, this film shows a great deal of coherence with Poirier’s cinematic oeuvre. From her beginnings with the Canadian National Film Board in

\(^{17}\) Poirier herself reflected in 2012 that in the 1960s, “[elle] avait aussi des revendications flagrantes qui devaient être faites sur le plan de la reconnaissance, de l’autonomie et de l’identité des femmes. Il y avait une part de participation dans la société qui nous échappait” (See article by André Duchesne in *La Presse* 2010). This film is her first foray into making those revendications – and it just happens to be about a girl and her girlhood.
1960 until making her most recent feature-length film in 1997, Anne Claire Poirier stood apart as a pivotal figure Quebec women's cinema, at once foundational and propulsive to that community's development. Her better known films are *De mère en fille* (1968), *Les filles du Roy* (1974), and *Mourir à tue-tête* (1980), all of which are consistently focused on women's issues and history in Quebec society. Michel Coulombe and Marcel Jean have nicely described Poirier's voice as a filmmaker as following “à la fois une perspective féministe large et ... la meilleure lignée du cinéma d'intervention” (DCQ 1999, 520).

*La Fin des étés* is unique in Poirier’s corpus as her sole work of pure fiction, but its underlying themes and preoccupations make it consistent with the larger train of thought of her cinematic oeuvre. Indeed, despite its marked stylization, it is quite as personal as Poirier’s other films, as it contains semiautobiographical elements and treats several subjects of significance to Poirier herself, most notably the erasure of the female subject as such. In the same article quoted above, which Poirier wrote for an edition of Copie Zéro in 1980 on "Des Cinéastes Québécoises," she writes, “j’appartiens à une génération de femmes où la solitude fut notre lot quotidien. ... Nous n’existions pas” (Poirier 1980). Although by 1980, Poirier had become famous and successful, and seemed very much to have found her voice, she still chose to identify with a generation characterized by loneliness, absence, and even inexistence, a generation cut off from dialogue with its masculine “other half” – sentiments which she probably felt even more strongly early in her career when she made *La Fin des étés*. I intend to demonstrate that this film is in fact Poirier’s effort
to both express the sense of alienation growing among women in Quebec in the
1960s and to problematize it – all of which she chooses to do by using a girl as both
the subject and the object of her film.

The ONF website, which keeps La fin des étés available for online streaming
free of cost, offers the following “cover blurb” for the film:

"Dans ce court métrage de fiction, Marie (Geneviève Bujold) vit en plein
cauchemar depuis l’accident de Bernard, son frère. Cramponnée de façon excessive à cet
être handicapé, elle veut en assumer la charge. Étienne, son fiancé, n’a aucun goût pour
le sacrifice. Il reproche à Marie de croupir dans son adolescence. L’amour l’emportera.
Dans un geste définitif, Marie se libérera des liens qui la retenaient encore à son

The core ideas expressed efficiently here – a young woman clinging to her
adolescence to the point that it has become a self-made prison, struggling against
the irresistible pull of her future, is torn between her love for her brother and her
love for her fiancé – come with an optimistic interpretation: love wins, and Marie
sets herself free from the rotting weight of her already-dead childhood. However, as
I will show, this comforting reading does not in fact line up with the content,
structure, or effects of the film itself.

Let us begin with the basics: La fin des étés is a 30-minute black-and-white
film starring a very young Geneviève Bujold in her first film role, and is set in the
countryside near Montreal. It opens with a brief scene of Marie and her family at her
mother’s funeral, and then follows the group as they drive back to the mother’s
manor-house immediately afterward. At the house, Marie finds herself engaged in a
muffled war against her family and fiancé, who insist that because of the mother’s death, the family must sell the manor-house and institutionalize Marie’s beloved brother, Bernard, incapacitated two years earlier by a car accident. The problem is that Marie is not willing to take these steps. She has a strong emotional attachment to both Bernard and the house, and many layers of guilt impede her ability to accept her family’s plans. The trigger of her mother’s death sends Marie on a psychological rollercoaster, and she spends most of the afternoon (the bulk of the film’s diegetic timeline) slipping in and out of flashbacks to her recent happy times with Bernard. Marie’s reluctance to let go of her past and its present vestiges, the care of Bernard and of the manor-house, threatens the financial and emotional comfort of the family; meanwhile, the family’s insistence on these points drives Marie deeper into herself, creating a deadlock between them and effectively freezing time. Until she can resolve her guilt, Marie keeps both her family and herself from moving forward.

At its core, the film sets up a clear opposition between Marie’s voice and that of both Etienne and her uninjured older brother Pierre. Marie’s narrative perspective is central; it guides and frames the film itself, as the camera haunts her footsteps almost exclusively and often shares her sight-line. However, her voice is almost totally discredited within and even absent from the film’s diegesis. She is generally reluctant to speak, and when she does, her words are almost always met with resistance. On the other hand, the masculine voices that drown hers out within the diegesis have virtually no structural importance. All of the male characters form a supporting cast to Marie’s starring role. This strange incongruity in narrative
control within and of the film makes the audience’s role extremely important. As
viewers, we are invited into Marie’s world, and we are allowed to understand her
perspective in ways that her diegetic counterparts clearly cannot. This allows
Poirier to put forth the questions of female identity, autonomy, and recognition that
were so central to her work as a filmmaker by using Marie as a vehicle for a new
kind of story(telling).

One important challenge in viewing and interpreting this film is that it puts
the viewer in an irresolvable situation. Throughout the film, Marie pleads, often
wordlessly, for a way to revive and perpetuate an already-dead but beautiful
adolescence. Her brother and fiancé demand that she surrender, and insist that she
move on. While of course the audience and even Marie know that returning to or
remaining in one’s girlhood is an impossible solution, Poirier’s film complicates our
empirical knowledge about time and space, and causes us to question the justice
even in those very immutable bases of our understanding of the universe.
Ultimately, as we shall see, the same core problem from the previous chapter
remains unresolved: even in 1964, the only true agency the girl can claim is that of
accepting her already-decided destiny.

*Suspended within girlhood: Marie as haunting and haunted*

Viewing this film as an exploration of spectrality *au féminin* is a fruitful
opening point of access into the rich complexity of its expression of the feminine
condition in 1960s Quebec. To do so involves an understanding of Derridean
spectrality coupled with feminist reactions to the striking absence of the woman in that theoretical framework. What can be gleaned through the use of such theoretical tools is very interesting indeed. As we shall see, Poirier’s film presents us with a girl figure who is cut adrift, forced to abandon her past but not yet ready to embark on her future. Within the space of the film, Marie exists as a ghost. She is a revenante, returning to the house that was the site of her past existence as a privileged, unfettered girl with an undecided future. She is a specter, a figure trapped in the past to some extent, one whose pastness disrupts the order of the present day. She is a ghost, at times invisible and almost always inaudible to those surrounding her.

At the same time, she is visited by spirits: her beloved brother, her artless suitor, and her own charmed girlhood self gambol about before her very eyes, invading the present with no regard for the limits of time or space. She is also haunted by what I call the specter of femininity, which is the sum total of the expectations placed upon her by her family and the example set for her by her mother. In order to examine the implications of all of this, I will focus primarily on two statements Marie makes, each of which frame our understanding of the film and reflect her experience within it. I will also deal with the way the film uses presence and absence and layers of time in order to convey Marie’s position as haunting and haunted. Through these analyses, I will show that the spectral elements of this film, all of which are primarily concerned with femininity, are indissociable from Marie’s girlhood, both past and present, and its disruptiveness to the patriarchal status quo in which she lives.
We will begin with a key statement that opens the film. In the very first scene of the film, the first voice that we hear is Marie’s. It comes as a voice-over (voix “off”) – disembodied, emitted from some unknown future time and space, spectral in its tone and effect – which explains that:

“Je n’arrivais pas à vivre ma douleur. J’en restais étonnée, et comme distraite.” She tells the viewer that she wished she could “prolonger cet instant de sursis, ne rien dire, ne pas dire les mots qui nous ramèneraient seuls, devant Bernard” (LFE 00:00:20).

As we hear these thoughts, the camera moves from its initial close-up on the flowers on Marie’s mother’s casket to do a slow, almost 360° pan from the point of view of the casket looking up at the funeral attendees, including Marie, her fiancé, and her brother Pierre. The rotation ends with the camera pausing to watch Marie, Pierre, and Étienne walk away to their cars. The combination of the camera movement and Marie’s voice establishes Marie’s dislocation from the present time and space of the film’s diegesis. It also introduces us to the most persistent problem of the film, which is that as long as Marie aligns herself with the ghostly figures of her dead mother and almost- or semi-dead brother, she is doomed to remain disconnected from the present world and even from her own body, which is of course an untenable situation. However much she desires to delay confronting the inevitable transformations happening in her life, she cannot deny them forever.

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18 The version of the film which I used for this project (due to the film’s very limited availability for purchase) was that which is available for online viewing via the ONF website: https://www.onf.ca/film/fin_des_etes/

19 The use of voice-over in this scene also evokes the status of women at the ONF in the 1960s: "Dans ce contexte, pour la femme, être derrière la caméra ou dans la salle de montage, c’est toujours être hors champ, ... c’est pourquoi elles élèvent la voix, qui a fini d’être une voix off" (Véronneau 3-4).
Indeed, Marie’s refusal to “see reason” on her brother and fiancé’s terms is never set up as anything but implausible. The film’s argument is not that Marie can or should remain in the state of in-between-ness she has claimed. Rather, the film seems to presume that the audience will at least initially have trouble sympathizing with Marie. It is only to be expected that we would, like Etienne on the way back to the manor-house, reproach Marie for her refusal to “accept[r] les réalités, voi[r] les choses en face” (LFE 00:04:55), and be just as frustrated as he is by Marie’s tearfully defiant plea: "je t’en supplie, ne me parle pas de Bernard – qu’on lui laisse la paix, puis à moi aussi !" (LFE 00:04:16). However, the subversive power of the film comes in its effort to convince us that even if Marie’s wishes are impossible to fulfill, they are still valid – both understandable and of value. Poirier’s film artfully invites the viewer to share in Marie’s multi-layered experience of haunting, privileging us by giving us intimate knowledge of Marie’s predicament and privileging Marie by giving her story preeminence and her voice power over what the viewer sees, hears, and understands.

The result is a poetic expression of the crisis of the female subject in 1960s Quebec. As we dive deeper into Marie’s psychology over the course of the film, it becomes apparent that the main specter haunting the “Canadienne française” is that of femininity – a specter conspicuously absent, of course from Derrida’s hauntology, as noted by Spivak (1995) and later Postl (1999). Postl’s article especially illuminates how Irigaray’s reading of Marx is essential to filling out Derrida’s thoughts on spectrality. Postl points out that Marx’s commodity in Derrida’s Specters
of Marx and woman as a commodity in Irigaray’s This Sex Which Is Not One do share certain properties: “As Derrida states about Marx’s commodity, ‘The automaton ... is neither dead nor alive, it is dead and alive at the same time’ (Specters, 153). The same could be claimed for Irigaray’s reading of woman: their ‘real,’ natural life is left behind in order to fulfill the requirements of a male economy” (Postl 64). However, the fundamental difference between the two is that

“[w]hile commodities in their spectral apparition are able to haunt the producers as well as the owners of the means of production, women are in no position to haunt anybody. Even if they have a ‘phantom-like reality,’ they are tamed ghosts – not haunting, not scary, not the messengers of an unsettling inheritance” (Postl 64).

Such is certainly the case for Marie’s mother, whose past life is evoked around the edges of the film’s plot but who never comes back as a visible ghost, and whose persona as remembered by her children seems so entirely out of joint with the dominant spoken discourses of the film that it seems as if her absence in death is merely a continuation of her dislocation from reality when she was alive. To quote Postl once more, “[t]he female (mother)body cannot reappear as ghost because she was never allowed among the living in the first place” (65). Marie is truly her mother’s daughter in this respect. For starters, as Irigaray’s economy of exchange predicts, she is not her own person. Although she inhabits a space of resistance in the film, her resistance is illegitimate and ignored. Her subjectivity is always already predicated upon its recognition by those around her, and that recognition is always predicated upon her performance of acceptable femininity. To be left alone, as she desires, Marie must comply with the desires of her family and her fiancé, which
entails surrendering her right to be left alone. She has no power over them except her ability to withhold her compliance for a time, which she does, taking refuge in her memories. However, from the first, it is obvious that such a resistance has no future.

Instead, Marie’s return to her memories and the film’s representation of both Marie’s act of remembering and the memories themselves becomes an outcry against the invalidation of Marie’s subjectivity as well as its swan-song. As the flashbacks reveal, Marie as a girl was exactly what her brother Pierre still calls her: a princess, an adolescent girl free of all responsibilities or obligations, full of potential, and the locus of the desiring male gaze. Her desirability and potentiality brought her power through influence over two dashing princes: her fun-loving older brother, Bernard, and her unassuming suitor, Etienne. The sun-drenched scenes of these memories have all the simple charm of a fairy tale; it is no wonder Marie is loath to let them go, especially when the future expected of her is the erasure of herself as plenipotentiary princess and the acceptance of the same absent, irrelevant, invisible existence her mother led before her. The specter of Marie’s mother becomes all the more menacing in the film the moment she dies and truly joins the ranks of the spectral. In life, the mother served as a buffer between Marie’s girlhood self and her future identity as a woman. While Marie’s mother was alive, she acted behind the scenes as the preserver of all that signified Marie’s girlhood: Bernard, the manor-house, and her status as a dependent daughter. With her death, the barrier
evanesced, and Marie suddenly became the only remaining protector of her own
girlhood.

As we have seen, the specter of motherhood that haunts this film is primarily
an obstructing, occulting presence. For Marie, the “impediment” her mother posed
to her path toward a new life was most welcome, as it allowed her to take refuge in
the perpetuation of her old self. For Pierre and Etienne, the specter of motherhood
is much more of a nuisance. Late in the film, Pierre reveals that his and Marie’s
mother “s’était cousue de dettes” (LFE 00:26:45) in order to keep the house and
care for Bernard, which has left the estate in a difficult situation as a result and left a
double burden for the family upon her passing: a helpless Bernard and an
inheritance in crisis. Although Marie seems conscious of this, she also seems
determined to take on her mother’s role, taking care of Bernard and keeping the
past alive – thus perpetuating a fruitless and doomed cycle of maternal self-sacrifice
in the pursuit of a moribund way of life. In this way, the film sets up past idea(l)s of
sacrificial materno-womanhood as distinctly pernicious, being opposed to growth
and possibility, and as offering a false sense of comfort that is based upon denial and
artificial perpetuation of the past. If Marie is to move forward, as the film’s male
voices demand, then she must definitively separate herself from such passé feminine
roles.

What makes such a transition difficult is that there is no room for
negotiation. Marie’s impossible wishes beat uselessly against her family’s
immutable prerogatives. Her only choice is whether or not to do as they demand. If
she does, she will have to surrender what was most precious to her throughout her childhood and girlhood; if she does not, she will have to surrender her access to the future she herself has chosen: a happy marriage to Etienne. There is no middle ground, and as Marie’s voice carries no weight, the viewer knows that it is only a matter of time until she complies. However, she resists as long as possible – long enough to make us wonder, and long enough to allow us to understand her feeling of profound alienation and isolation as a haunted and haunting figure. Lost in a deep reverie, Marie herself becomes a sort of ghost, and wanders wistfully about, passing freely between multiple timelines.

From the moment Marie reaches the manor-house with Etienne, her disjointed relationship to time and space comes to dominate the film itself, which in turn becomes a reflection of her. In the lead-in to her first flashback, Marie pronounces a peculiar statement, which reiterates her wish to remain en sursis. Speaking to Etienne, she murmurs: “Regarde – c’était la fin de l’été. Maintenant je voudrais que les étés ne finissent jamais.” (LFE 00:06:47) The grammatical complexity of the sentence, which employs a total of four different verb tenses in as many clauses, is as jumbled, tortuous, and impossible in its form and content as Marie’s current state of mind. She begins by demanding that Étienne – and perhaps the viewer – regarde, that we look, pay attention, prepare ourselves to see something important. She then bizarrely pushes us into the past, as though she can see it before her in the present: c’était la fin de l’été. This phrase also evokes the title, and underscores the significance of memory to the film: the end of summer in the
title has already occurred. Next, she brings us and herself unequivocally back to the present through the use of the word *maintenant*, and addresses her current wish (politely stated in the conditional): that summer, here clearly meaning the happy summers of her past, would never end.

This strange utterance firmly anchors Marie within the psychosocial space of girlhood. More specifically, it situates her – despite her desire to resist such a situation – at the terminus of that process. She clearly senses that she is teetering on the edge of some irreversible change, and will do anything to delay the imminent, inevitable moment of jumping off that edge.

But what precipice could stand before her? She is healthy, well-to-do, apparently educated, and engaged to a kind man whom she loves. Her future promises to be quite as bright as her past, which again makes her resistance to it puzzling to the viewer and even to herself. Clearly, we must go deeper under the surface of this film to find the source of the deep *angoisse* haunting its heroine.

One interpretation of Marie’s lonely existence as a time-traveling ghost is that it expresses the alienation and isolation felt by many women in Quebec during the 1960s. At a time at which much of the male population was concerned with forging a strong, coherent national identity, the women of Quebec felt their own growing desire for enfranchisement. While they stood to benefit quite as much as men from the promised changes of the Quiet Revolution, they were rarely invited to participate *à part entière* in the efforts to secure those changes. In addition, when they sought to voice their own particular concerns as women, their voices were
frequently drowned out or even reviled by the nationalist movement. They were seen as distracting at best, disloyal at worst. Marie’s state of being, torn between past and future and excluded from the dominant discourse that was nevertheless shaping her destiny, is in large part a poeticization of the plight of Quebec’s women during the Quiet Revolution. Indeed, "[i]ssues de mouvements politiques définis et dominés surtout par les hommes, les femmes enchaînées avaient ressenti le besoin de se regrouper en tant que femmes" (Clio 472) – with the idea of coming together en tant que femmes of course resonating quite harmoniously with the larger engagements of Poirier’s work that would come in the decade following the production of La fin des étés. Legally, starting in 1964 with a set of important legal reforms in the province, Quebec women "ne sont plus considérées comme des mineures" (Lacoursière 170), and are no longer living in a state of legally-enforced dependence upon and obedience to their husbands or fathers. This film, like its counterparts in women’s literature of the period, expresses women’s awareness of their condition in the 1960s and foreshadows the rising tide of the women’s movement that was to come in the following decade.

In fact, what we can observe in the haunting of Poirier’s protagonist is an iteration of the “malaise 'sans nom’” (Clio 474) that became increasingly widespread and palpable in the littérature des femmes of the 1960s. As the decade progressed, women became conscious that their worth as individuals was primarily constituted of their “exchange value” (This Sex 83) on the male-determined “market” that constitutes the bulk of interaction in patriarchal Western societies. Women’s real
desires, their real selves, were subsumed under their constructed value as mothers, potential mothers, or sex objects. In *La fin des étés*, Marie experiences this when she understands that there is only one acceptable way for her to behave if she wishes to “survive” within her community. When she resists, she is rejected and excluded, and becomes a ghost.

Within Quebec, the alienation women experienced as they became more aware of themselves and the conventions imposed upon them had an added element: the simultaneous growth of the Quebec nationalist movement. As the 1960s progressed, it became clearer and clearer that the dominant discourse in Quebec was the strong current of new (male-dominated) “nationalisme actif centré sur la modernisation” (Clio 455), primarily concerned with the nascent *Québécois* identity; as the Collectif Clio notes, “toute l’activité culturelle s’accomplit dans l’affirmation Québécoise” (455). *La fin des étés*, however, is not concerned with nationalism at all, as I indicated earlier. Instead, the identitary question at the heart of the film is unequivocally that of feminine identity. The concern of this film is to express a *Québécoise* voice, but it is the feminine “e” of that adjective that is of primary importance, and not the rest. This is a rebellious deviation from the trends of the period, and proves Poirier’s primary engagement as that of a woman and feminist, and not as a Québécoise. The feminine condition remained a dark continent in 1960s Quebec, one whose exploration remained low on the national list of priorities. Poirier’s film is an act of rebellion in its nonlinear, dreamlike form and focus on becoming feminine in her context rather than becoming Québécois.
This being the case, it is eminently fitting that the figure at the heart of this film is not in fact a woman, but rather a girl – a woman-to-be, a woman-in-progress, a devenir-femme. Within the film’s diegesis, Marie is a divided subject, a fractured individual. She lives in between selves, no longer truly a child, disjointed even from girlhood, but not yet entirely a woman, since she has not yet fully left those past identities. For this reason, her fluid relationship to space and time is not contingent on her girlhood, but rather a feature of it. As a girl, she really does inhabit a space of sursis – of abeyance, of in-between-ness. Hers is a final moment of indefiniteness before arrival at a predetermined future. This reflects prominent girlhood studies scholar Catherine Driscoll’s description of girlhood as "a delay, a period of stasis as well as of transformation" (90), an uncomfortable interval during which the girl wrestles with being trapped within "the desired and incoherent body of one becoming a woman" (62).

Driscoll’s two terms, desired and incoherent, perfectly describe Poirier’s representation of Marie; her conformity and her obedient performance of acceptable adult femininity (i.e., aligned with the expectations of the dominant male voices within the film) are desired, as is her body; however, her body and her performance of femininity are as yet incoherent and incomplete, still awaiting a final moment of transformation.

Desire and incoherence are in fact pillars of Poirier’s narrative. Desire becomes key in Marie’s battle between past and future, because it is desire – her own and that of others – that pulls her in each direction, and incoherence (or
deviance from conventionally coherent behavior and existence) that sets her apart from the rest of the film’s population. This film sets girlhood up as a unique, transient, and disruptive identitary space and expresses its voice as one at odds with those around it. In this film, girlhood is an ambivalent space for the girl herself, being at once a refuge and a prison, both living and dead, impossible to inhabit and devastating to leave. For those around her, it is no more than a happy memory that must be boxed up and shelved or even discarded in order for the girl to become a woman. Girlhood in this film exists as an in-between space, one marked by feminine attributes but not wholly committed to the feminine, a region still separate from womanhood. It is a space in which Marie cannot remain, however much she wishes to, but it is a space in and from which she can still express a dissident point of view. Moreover, it is an innately haunted identitary space – populated by ghosts of past, present, and future (expected) identities, marked by loosened connections between body and mind, body and voice, body and self. For Marie, however, girlhood is a refuge – the temporal castle in which her princess-like girlhood self reigned supreme and free.

By using her film to make Marie’s bizarre, spectral voice heard, Poirier sets herself apart as an example of Derrida’s “ideal scholar,” which he defines as a person who learns from the ghosts haunting the present discourse and culture. As Derrida argues in his Specters of Marx (1993), a true scholar, “devrait apprendre à vivre en apprenant non pas à faire la conversation avec le fantôme mais à s’entretenir avec lui, avec elle, à lui laisser ou à lui rendre la parole, fût-ce en soi, en l’autre, à l’autre
en soi" – and this because “ils sont toujours là, les spectres, même s’ils n’existent pas, même s’ils ne sont plus, même s’ils ne sont pas encore" (Spectres 279). Marie’s voice is opposed and ignored in her own world, but through Poirier’s film, it regains legitimacy and even an audience. By drawing her viewers in to experience her ghostly heroine’s spectral existence, Poirier brings us to viscerally understand her generation’s “malaise sans nom” and invites us to reconsider our dependence on logic, linearity, and convention.

Unlike in a typical “ghost story,” the spectral elements of La fin des étés – especially the memories haunting Marie – are not “uncanny”; quite the opposite: they are familiar, beloved, reassuring, and intimate – the very definition of Freud’s heimlich. What is uncanny to Marie, in an odd reversal, is the specter of her future – her seemingly preformed and imminent identity as a woman. Cinema scholar Carrie Clanton argues that “[g]hosts may be interpreted as the external expression of some notion of the unsettledness about the past; their presence signifies the past impeding upon the enjoyment of the present” (NP). In La fin des étés, Marie is clearly unsettled about her past, but she is just as concerned about her future. If we are to read this initial mode of haunting in the film as the expression of issues facing women in Quebec and facing the nation as a whole during the QR, then we can understand that Poirier views the past as a lost ideal(ized) space that is strongly desired, very heimlich, but always already irretrievably lost. The future, on the other hand, is a blank canvas – a different kind of specter that lurks on the edges of the present, its arrival embraced by men, ready to build a new nation, but dreaded by
women, who have yet to make their voices heard, and whose own desires for self-definition have not yet been recognized. Most importantly, this film locates the heart of the battle being waged for women’s selves firmly in the aporetic territory of girlhood, where femininity is not yet fully determined and the feminine self is *en devenir* – still becoming, still having at least the illusion of control over her own destiny. In order for Marie to emerge from her alienated, ghostly state, she must surrender that territory. In order to become the woman her family expects her to be, she must purge the specters of her girlhood from her mind and erase her previous girlhood self.

*Palimpsest or tabula rasa? Wiping out Marie’s girlhood*

An important concept underpinning the complex haunting of *La fin des étés* is the concept of the palimpsest. As a literal object, being a piece of parchment that has been written on, had that first text scrubbed off, and then been written on again, the palimpsest is decidedly outdated. However, as a metaphorical figure, it remains an object of fascination taken up again and again in theorizations of identity, memory, and subjectivity. It is the ultimate haunted object in the literary world – a text written over the remnants of another text, inhabiting the same space as its predecessor, imperfectly covering the still-discernible traces beneath. It is also an excellent figuration of the girl, especially as depicted in *La fin des étés.* Literary
scholar Sarah Dillon\textsuperscript{20} reads the palimpsestuous entity as one which “offers the reassurance that erasure and death, even if they appear permanent, can always be reversed – that nothing can properly and truly ‘die’” (246). Such a concept of memory is exactly what Poirier’s haunted heroine is seeking; however, the reality of what is expected of her – and what ultimately becomes of her and her memories – is entirely different.

Indeed, just as Marie reconstructs and returns to her girlhood as a sanctuary, a space in which she was happy and possessed agency, her brother Pierre and her fiancé Etienne seek to dismantle that sanctuary and force her to come out of it into their world. Marie’s opening voice-over demonstrates that she is aware of this, and fears it. She knows that her family wishes to scrub away her girlhood completely in order to make her a proper “blank slate” that can be inscribed with all the features of conventional adult femininity. The film presents no middle way through which Marie’s girlhood identity live on and be incorporated into her adult existence. Her particular girlhood is a process toward a “future identity” as a woman, which is “divorced from what she presently is” (Driscoll 57); within the world of the film, girl is girl and woman is woman, and never the twain shall meet.

Instead, the many layers of palimpsestuousness we can observe in this film come together to form a portrait of terminal girlhood. Again and again, we see

\footnote{Dillon writes in analysis of Thomas De Quincey’s 1845 collection of essays entitled \textit{Suspiria De Profundis}. His essay encouraged his reader, stating: “Everlasting layers of ideas, images, feelings, have fallen upon your brain softly as light. Each succession has seemed to bury all that went before. And yet, in reality, not one has been extinguished” (Suspiria 28).}
examples of how Marie’s multidimensional narrative and indeed, her very self are ignored, viewed as insufficient, kept sous rature, and seem to be awaiting a moment of full erasure to create space for another identity and narrative altogether. Two elements of the film in particular will allow us to see this at work: first, the layering of timelines through visual and narrative overwriting of the present onto the past, observable in the flashback scenes, reveals the dispute over memory in the film; second, Marie’s love triangle with Bernard and Etienne and her obligation to choose between them begins the palimpsestic process of her identitary transformation from girl to woman. Together, these elements oppose two views of palimpsestuousness: one that allows for the ghostly presence of the past as part of the present, and another that rejects it.

The first scene that I will examine comes at the end of Marie’s first flashback sequence. Following the moment when Marie mused that she “voudrai[t] que les étés ne finissent jamais,” a burst of music and jump cut to a shot of a duck flying through the air signals our first transition from present to past. We find ourselves following what can be presumed to be Marie’s line of sight, which leaves us looking at Bernard, who is shooting at ducks over the lake behind the manor-house. Etienne and Marie join him, and the trio spend a few minutes firing at ducks and rolling around in the grass. Once they tire of this, they decide to go to visit the locks on a nearby waterway. Marie runs into the house to get some snacks for the excursion while the boys go and get the car. They pull up in front of the house, pick her up, and then drive off, following the house’s convenient circular driveway. On the way out,
they pause to let another car in. As the trio leaves and the new car approaches, we hear a sudden melancholy chord of piano music. The camera stays in its place, and so when the second car gets to the house, we see that it belongs to the diegetic present, bearing Marie's sister Monique, her husband, and their young son Dominic. This scene then carries us back into a set of short sequences in the diegetic present of the film.

The transitions between past and present are intriguing here. While the initial moment of flashback with the duck and sudden rush of music is fairly obvious, probably intentionally so, the switch back to the diegetic present is more troubling, as the two physically overlap, and are really only distinguishable through the music accompanying them, which signals us that present-Marie has suddenly been called back from her memories. I attribute the camera’s perspective to Marie because the sequence began from her perspective, but of course it is not explicitly clear in this scene that we are seeing through her eyes. However, the sensations at the end of the flashback sequence ring true as belonging to her; the overt, almost incredible sensations of joy, energy, and insouciance that filled the flashback sequence vanished in a cold wave of reality as she remembers that she is not, in fact, still in that memory.

In the context of our discussion of palimpsests, I argue that this scene can be read as an overwriting of present onto the past. The space and timeline of Marie’s memory is invaded and interrupted by the arrival of an element of the present. Marie’s narrative is cut off mid-flow, derailed in a way. If we view the film as a whole
as Marie's narrative, then it is as if her story has been hijacked. This storytelling tactic allows us to experience Marie's alternate reality. For her, past and present overflow into each other; the borders between them are permeable. As we see, watching from what is ostensibly her perspective, the traces of the past are in fact present to her, waiting to be revived at any moment. The abrupt change in the music allows us to deduce that it wounds her to know that her family does not share in this perception, but rather wishes to wipe out that past life to make room for more pressing present concerns.

Multiple similar flashback scenes in the film drive home the palimpsestuousness of the manor-house for Marie. What is intriguing about these sequences is that they are composed of so many layers. Marie is of course palimpsestuous herself, because her past self is still clearly visible under the first lines of the new identity being inscribed upon her and because of the efforts of her family to efface that past identity in order to continue that reinscription. The house itself is also palimpsestuous; of course it is haunted, as we have seen, by its past inhabitants, but it is also an erased and reinscribed surface. It once bore all the signs of happiness, family, and stability, but now, in the eyes of Marie’s family in the film’s present, that past text has been washed away, and now the house bears a message of failure, decay, and insecurity instead. Poirier’s transparent use of simple montage

21 For instance: not long after the driveway scene, Marie’s sister Monique comes out to find Marie in the front yard. Monique is looking for her little son, Dominic. Marie immediately thinks of “la tour!” and the two women look up to the little tower perched on the roof of the manor-house. The camera follows their gaze, and we (the viewer and the two women) see Dominic’s little face peering out the window back at us – but Marie breathes, “Bernard.” The shot cuts back to the tower, where now a different face looks back at us: Bernard’s.
tricks to visually represent what Marie sees, artificially layering two separate moments one over the other as if they were the same, yet allowing us to see that they are not, visually cements the palimpsestic element of her narrative strategy in the film.

These techniques lead us to ask two important questions about the palimpsestuous elements of *La fin des étés*: first of all, if the film or its characters function as palimpsests, then who is the writer who effaces and reinscribes them? Secondly, what is it exactly that must be erased, and why?

The answer to the first question is very difficult to determine in the film. On a preliminary level, of course Poirier herself is an authorial voice in the film. She chooses how to visually recreate the layers of text and subtext within the narrative, and she is the creative voice behind the film as a whole; since it is a work of fiction, her place as author is obvious. However, within the film, there are other “writers” at work. On one hand, we have the patriarchal power structure led by Pierre and supported by Etienne, Monique, and Monique’s husband. Collectively, these figures continually pressure Marie to let go of her obsession with the past, urging her to comply with their desire to erase it from her. On the other hand, we also have Marie herself, who only appears passive in the film. Her guiding perspective is what shapes our reading of the film and of herself as palimpsestuous, marked by hidden subtext and haunted by imperfectly forgotten memories, inhabited by past narratives that cling to and glimmer through cracks in the present.
So why the insistence on suppressing these coruscating memories? What is so terrible or threatening about the joyous, gamboling girlhood in which Marie yearns to take refuge? The answer, not surprisingly, comes from Marie’s memories. During the flashback sequences, the viewer comes to understand that Marie’s love for her brother Bernard at least bordered on incestuous. One key scene that reveals this happens just after Marie spies “Bernard” (really her nephew Dominic) in the tower window (LFE 00:12:06). As soon as she “sees” him, Marie and the viewer are transported to a moment when she and Bernard were playing scrabble in the tower.

Here, we have a brilliant illustration of the strange juxtaposition of innocence and nascent sexuality that is so characteristic of adolescence. On one hand, the two adult-looking siblings are dressed in childlike summer playclothes and are engaged in an utterly innocuous pastime. On the other, they are sitting on an uncomfortably suggestive leopard-skin rug, and their conversation is primarily about their love lives. The camera captures Bernard’s keen, searching gaze on his sister as he asks her, for example, if she knows many boys, then brags jokingly that all the girls he knows always fall in love with him. His curiosity and teasing are not necessarily un-brotherly, but his tone and attitude coupled with the strange setting are just enough to make the viewer wonder.

At the end of this scene, Bernard asks Marie: “est-ce que tu t’es déjà fait embrasser sur la bouche par un garçon?” (LFE 00:13:07) There is then an abrupt cut to a close-up of Etienne’s face, accompanied by a burst of romantic violin dance music that is more or less Marie and Etienne’s “theme” as a couple in the film. One
memory floods into another, one subtext overlaps onto another, and we come to see that in Marie’s girlhood, Bernard and Etienne were entangled with each other in her mind. A complicated matrix of desire and complicity linked the three of them together. As a girl, Marie apparently had the luxury to freely associate with them both, and even to flirt, play, and dance with them as if they were both her brothers and suitors simultaneously.

Unfortunately for Marie, such a state of affairs as no place in the real world. Here we must return to the figure of the girl herself as a palimpsest. By nature, the palimpsest is ambiguous, porous; it features blurred lines between former and present, allowing one to exist almost as part of the other. In this way, it can have many lives as one “body.” However, the palimpsest itself has no agency. It is no more than a recipient of the inscriptions of whatever author(ity) controls it at a given time. This reflects the realities of girlhood in Quebec up until the 1960s. As Mary Jean Green notes, “‘the girl’ (la fille), since only marriageable maidens enjoyed central status in the traditional Quebec novel — has only one role, and that a passive one” (WNI 13). The girl in this context existed to bear meaning, not to create it. As a result, her associations with others, especially with men, had to be tightly controlled – all the more so as she approached marriageability and adulthood. In La fin des étés, Marie experiences this when she is caught between Etienne and Bernard.22

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22 During the last of Marie’s flashbacks, Marie is getting dressed for a night out dancing with Étienne. Bernard tells her she is “too pretty to be allowed to go out in public” (my translation), after which he sweeps her up in his arms and carries her downstairs singing the bridal march. Ambiguous and suggestive, at once alarming and tragic, this scene insists upon a strange, irreducible love triangle between Marie, Bernard, and Étienne.
However, as the film demonstrates again and again, Marie cannot remain in between. Rather, she must choose between the two, either arresting her own development or becoming a *tabula rasa*. We do not see her moment of decision late in the film, but when we do, it happens in a memory, which allows us to see that part of the guilt that binds Marie to the almost-dead Bernard is her guilt at having chosen to leave him long ago.

At one point, during a scene at the old lighthouse, Etienne asks Marie if she loves him. At first, she does not reply, but later on in the same sequence, she and Etienne go down onto the jetty (a strange in-between spit of land that leads straight off toward the horizon but ends abruptly in the distance). She takes his hands and tells him, “Oui, je t’aime,” and they grin and then run off toward the end of the jetty to the sound of Bernard calling first both their names, then only Marie’s. Like many moments in this film, this “into the sunset” shot of the two lovers is very hard to interpret. On one hand, the bright music and optimistic image of the lovers running hand in hand suggest possibility and happiness, on the other, the visible terminality of their flight and the desperation in Bernard’s voice reveals a grim undertone of impossibility and *déchirement*, a French term that simultaneously connotes not only tearing, separation, and the painful creation of a rift, but also heartbreak. This moment is clearly set up as the moment in which Marie took her first definitive step away from Bernard and toward Etienne, or away from adolescence and toward adult womanhood. It is also set up as a revelation of the roots of Marie’s present day guilt and sense of being pulled irresistibly in two directions.
These conflicting desires, which oppose not only Bernard and Étienne but also Marie’s past and present planes of existence, illicit and acceptable sexuality, and even death and life, are at the root of Marie’s incoherence as one becoming a woman. “Incoherent” is a term generally described to speech, and is synonymous with unintelligible, illogical, incomprehensible, and inconsistent. This certainly describes Marie’s attitude as she vacillates romantically between Étienne and Bernard, and it reflects her family’s opinion of her in the present. Clearly, there is a conflict between the two “texts” that are fighting for space on the “parchment” of Marie’s girl-body: Marie’s forbidden, boundary-pushing closeness with Bernard, wrapped up in her girlhood identity as daughter and sister, and her nascent affection for Étienne, which is bound to her as-yet-unrealized adult identity as wife.

The ambiguity of Marie’s relationship status as a girl is ultimately intolerable for her world. Driscoll states that: “[t]he girl marks the ambivalence of boundaries around crucial territories such as the State, the Mother, and the Law,” (29) pointing out that “… as not mother and not wife she is independent from those strictly delineated territorializations of women that fix their dependent relationships to men” (30). While she inhabits the space of girlhood, the girl is able to elude the fixities of adult femininity for a time. For this period in her life, she is a palimpsest, bearing past and present simultaneously in her body, as well as the “promise” of her future womanhood. She is also infinitely reinscribable, able to bear any number of actual or potential significations for her family, her lover(s), or even her nation. However, such ambivalence is unsettling. Just as Marie’s deviant, palimpsestuous
relationship to past and present frustrates her family, so her fluid relationships to Bernard and Etienne threaten the straightforwardness of their understanding of identity. This cannot be tolerated, and must be undone. But how will this be resolved? Can Pierre and Etienne efface Marie’s girlhood and write womanhood upon her if she is unwilling? Is Marie’s position in all this truly passive?

Only one way out: “Choosing” complicity

As a matter of fact, the film’s argument is that – much like Florentine Lacasse and Maria Chapdelaine – Marie does have a choice, but that choice is either to move forward exactly in the way her society demands, or to remain in stasis, and essentially perish. This reflects Gertrude Postl’s integration of Irigaray and Derrida on the subject of commodities and spectrality: “As Derrida states about Marx’s commodity, ‘The automaton mimes the living: the Thing is neither dead nor alive, it is dead and alive at the same time’ (Specters, 153). The same could be claimed for Irigaray’s reading of woman: their ‘real,’ natural life is left behind in order to fulfill the requirements of a male economy” (Postl 64). The only viable option before Marie is not for her to accept the erasure of her girlhood self, but rather for her to perform that erasure herself.

This is accomplished through a very troubling concluding sequence in the film. First, Marie’s vagaries between past and present finally culminate in an episode of identity crisis. Just as the sun sets, Marie is besieged by a legion of voices from the past and present. She hears Bernard’s voice teasing her and revisits him carrying
her down the stairs; she hears Etienne urging her to be reasonable and remembers their dance together for a second time; and she sees a rapid-fire series of moments when she chose Etienne: when Bernard presented her to Etienne at the bottom of the stairs, a moment when Etienne caught Marie his arms at the foot of the lighthouse stairs; the moment when she and Etienne joined hands to run down the jetty; a more recent memory of Etienne kissing her. Through it all, there are clips of Etienne in the diegetic present calling her name. In addition, the emotional charges wrought by the potent notes music overlaying it all plunge the viewer into Marie’s intolerable emotional turmoil. To truly underscore the notion of “summons” at the heart of this bombardment of images and sounds, we also hear a loon wail in the background, a sound that this particular bird uses to call out to others of its kind from a distance. Marie is being called to choose: past or present. She cannot have both. In this moment, she chooses Étienne – she chooses to leave summer, girlhood, and Bernard behind in favor of an uncertain but socially acceptable future.

Once Marie has made her choice to move forward, however, she reaches a point at which she must finally face the death of her past self, which means disconnecting from her attachment to Bernard and to the manor-house. For Marie, this means that in order to accept Étienne’s expectations and those of her family, she must first put to death what ties her to her lost idyllic past. In the brief space between Marie’s crisis scene and the final sequence of the film, she performs two actions: first, she gives a tearful testimony about the moment of Bernard’s accident to her family, but they ignore her. Overwhelmed by her grief, she then lets Etienne
walk her out of the room. He returns to the dining room, and in a rare exception to the rule, we do not see Marie; instead, the camera stays in the dining room with Marie’s family, and Marie herself is mysteriously absent for a few moments. When she returns, the transformation is remarkable.

In a striking contrast to her attitudes during the rest of the film, at the very end of the film, Marie is totally composed, almost robotic. She announces that she has just visited Bernard, and that he is sleeping, and so all is well. Many critics have speculated that what she means here is that she has euthanized him. Whether or not this is the case, something fundamental has certainly changed, as Marie has resolved her inner turmoil. However, this has come with great sacrifice: that of her Self. This is represented in the film’s closing sequence of images. Marie’s calm face fades out into a series of still shots of the old “haunts” visited during Marie’s memory sequences. The camera lingers mournfully on the spaces once occupied by the Marie, Bernard, and Étienne of the past - the ghosts of Marie’s memories, who are now strikingly absent. Slow, melancholy music evokes sad acceptance of a new reality: girl-Marie and her joyous companions are no more.

The sudden, sharply contrasting emptiness of the yard, lighthouse, pier, and jetty all indicate that Marie has chosen to jettison her girlhood self in order to take on her new role as future wife and adult woman. The film’s dim view of her choice is undeniable. While it reveals that Marie is now free of the encumbrance of her guilt and nostalgia, the lugubrious music clearly prescribes a melancholy reading, and the haunting fixity of the camera, which seems almost to be waiting for the laughing,
lighthearted figures to return, indicates that something essential and irreplaceable has been lost. The grim simplicity of the intertitles that appear over the last image, unequivocally declaring the end of summer, drive the point home. Perhaps it is inevitable that Marie must move on, but the dark feeling of the film’s end does not seem to portray closure or peace. It hints rather at something like resignation – or defeat. Marie’s insurrection is over; her intolerable dissonant voice has been silenced, perhaps forever.

Poirier’s final portrayal of Marie’s crushing obligation to sacrifice, obey, and conform in order to belong is a strong criticism of the systematic smothering of the multiplicity of femininities possible in her society. The film seems to ask a similar question to one posed by Postl in her article on spectrality and women: “What if the question for women is not how to live with ghosts but how to free themselves from a ghost-like living?” (Postl 66) Marie’s existence is very ghost-like indeed throughout the film, as she is both haunted and a figure who haunts in her own way. However, the film’s conclusion, which involves the exorcism of Marie’s favorite ghosts, is not a liberation. At the end of Poirier’s film, whatever visibility Marie had vanishes, fading out of sight like the image of her face in the final sequence. Postl states that women cannot haunt because “somebody who has never been here cannot come back” (65). Poirier overcomes this obstacle by forcing us to acknowledge and experience the presence of her heroine, and this is the last haunting with which she leaves us: the vivid memory of a girl able to see beyond linear narratives, a girl reaching for alternate levels of existence and dreaming of
reconciling past and present within her own body. A girl perhaps doomed to
disappear – and yet made to live again beyond the “grave” through the engraving of
her image upon the new palimpsestuous medium of camera film. Poirier’s film, an
utterly unique ghost-story, achieves what Marie could not: it allows Marie’s girlhood
to live on forever.

**Part II: Re-membering the girl in Kamouraska**

Anne Hébert’s unsettling masterpiece *Kamouraska* is quite as over-studied as
*La fin des étés* is under-studied. It is a must-read for Quebec literature courses
around the world, functioning beautifully as both a fascinating exploration of the
core questions of feminism – which allows it to transcend its national origin – and at
the same time as a compelling portrait of key issues of national identity that are
unique to Quebec. However, the fact that *Kamouraska* has been looked at so closely
and written about so extensively does not mean that there is nothing left to say
about it; on the contrary! The deeper scholars plunge into Hébert’s unparalleled
novel, the more we find to talk about.

In order to add my voice to this conversation, I will use the following pages to
accomplish two objectives that are closely linked: first, to reveal the many
meaningful intersections between *Kamouraska* and *La fin des étés*, and second, to
investigate the unique presence of girlhood in this novel.

The core element of this presence is the inner insurgency of the main
character’s girlhood, a past and past self that continually rise up to shake the
artificial peace of the present. Elisabeth’s perpetual state of alienation, fracture, and resistance form a poetic expression of both the rising frustration of women in QR Quebec and the growing force of the main ideas of the QR itself. In terms of the renegotiation of feminine identity and destiny within Quebec culture, Elisabeth’s narrative serves as a feminine rereading of history, one that vigorously shakes the foundations of conventional Quebec womanhood by depicting a decidedly non-altruistic, non-self-effacing, non-innocent girl figure pursuing a course of dark manipulations and subterfuge in order to seek her own pleasure where possible, and security when necessary. Wifehood and motherhood are a sham, no more than a façade to cover desire and its consequences; the sacredness of the family is no more than an empty mockery, a blatant construct. Moreover, Elisabeth is no earnest defender of French-Canadian identity; she is an individual primarily in pursuit of her own interests.

Hébert’s makeover of the femme convenable is rooted in her imagining of the girl: an ambivalent figure, desired and desiring, continually in the process of negotiating herself. This girl dreams of sovereignty, however carefully she must dissimulate the fact in order to survive. The subversive irruptions of girl-Elisabeth within the body and mind of adult-Elisabeth undermine the expectation that womanhood can be equated with submission and obedience. In terms of broader national identitary evolutions, the perpetually unresolved conflict between memory and reality in Elisabeth’s narrative aligns meaningfully with the new narratives of decolonization in Quebec during the QR: "an end to the past oppression and to the
second-class status, ... a rejection of the domination from within and from without, and a new collective identity freed from the old submissive bent” (Bouchard 12).

On the whole, the figure of the girl is of primary importance in this novel. The multiple girls in the novel come together to form an image of the girl as an entity caught between past and future, tirailée in multiple directions, her in-process subjectivity disintegrating amid the centrifugal force of cycles of feminine destiny. She is both desired and incoherent, to use Driscoll's terms once again – by and to herself and her entourage – and both of these qualities make her a truly dangerous figure, to be contained at all cost.

This is mainly due to the profound ambivalence of the girl in Kamouraska. She is at once innocent and lascivious, plenipotentiary and powerless, sacred and damned. She and the space of her girlhood are elements of resistance in the novel, representing the hope and struggle for true happiness in the face of the constricting social expectations that are conditions for the adult woman's survival. It is the girl who can see through the cracks of centuries of construction of woman, and it is girlhood that allows the girl – for a moment – to push against those cracks and attempt to widen them, perhaps eventually setting herself – and the woman she is supposed to become – free. Kamouraska truly posits a girl who "engages with threats to [cultural] continuity" and "locates points of fragility" in it (Girls 68). However, the girl’s very resistance dooms her, as she is the primary target of her world's (and even her own) most vehement suppression.
My reading of *Kamouraska* will allow us to take what we saw in *La fin des étés* yet further. What we see in Hébert’s novel is an expression of the author’s (and her society’s) deeply ambivalent relationship to the past, as noted by Marie-Hélène Lemieux (2003); whether or not Hébert herself intended to engage herself with the politics of the time, she is inhabited – haunted, even – by the question of being Québécoise; her narrative is thus “contaminée par les tensions idéologiques qui traversent le discours social des années 1960-1970” (97). As a result, Hébert’s narrative is ambiguous on multiple levels: “d’une part le désir de rompre avec le passé est paradoxalement teinté de nostalgie, d’autre part le passé est interprété à la fois comme la source de l’aliénation présente et comme l’origine des premières révoltes” (97). This persistent tension manifests itself in the “force duelle qui pousse Elisabeth à la soumission pour survivre tout en lui interdisant d’abandonner la révolte pour vivre” (Ancrenat 76). When neither total submission nor wholehearted revolt are possible, how can a coherent identity form?

For cultural historians Gilbert and Taylor, as quoted by Driscoll, “[b]ecoming feminine ... represents the attempt to reconcile the irreconcilable; to seek coherence where there clearly is none; to find solutions to an endless stream of problems” (*Girls* 58). The history of Quebec’s path to nationhood, which remains in process, echoes this characterization of girlhood. Quebec, like girlhood in Hébert’s novel (and indeed in Poirier’s film), is a space “où chaque révolte importante conduit à une soumission plus complète” (Lemieux 107). The girl is the prime example of a figure caught in an identititary downward spiral from which there is no recovery. As we
explore haunting, palimpsestic identity, and complicity in *Kamouraska*, we will see how this novel uses the figure of the girl to contest both the suffocation of the feminine condition and the unresolved tension between *survivance* and revolt at the heart of Québécois identity. The girl in *Kamouraska*, an entity with a paradoxical relationship to the past, constantly reinvented and reappropriated, compelled to destroy herself in order to survive, and returning as a *revenante* to haunt her adult self, ultimately signifies much more than she knows.

"Je suis hantée!" The girl as revenant in *Kamouraska*

Our exploration of girlhood in *Kamouraska* will begin with an analysis of the relationship between haunting and girlhood in this novel. It is worth noting that studying haunting in *Kamouraska* is a favorite pastime of scholars of Anne Hébert’s works; indeed, the journal *Les Cahiers d’Anne Hébert* devoted an entire edition to the theme of "La revenance dans l’oeuvre d’Anne Hébert," in which multiple authors explored the many types of spectrality common to Hébert’s writing. In the foreword of this edition, Isabelle Boisclair and Andréa King state that: "Que la revenance soit mnésique, fantastique ou linguistique, elle s’avère un thème omniprésent dans l’oeuvre d’Anne Hébert" (3). My analysis of spectrality in *Kamouraska*, which focuses on the role of the girl (multiple girl figures, in this case) as a revenant, as well as on the specter of girlhood present in this text, intersects with all three of the descriptors Boisclair and King mention. The primary role of both girl and girlhood in the novel belong to the domain of memory because they are part of the past.
*Kamouraska* is haunted by a hunger to return to this past, to reconstitute it and take refuge in it. As a result, the girl and girlhood, poorly repressed, continually burst in upon the adult feminine consciousness. This impossible fantasy of a return to the state of girlhood is evoked through repeated linguistic cues, such as Elisabeth’s repeated insistence that “Je suis innocente!” and the obsessive reiteration of the post-girlhood overlaying of her identity through marriage. As a whole, the three modes King and Boisclair mention, memory, fantasy, and language, are all present in Hébert’s depiction of a woman haunted by her own girlhood.

In this work as in *La fin des étés*, this haunting stems from both nostalgia and trauma. Both of these works re-member girlhood as a space of liberty and authenticity that has been destroyed – with the girl’s help. The past innocence both Elisabeth and Marie crave is tangled up in a swirl of constructed goodness, problematic desire, and hidden shame; they are separated from that innocence forever due to their own actions, as well as those of others. This leaves them fractured, alienated, and perpetually unresolved as adult female subjects. Their narratives reflect this in their form – “out of joint” in the Shakespearean and Derridean sense, adrift on the high seas with no port in sight.

Out of this alienation comes a revelation: haunting *au féminin* is possible, contrary to Postl’s argument (cited earlier) that “women are in no position to haunt anybody” (64). The girl in *Kamouraska* is a female specter who *can* and *does* haunt the present in powerful ways. Girl-Elisabeth, for example, primarily haunts her adult self, disrupting adult-Elisabeth’s carefully constructed life with her frustration and
longing, frightening adult-Elisabeth with her own forgotten subversive power. Girl-Elisabeth is a unique sort of ghost, her presence as welcomed as it is dreaded, but it seems clear that she is not one of Postl’s “tamed ghosts,” and that she is a “[messenger] of an unsettling inheritance” (idem). Her counterpart, the part-witch, part-specter Aurélie Caron, works in tandem with girl-Elisabeth to keep the past alive. Her preternaturally prolonged girlhood serves to taunt adult-Elisabeth, reminding her of the fluidity and potentiality that might have been hers in other circumstances.

Together, these two main girl-figures constitute a representation of the girl as a revenant, a returned figure (presumed dead) who amuses herself by incessantly dredging up the dark dowry of the adult femme convenable forced to make become a “tamed ghost” in order to become Woman. Before I continue further, I will clarify two important points in my analysis: my definition of Elisabeth’s girlhood in the novel, and my reading of the girl as a specific kind of specter.

First, for the purposes of this essay, I define “girl-Elisabeth” as the adolescent Elisabeth d’Aulnières from the period between her first communion and her marriage to Antoine Tassy, and also as the (still-adolescent) Elisabeth d’Aulnières-Tassy during her marriage to Antoine up until the latter’s murder. While marriage and motherhood typically serve to mark the passage between girlhood and womanhood, I include Elisabeth’s first marriage in her girlhood for two reasons: first, because I consider much of Elisabeth’s behavior during her marriage to Antoine (as re-membered through the novel) to be consistent with the features of
girlhood; and second, because the figure that haunts madame Rolland is not only an unmarried teenager, but also the transgressive “young woman” of the second stage of Elisabeth’s adolescence. Elisabeth d’Aulnières-Tassy, barely twenty years old, colluded with her girlhood friend and her young lover to murder the young man who represented what the book presents as Elisabeth’s failed first attempt at achieving conventional womanhood. These “two” girl-Elisabeths are expressed as a sort of continuum. The decisive moment of transformation from girl to woman in Elisabeth’s life comes not with her first marriage, which was as much the gratification of adolescent sexual desire as anything else, but rather with her second, which truly involved the destruction of Elisabeth’s girlhood self. This final trauma – losing George Nelson and going on trial for murder – is the fundamental fracture in Elisabeth’s life, much like the “il dort; ça va” scene in *La fin des étés*.

Secondly, in our discussion of haunting in *Kamouraska*, I consider it useful to think of girl-Elisabeth as a “revenant,” rather than as a ghost. A revenant is a spectral figure, but not necessarily a supernatural one. A revenant can be one of two things: a person who has been absent for a long time and is presumed dead, but then returns nevertheless, or an actual ghost – a spirit returning from beyond the grave. Because the word “ghost” is so much more commonly used for the latter definition, most of the time, a revenant is understood to be a thing or a living person who seems to return “from the dead,” but in fact never died, and so has been alive all along. Girl-Elisabeth is a revenant and not a ghost because she never entirely dies. Pieces of her still smolder like embers in the depths of adult-Elisabeth. Madame
Rolland herself admits fearing that she will “retrouver [sa] vie ancienne se ranimant, secouant ses cendres, en miettes poudreuses. Chaque tison éteint, rallumé” (56). Her bold, passionate, *maudite* girl-self, martyred for the cause of convention and presumed dead, does indeed awaken like a terrible phoenix from those ashes, roused by the imminent death of Jérôme Rolland and intent on making her presence felt. She has been dormant for a long time, frozen under madame Rolland’s desperately rigid self-denial for the sake of survival, but she lives.

The power of girl-Elisabeth as female haunting presence is all the more surprising because it extends beyond adult-Elisabeth. The presence of girl-Elisabeth’s first identitary descendant – the Lady of Kamouraska, murderess and adulteress – clearly haunts monsieur Rolland in the early pages of the novel, making him fear his wife after eighteen years of decorous matrimony. Adult-Elisabeth sees this, inwardly lamenting: “Ainsi tu n’as jamais cru à mon innocence? Tu m’as toujours crainte comme la mort?” (K 16). The specter of madame Rolland’s “folle jeunesse” (8) has always been there, lurking in the background. With death on the doorstep, she reemerges from the shadows to remind everyone of her subversive power.

As Elisabeth’s memories resurface in the narrative, we see that she was never a docile, compliant figure. Descriptions of her childhood boisterousness abound: she is “malfaisante,” with “le diable dans le corps” (51); she drives her governesses away and has to have her head shaved when she gets lice – “on dirait un forçat!” (52); she runs wild and is fascinated with the poorer, rowdier neighbor
children and boys, “une vraie sauvageonne” (53). However, these memories are just that – nostalgic reminiscence. The specter of girlhood, the revenant girl-Elisabeth with the power to engage with and disrupt the present, does not arrive until the semi-linear progression of Elisabeth’s memories brings us to two important landmarks on her road to womanhood: menarche, and her first communion. This is when Elisabeth as a girl in the sense most relevant to my project (re)emerges in madame Rolland’s mind as a revenant.

Passing through the dark corridors of her memory, madame Rolland encounters herself as a communiante. Madame Rolland tells us: “Une enfant qui est moi me regarde, bien en face, et me sourit gravement. M’oblige à écouter la voix légère et solennel que je croyais perdue” (K 58). Girl-Elizabeth is at once part of adult-Elisabeth and separate from her, “une enfant qui est moi,” and she has power over adult-Elisabeth; she can oblige adult-Elisabeth to listen to her. A few paragraphs after this encounter, we are told that: “l’enfance est révolue” (59), that “la Petite est bel et bien devenue une vraie femme” (59), and, most importantly, that: “il va falloir marier la Petite” (60). Just as girl-Elisabeth’s power to transgress the boundaries of time to interact with her adult self is established, her power to transgress social boundaries as a sexual being is acknowledged in her adolescent timeline. Sexuality and transgression are almost indistinguishable in this novel, and both are tangled around the figure of the girl, who is supposed to remain innocente. This scene is the emergence of Elisabeth as Girl: a subversive figure whose power
must be contained and controlled, preferably through marriage, as quickly and utterly as possible.

However, girl-Elisabeth does not surrender without a fight. Indeed, she keeps resisting even beyond her matrimonial repressions, and uses violence when necessary to keep herself from being totally annihilated. As the novel progresses and girl-Elisabeth is more and more successful in her efforts to break in on adult-Elisabeth’s consciousness, we see that she "devient sa propre apparition par l’entremise du passé qui s’empare avec violence d’un présent chancelant et menacé de s’écrouler" (Magurean 34). Girl-Elisabeth skillfully finds the weaknesses in adult-Elisabeth’s identitary façade as madame Rolland, and she violently exploits them. Again and again, she asserts her own reality and continued life, insisting that adult-Elizabeth recognize her, remember her drives and desires, and restore her control over their shared body, regardless of the pain or distress her efforts may cause to her adult self.

Indeed, violence is a key feature of girl-Elisabeth as a revenant. Hers is not a peaceful, gentle protest, but rather a passionate revolt. The fierce girlhood self so imperfectly contained within the disciplined exterior of the adult madame Rolland is a figure ready to assert her subjectivity through transgression if she believes that she will benefit from such an act. From her days of sneaking out the window to spy on Aurélie Caron as a young girl to her ballroom boldness as a debutante and her unabashed husband-hunting as a marriageable woman-to-be and even to her bold, illicit affair with George Nelson, girl-Elisabeth is certainly not afraid to make the first
move toward what she wants. She is the antithesis to the subdued, conforming, entirely contained madame Rolland – and yet, she is also a part of madame Rolland, still alive just under the surface.

As the novel progresses, girl-Elisabeth’s voice begins to blend with that of her adult self, creating a fractured, polyvocal narrative whose threads are often difficult to distinguish from one another. Rising from her slumber, girl-Elisabeth picks at the fraying edges of madame Rolland’s dubious existence. "C’est peu d’avoir une double vie, madame Rolland. Le plus difficile serait d’avoir quatre ou cinq existences secrètes, à l’insu de tous … Mais vous n’êtes qu’une absente, madame Rolland" (74). She taunts or laments her adult self’s frozen state: "Avez-vous donc tant besoin de distractions qu’il vous faut aller chercher, au plus creux des ténèbres, les fantômes de votre jeunesse?" (75) And then, shortly thereafter, she declares her own existence : "On dit que la voix des morts se mêle au vent, les soirs de tempête. Personne n’est mort ici. Je suis vivante et mon mari aussi. Nous passons au manoir de Kamouraska notre cruelle jeunesse, sans fin." (75) By asserting her own reality in her own voice, girl-Elisabeth destabilizes the façade of innocent tranquility that her adult self had so painstakingly painted over her traumatic past.

In response, adult-Elisabeth is both shaken and stirred – afraid of the vivid strength of her girlhood self, and yet hungry to recapture it. Sensing anew the electric energy that once so ardently animated her, she finds herself suddenly alienated from her present existence. "Ma vie est ailleurs," (107) she remarks; "Je dis ‘je’ et je suis une autre" (113); "Je suis encombrée. Surchargée. Ligotée.
Prisonnière de la rue Augusta et de la ville de Sorel" (150). For eighteen years, Elisabeth has kept her true self – which the novel posits as being her girlhood self, the authentic, autonomous self that asserted its own interests, fought for its own happiness, and subverted convention, the *rebelle* not yet subsumed under adult femininity (despite wearing so many of its trappings) – rigorously contained, to all appearances effaced altogether. She has almost succeeded in annihilating her girlhood self, in making that self into a ghost. She describes her existence as: "Étant le plus près possible qu'il me soit permis de l'être (sans mourir tout à fait) de mon propre néant. Je deviens translucide. Dénuée de toute réalité apparente. Dépossédée de toute forme, de toute épaisseur et profondeur" (210). She continues to reiterate these ideas in a subsequent passage, calling herself: "Transparente comme une goutte d'eau. Inexistante en quelque sorte. Sans nom ni visage. Détruite. Niée" (212) – but here is where girl-Elisabeth resurges once more as a revenant: "Et pourtant quelque chose d'irréductible en moi s'élance, hors de moi, lors même que je n'existe plus" (212). Adult-Elisabeth disappears in order for girl-Elisabeth to reappear. When the façade is stripped away, the irreducible authentic self hidden beneath suddenly surges forth, and anything is possible.

Girl-Elisabeth's return renews the possibility of the realization of adult-Elisabeth's most cherished secret dream: "Me libérer. Retrouver l'enfance libre et forte en moi" (150). Of course, adult-Elisabeth's dream (and indeed that of girl-Elisabeth) brings her into conflict with the limits of time and space, which still retain their hold on her natural body. She wishes to return to a very specific period of time,
to take both herself and her counterpart, the almost-uncanny Aurélie Caron, back to the days before the trauma of Elisabeth’s marriage to Antoine and its fallout: "Il faut faire vite. Me protéger de la fureur d’Aurélie. Nous sauver toutes les deux. Nous réconcilier à jamais. Abolir toute une époque de notre vie. Retrouver notre adolescence. Bien avant que ..." (K 62).

Elisabeth’s longing for her lost adolescence is irreducibly bound to her troubled relationship with the uncanny figure Aurélie Caron. Aurélie is in some ways an extension of Elisabeth herself, and in other ways her surrogate or “evil twin.” She is also the perpetuation of Elisabeth’s girlhood, as she remains unmarried and girlish – naïve, indeterminate, subversive, between child and woman – throughout the novel, and is always either on Elisabeth’s mind or in her presence. In addition, she serves as Elisabeth’s scapegoat, taking on both the (attempted) murder of Antoine and the prison sentence for it in Elisabeth’s place. In many ways, Aurélie has a similar presence in Elisabeth’s consciousness to Bernard in Marie’s in La fin des étés; both figure represent at once innocence and transgression, are indelibly marked with guilt, and return again and again to reopen the wounds of the past. Both must be cast off in order for either Marie or Elisabeth to have peace, but only Marie manages to accomplish this, and the peace she obtains is diminished by its lifelessness. Elisabeth never gets rid of Aurélie, even though she mentions doing so plenty of times; instead, she allows Aurélie to stay close to her, willingly – if painfully – maintaining her most dangerous concrete link to the past just as she keeps her own volatile girlhood alive within herself.
This choice on Elisabeth’s part is in one sense motivated by the endurance of her own girlish naïveté; even as an adult woman, Elisabeth still clings to the sensations of her girlhood in the hopes of one day returning to it. When madame Rolland dreams of such a return to girlhood, she expresses her desire to Aurélie: “Ma vie pour retrouver intact le temps où nous étions innocentes, l’une et l’autre” (61). As is typical, whenever Elisabeth is naïve, Aurélie is not (or vice versa), and so here, Aurélie wryly retorts that “Je n’ai jamais été innocente. Ni Madame non plus” (61). This quote reminds us that it is not only the limits of Elisabeth’s natural body that keep her from the “innocence” she wishes to recapture, but also her own nature. What, then, can Elisabeth hope to achieve in her stubborn refusal to release her girlhood?

One answer to this question comes through the impact of haunting on the structure of the narrative in Kamouraska. As in La fin des étés, spectrality becomes a means to contest the borders of space and time within the narrative. Obviously, adult-Elisabeth cannot literally, physically return to her girlhood. Her body and circumstances have changed, and this cannot be altered. However, the very nature of Hébert’s narrative, with its elliptical structure that allows the past to interrupt and overwhelm the present, seems to defy this reality. Kamouraska in fact reveals a way to circumvent the barrier between past and present: through haunting. As her girlhood self returns to disrupt her present life, madame Rolland in turn finds herself able to separate her consciousness from her circumstances. Much like Marie in La fin des étés, she becomes a time-traveling ghost, able to pass between timelines.
more or less at will. She achieves a "parfaite maîtrise du corps, alors que le cœur s’égare, déraille dans la nuit d’été" (150). As a result, her necessary self-effacement for the sake of social survival need not be entire. Her submission is certainly not total; as she avers: "Si loin que je sois dans l’espace et le temps, je demeure attachée à George Nelson, en cet instant précis où toute la campagne de Sorel chavire sous la pluie" (150). Even if no one beyond herself and the reader know it, Elisabeth remains in revolt.

Quebec literary scholar Mélanie Beauchemin describes Elisabeth’s situation in this way: "Ce personnage [Elisabeth], comme tant d’autres figures féminines subversives hébertiennes, est prisonnier d’un microcosme aliénant où il ne peut dépasser le rôle passif ou tentateur qui lui est assigné que par le biais d’une révolte démesurée" (Beauchemin 57). In Elisabeth’s case, revolt manifests in two ways: concretely, in her conspiracy to murder her first husband, and psychologically, in her resilient inward refusal of her assumed identity as obedient wife and mother (in both of her marriages!). She claims secret sovereignty, swearing loyalty only to herself, even if it means living in exile: "Je me suis juré de garder les yeux fermés et de faire en quelque sorte que je quitte mon corps. ... Je ne serai pas plus là qu’une âme chassée de son corps et qui erre dans des greniers étrangers, en compagnie des chauves-souris" (107). It is a miserable-sounding existence, to be sure. However, for girl-Elisabeth, existence as a revenant is better than total annihilation, as it allows her to keep pursuing her desires, however unattainable they may be.
“Je dis ‘je’ et je suis une autre”: Palimpsestuous girlhood in Kamouraska

In large part, Hébert’s novel is adult-Elisabeth’s insistent struggle to return to her girlhood and resume her girlhood self, as we have seen. Because of the incompatibility between this desire and the “realities” of the feminine condition in Elisabeth’s sociohistorical context, Kamouraska is also the expression of the pain of a perpetually unresolved, incoherent, fractured subjectivity. Elisabeth is divided against herself, inwardly insurgent but outwardly obedient. Her girlhood self exists as an imperfectly-purged remnant of text still glinting from beneath the subsequent layering of identities written over it. Elisabeth’s alienation from herself is compounded and even rendered irreversible by this series of selves she is forced to assume, all at the cost of the free expression of her true self. She is the ultimate palimpsestuous figure, an insurgent girl trapped within a fabricated personality used to cover up layer upon layer of guilt-ridden past selves that must not be seen – and yet that are still clearly present, visible through the cracks in her fragile façade.

This sad state of affairs stems from a palimpsestic process of identity construction that has its roots in the very earliest stages of girl-Elisabeth’s existence. It begins with the first manifestations of her nascent femininity. From the moment her sexuality became apparent during her adolescence, Elisabeth had to be contained. In our exploration of La fin des étés, we saw that the girl’s existence presupposes an eventual erasure of her subjectivity in order to make room for adult femininity. As soon as the girl ceases to be a child, she is on a path to becoming a woman. The death of her girlhood is written into its birth. Much as Marie was
expected to annihilate her girlhood self to please her family, Elisabeth had to play the part her society had assigned to her. Marriage was the usual means of execution, and so as soon as Elisabeth reached a marriageable age, her existence became much like Marie’s: that of a condemned figure living *en sursis*, awaiting a predetermined end. Elisabeth’s family caught one hint of curiosity about boys from their little girl and agreed: “il va falloir marier la Petite” (*K* 60).

At first, Elisabeth did not resist, but rather tried to work this expectation to her advantage, boldly flirting with the governor at her coming-out ball and unabashedly “hunting” for her first husband. She sought a husband who sparked her desire and who would offer her a good position in society, and she married him with clear knowledge of his lascivious tendencies, whether through naïveté or pride. However, her proactivity did not allow her to escape her fate in the end. Indeed, her first wedding marks a crucial moment of fracture in her identitary construction, and lives on in her memory as a moment from which she wishes to distance herself. When recalling it, adult-Elisabeth strives to “penser à soi à la troisième personne” (70); she simultaneously associates herself with and dissociates herself from her past self in this phrase, much as she did when remembering the “enfant qui est moi” (58). Marriage to Antoine Tassy is Elisabeth’s first step away from her girlhood, although she does not realize this until after the fact. It brings the first forcible overlaying of girl-Elisabeth’s identity: she takes on a new name, moves to a new home, and supposedly becomes a woman. However, subsequent events take Elisabeth on a palimpsestic journey that perpetually brings her back to her complex
desire for innocence. Just as her society tries to efface her subversive girlhood and inscribe her with proper femininity, Elisabeth repeatedly endeavors to erase her mistakes and reinscribe herself with pure girlhood, or innocence.

The second stage of this process comes when Antoine becomes abusive and Elisabeth returns to her girlhood home. After a trial period of womanhood, which ended in disaster, Elisabeth attempts to become a girl once more. However, her girlhood bedroom is more like “un musée” (94) than a place to live in, full of the dusty relics of her past life. Moreover, her present existence as a young wife and mother invades the space; her children are with her when she returns, and Antoine’s brutal conjugal visits seem to drive the last vestiges of innocence from the house. Elisabeth cannot undo the reinscription of her identity, nor can she escape her current condition on her own: “Je suis Elisabeth d’Aulnières, épouse d’Antoine Tassy. Je me meurs de langueur. J’attends que l’on vienne me délivrer” (98). Her first attempt to return to “innocence” is therefore unsuccessful.

However, out of the dead end of her marriage comes a new reason to live: Doctor Nelson. Elisabeth’s passion for George Nelson brings about her second effort to reclaim her innocence, this time in the form of sexual purity. Elisabeth longs to start fresh with Doctor Nelson, and is determined to “[s]’établir dans une chasteté parfaite” and to “effacer de [son] corps toute trace de caresse ou de violence” so that she can “Renaître à la vie, intouchée, intouchable, sauf pour l’unique homme de ce monde, en marche vers moi. Violente, pure, innocente! Je suis innocente!” (115). Once again, Elisabeth attempts to perform her own palimpsestic reinvention of
herself as a pure girl, washed clean of her dark past. Tragically, the deep marks scored across her body and her life by Antoine and his violence can only be eradicated through further violence – which in turn reinscribes Elisabeth (against her will and despite her best efforts) with a new identity as adulteress and participant in a conspiracy to murder.

The extreme precarity of such an identity is not survivable, and leaves Elisabeth desperate for yet another identity – for yet another return to innocence, even if it must be even more false than its predecessors. She submits to marrying the respectable Jérôme Rolland in order to purge her sins and enact a final reinscription of the palimpsest that is her body: that of herself as madame Rolland.

As a result of this process, the adult-Elisabeth whose voice frames the novel’s narrative exists as a palimpsestuous figure, her identities stratified through the palimpsestic layering of her names, "plusieurs noms, plusieurs femmes se succédant, se superposant sans s’amalgamer, dans un seul corps qui vieillit" (Pelletier 30). Her assumed identities are inscribed and reinscribed one over the other, with each previous identity visible beneath: "Moi, moi, Elisabeth d’Aulnières, veuve d’Antoine Tassy, épouse en secondes noces de Jérôme Rolland" (8), or again: "Je suis Elisabeth d’Aulnières, épouse en premières noces d’Antoine Tassy, seigneur assassiné de Kamouraska, épouse en secondes noces de Jérôme Rolland, notaire de Québec, de père en fils depuis X générations. Je suis innocente!" (244). The irony of Elisabeth’s claim of innocence in the second citation is biting indeed. She knows the cost of her perceived legitimacy: the smothering of her true (or favorite, or
strongest) self beneath a cloying veneer of respectability. Will she ever be free, or will her most authentic identity finally be snuffed out?

The answer is surprising. We have seen girl-Elisabeth as the primary specter of the novel, the most tenacious and disruptive inhabitant of Elisabeth's body. She has endured years of repression without being defeated, and the imminent death of monsieur Rolland offers an unhoped-for possibility that she might once again be invited to the surface, rather than having to force her way through, as previously. This is certainly an explicitly stated wish of hers: "Je refuse bel et bien la rue du Parloir et Jérôme Rolland, mon mari. En songe je redeviens blanche et bête comme une jeune fille à marier" (239). However, when the time comes, the story’s conclusion holds a final twist. As our narrator explains: "Elisabeth d'Aulnières, veuve d'Antoine Tassy, entre en scène ... Sans aucun refuge à l'intérieur de soi. Chassée hors de soi. Jetée dehors. (Quittant tout à fait Mme Rolland, sa dignité et sa hauteur.) N'ayant jamais été aussi profondément séparée de soi-même" (227-28). It would seem that at the end of her second marriage, girl-Elisabeth is banished and erased once and for all. More importantly, she herself does the banishing – no one is left to force her hand, and yet she casts her girl-self out of her own volition and on her own authority. Like Marie in La fin des étés, it appears that Elisabeth also must eventually put her girlhood to death in order to turn the page, although the reason for this is ultimately much less clear in Elisabeth’s case than in that of Marie. Indeed, such a conclusion makes one wonder what the point of girl-Elisabeth’s insurgency was, after all.
“Mon atroce complicité”: Undermining the myth of the Quebec girl’s submission

In my introduction to this second portion of my chapter, I cited Quebec historian Gérard Bouchard’s description of QR-Quebec’s desire for “an end to the past oppression and to the second-class status, ... a rejection of the domination from within and from without, and a new collective identity freed from the old submissive bent” (Bouchard 12). This quote comes from a text about national myths in Quebec – but interestingly, it could be applied quite as effectively to the question of Quebec womanhood as it could be to nationhood. More interestingly for my purposes, it also accurately describes the future desired by both of the girl-figures in this chapter: an existence not predicated on submission, subalternity, and self-sacrifice, but rather on the recognition of each individual’s right to govern her own life and body with true sovereignty over both. However, Bouchard’s quote does not describe the destinies actually reserved for the girls we have studied in this chapter, who instead must accept their society’s definition of woman as "[c]onsentante et résignée" (Kamouraska 164), surrender their girlhood sovereignty as they become women, and ever after conform to the unbending terms of acceptable femininity in their contexts.

The two terms Hébert’s novel uses reveal the utter inescapability of this femininity for Elisabeth, like for Marie. Just as Marie “chose” to put girlhood behind her (to all appearances, consentante) and assume the correct attitude of womanhood (appearing entirely résignée thereafter), so Elisabeth “chose”
repeatedly to surrender her right to act on her girlhood, again and again adopting the posture of proper femininity within her society. The one difference between these two parallel narratives is that Marie’s choice appears sincere, total, and irreversible, whereas Elisabeth’s choice is artificial, partial, and inconclusive. Marie is haunted by her girlhood until she exorcises it from herself; Elisabeth represses her girlhood, but never fully gets rid of it, and so it returns to haunt her throughout her life as an adult woman. In both cases, the pressure to obey society’s unspoken demand to annihilate girlhood for the sake of proper womanhood is almost irresistible. While each of our protagonists had the illusion of autonomy in the pursuit of her own destiny, both finally came up against the glass ceiling of convention: comply and survive (belong), or deviate and perish (be excluded). Elisabeth, like Marie, ultimately chose – multiple times! – to assume the roles expected of her, making her complicit, even an active participant, in her own self-destruction.

But if this is so, how can her narrative be qualified as insurgent or subversive, beyond what we have already seen? If the conclusion of this work, like that of La fin des étés, still involves the ultimate subsumption of girlhood under acceptable adult femininity, then what has really been accomplished?

My answer here is similar to that which I posited for the conclusion of La fin des étés. The sheer force of girl-Elisabeth’s presence in the narrative of Kamouraska compels the reader to recognize her subjectivity, even if only as a part of the incoherent whole of Elisabeth as a character. The novel invites us to empathize with
Elisabeth even if we do not agree with her choices. It validates her passion (leading to adultery and murder) quite as much as it validates her pragmatism (leading her to marry twice but never for love, to surrender her true self for the sake of social survival). Its ultimate condemnation is not of Elisabeth; the narrative disagrees almost entirely with the judgment of the English court, which found Elisabeth guilty of willful criminality and malice “against the peace of our said Lady the Queen, her crown and dignity” (K 32). Instead, the real villain in Kamouraska is more diffuse; it is the forces that compelled Elisabeth to engage in acts of violence against herself and those around her.

Hébert’s novel is not merely an account of the individual tragedy of a violent, incoherent woman, but rather an outcry against the collective travesty of the oppressive, artificial, incoherent system of values and structures that made her a criminal. Hébert’s novel points the finger at “l’appareil des vieilles familles” and its consuming desire to “Apaiser tout scandale” which meant: “Condamner Elisabeth d’Aulnières au masque froid de l’innocence. … La sauver et nous sauver avec elle” (233). This version of innocence is a lie, a fraud, a con, a mask assumed in obedience to the so-called greater good. Compulsory complicity is the true villain of Kamouraska, just as it is in La fin des étés, and the self-destroying girl at the heart of both narratives is both its victim and the proof of its cost.
Concluding remarks (from the cemetery)

The shared condemnation of complicity in these works must surely be linked to the ideological evolutions occurring during the decade in which they appeared. Just as Quebec itself was busily pushing back against generations of multifarious oppressions, the women of the province were awakening to the reality that their own bodies were provinces – conquered territories, ruled by external powers in which they themselves were not allowed to participate. They began to question the institutions holding them in place, even those which appeared to be foundational to life as they knew it, such as marriage itself. In both Kamouraska and La fin des étés, marriage is directly associated with violence and death. It is the inevitable force that snuffs out girlhood and erases the girl so that proper adult femininity can be achieved once more.

In a response to France Théorêt's 1987 collection of essays Entre raison et déraison, Claire Lejeune postulated that:

"La souveraineté de la raison du sujet masculin s'étant fondée sur le musellement de la déraison attribuée au sujet féminin, on pourrait dire que le silence du sujet féminin fut acheté — au nom de l'Ordre — contre une place plus ou moins enviable dans la Maison patriarcale" (Lejeune 53).

This idea comes out very strongly in both of these works, as it really does seem that the voices of Elisabeth and Marie must be silenced in order for them to belong to the patriarchal orders in which they exist. The disintegration of girlhood was the necessary prerequisite to the integration of the adult woman into society. In defiance of this, both Kamouraska and La fin des étés privilege these silenced voices
in a way that clearly objects to this status quo. Poirier and Hébert use their girl-figures to express their own malaise and that of many generations of women (formerly girls) at the idea that the “moments of transformation” (Driscoll 57) marking the passage from girlhood to womanhood have to be moments of fracture, destruction, and violence. In both narratives, the obligatory scission between girl-ness and adult femininity is a tragedy, a wound that never heals. Moreover, it is an injustice – one that both narratives imply cannot be endured much longer before a revolution comes.

The core target of such a revolution would surely be the awful association between marriage, the death of the girl/girlhood, and the silencing of the girl’s deviant female voice. Resistance to this manner of becoming a woman comes across very strongly at the end of Kamouraska. This is odd timing, because it is a moment in which Elisabeth’s marriage is on the point of ending through death, which ought to mean new freedom for her. However, the novel leaves us with the impression of a defeat, albeit a deeply resented one. Much has been made of the novel’s enigmatic conclusion, which is fully as troubling and unsatisfactory as the ending of La fin des étés. In the final paragraphs of the novel, Elisabeth evokes a mysterious “femme noire” buried in a field: “Chacun se dit que la faim de vivre de cette femme, enterrée vive, il y a si longtemps, doit être si féroce et entière, accumulée sous la terre, depuis des siècles !” (246).

While adult-Elisabeth refers to a woman being buried alive here, I contend that it is the girl who is truly buried alive in Kamouraska, much as in La fin des étés.
After all, it is undeniably the girl who demonstrates ferocious, wholehearted "faim de vivre" in both works, and it is she who is smothered, plowed under, and scrubbed away to make room for adult femininity. Moreover, in both stories, it is the girl who threatens to resist her fate and come back from the dead. She is the true subversive figure in both works, the greatest threat to the equilibrium of her world.

Anne Ancrenat discusses the many "filles rebelles" in the works of Anne Hébert in her significant study *De mémoire de femmes* (2002). She comments that these figures, of which Elisabeth is certainly one, always come up against the futility of "leur appétit de vivre, leur quasi-impouvoir à se réaliser comme femmes ‘à part entière,’ tant elles sont seules dans leurs révoltes" (*MDF* 43). For Ancrenat, Elisabeth is part of "cette lignée de femmes obscures qui se sont révoltées au cours des siècles passés et qui ont porté de génération en génération leur désir de vivre, complètement dénaturé par l’imaginaire antiféministe qui dominait la scène sociale" (*MDF* 261).

Ancrenat’s words clearly echo the conclusion of *Kamouraska*, and also serve to situate the novel in its context: 1970 in Quebec, at the height of the emergence of the women’s movement. Hébert’s novel is in fact a sort of revenant itself, the rebirth of a forgotten fait-divers made into a groundbreaking work of semi-fiction interwoven with hints of autofiction and poetic structures. It gives voice to the generations of girls and women bottled up in the single femme noire of the last page. Poirier’s film can be viewed in a similar light; despite its relatively meager reception, it is also an effort to revisit memory and contest deeply-ingrained social
norms that oppress women and suppress girlhood. In both La fin des étés and Kamouraska, adult heroines "cherchent cette part d’elles-mêmes jetée aux oubliettes de l’histoire universelle" (MDF 285) – in my view, this "part" is nothing less than their girlhood, their desired and incoherent past selves whose incredible subversive power posed such a threat to their society that they had to be destroyed.

This obligatory destruction is, as we have seen, the core crime that Kamouraska and La fin des étés condemn. Both Poirier and Hébert clearly see that the forced complicity of girls in their own self-erasure causes irreparable fracture in female subjectivity. It forces them to either alienate themselves from the only selves they have known, abdicating their own sovereignty, or to be alienated from the rest of society as deviants. Our two narratives posit two possible outcomes of this choice: either the adult woman annihilates her girlhood self and becomes no more than a ghost, transparent and powerless, or she hides it away, and lives the rest of her life haunted by the specter of her girlhood.

In the end, neither of our authors for this chapter could yet see a way out for the girl; the best that they could do was depict the inner struggle and tragic demise of the girl in the hopes that such a story would awaken new lines of thought and questioning which might one day lead to new possibilities. As we shall see in the following chapter, those possibilities did come – and brought with them a host of new challenges for the young Québécoise. Although escape was on the horizon, it would not be an easy road; like belonging, sovereignty, too, comes at a cost.
CHAPTER 3

The price of sovereign girlhood in *Une Belle Education* and *La Route d’Altamont*

"Et pour être toi-même, tu entends donc tout briser?" (La Route d’Altamont, p. 147)

"Une phrase toute simple a causé ce ravage : connais-toi toi-même. Sans doute est-elle vraie dans la mesure où elle appartient à la culture. Elle est fausse lorsqu’elle prend toute la place, lorsqu’elle mène à un gouffre insondable" (France Théoret, Entre Raison et Déraison, p. 52).

"Les frontières de nos rêves ne sont plus les mêmes." (Paul-Emile Borduas et al., Le Refus Global, p. 9)

If *Kamouraska* left us wondering if the Quebec girl would ever have a taste of freedom, or when the *faim de vivre* of the girls we have seen “buried alive” in Chapters 1 and 2 would finally bring them up from their pitiless prison beneath the earth, France Théoret’s novel *Une Belle Education* and Gabrielle Roy’s collection of novellas entitled *La Route d’Altamont* provide that answer. These two texts function as responses or alternatives to the
works we have already examined, and show us a new kind of Quebec girl: one who is willing and able to claim sovereignty over her own destiny, even if it means burning bridges. The uneasy complicity of Maria Chapdelaine, smothered rebellion of Florentine Lacasse, erased subjectivity of Marie Préfontaine, and fruitless revolt of Elisabeth d’Aulnières-Tassy-Rolland give way to a new brand of feminine adolescence: one whose outcome, while certainly still circumscribed, is neither entirely predetermined nor totally inevitable. Although our two new protagonists, Théoret’s Evelyne and Roy’s Christine, are faced with similar patriarchal (and matriarchal) ideologies and social codes to those that so narrowly limited their predecessors’ options, they are also able to see and even pursue a future other than that of their mothers. Endowed with such a vision, Evelyne and Christine navigate new avenues to self-actualization, agency, and subjectivity undreamt-of by previous generations of Quebec girls.

The frustration roiling just below the surface in the texts we have examined so far will finally result in change as the two girls we encounter here at last meaningfully surpass the destiny of their (fore)mothers. This happens through both girls’ active rejection of a traditional feminine form of subjectivity, characterized by passivity, compliance, and self-denial, and accession to a markedly masculine form of subjectivity: an individualistic, progressive, and forward-oriented form of personal sovereignty attained
through individual achievement and industry, and contingent upon the
abjection of the traditional Quebec mother, present in each text.

As my terminology suggests, the theoretical framework of my analysis
here will at times draw upon Kristeva’s work on abjection and subjectivity.
Kristeva scholar Lynne Huffer argues that "Kristeva’s theory … presupposes
… [a] totalizing view of human agency in which the individual subject in
isolation becomes the final repository of revolutionary change" (Huffer 88).
My argument is that Christine and Evelyne, the two girl-protagonists
featured in this chapter, engage in the pursuit of an individual-centric form of
subjectivity and agency, seeking "revolutionary change" by driving inward to
find their true purpose or reason for being. While this process does liberate
them from their mothers, and allows them to attain a high level of individual
sovereignty, it also alienates them almost entirely from past forms of
feminine subjectivity, creating a deep rift between themselves and their
“roots” as figures becoming women. In my analysis, I will demonstrate how
Evelyne and Christine’s similar approaches to girlhood are evidence of a new,
dramatically different ethical framework being embraced by the girl in
Quebec in the Quiet Revolution period and in the decades that followed.

In addition, this chapter will reveal striking parallels between these
changes and similar sociocultural developments in Quebec culture, especially
the dramatic movement of Quebec’s society toward deliberate abjection of its
collective maternal edifice, the Catholic Church. Literary scholar Lori Saint-
Martin has noted that in much Quebec women’s literature of this period, “"Se couper de la mère devient la condition d’accès au statut de sujet souverain" (30); in the context of 1960s Quebec, this statement has resonance on both an individual level (girls leaving their mothers) and a collective, even national, level (Quebec leaving its “mother”). The global wave of decolonial rhetoric reached Quebec at the end of the Grande Noirceur of the 1950s, and stoked long-simmering frustrations over the “colonized” state of the Québécois nation under Anglo-American economic control and under the cumbersome, feminizing dominance of the Church. This led to a dramatic drop in Catholic religious practice over the course of the 1960s. Quebec historian Michael Gauvreau describes the new, secular(ized) religious mentality in Quebec by 1968 as having “simply bypassed the institutional church to found its cultural legitimacy upon the new synthesis of Christianity and the values of democratic pluralism in which the sovereignty of the individual conscience superseded any external or doctrinal authority” (Gauvreau 200). Quebec’s rapid ideological shift from collectivism and orthodoxy to individualism and pluralism over the course of the 1930s-1960s radically destabilized the social structures that had defined the French-Canadian lifestyle for centuries. Such a change brought untold

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numbers of new possibilities, but it also involved a deep collective trauma, which, though arguably salutary in the end, has yet to be resolved.

What we will observe in this chapter is how these changes are reflected (even foreshadowed, in the case of *La Route d’Altamont*) in two girlhood narratives, one written during and one taking place in Quiet-Revolution-era Quebec. Both narratives reveal the exponential increase in the complexity of becoming a woman in the midst of such a sociocultural maelstrom. In a society hungry for revolution, which rejects any “feminizing” force and valorizes the empowerment of a more virile, masculine individual, becoming feminine in the traditional manner is no longer possible. Instead, the girl, like the boys and young men surrounding her, now has the chance to break new ground by pursuing a path toward individual sovereignty.

However, the educational system and even the parents of this generation of girls did not take these social changes into account, instead continuing to indoctrinate girls in proper Catholic or Catholic-influenced femininity. This is the impossible tension in which girls had to become women in 1960s Quebec: on one hand, within the social structures of school and family, what it meant to perform or pass through girlhood “correctly” was almost unchanged, or was evolving very slowly. On the other hand, Quebec society was rapidly dismantling, even discarding, exactly the value system on which that old definition of girlhood was founded. For the protagonists of *Une Belle Education* and *La Route d’Altamont*, the question
becomes: amid so many conflicting messages about what femininity and womanhood are or should be, how can or should they be attained, and how can or should they interface with the rest of society? In essence, how does one become a woman/become feminine when womanhood and femininity are being radically redefined, if not abjected entirely?

Rocked by new waves of uncertainty, girlhood continues to be a problematic space, both a borderland and a battlefield, in this text. It is a crucial, poorly-defined zone marking the distance between past and future modes of being. How the girl takes ownership of that space will define her destiny and that of her society; whether she will align herself with tradition or break with it to pursue modern subjectivity is the ultimate question. Roy and Théoret present us with our first girl-protagonists who truly dare to make that choice for themselves, unlike the figures examined in Chapters I and II. This new level of agency makes these two girls free radicals, markers of the changes rapidly occurring in their society.

This agency also makes these girls threatening to those around them. The traditional authority structures in their lives – teachers, parents, family members – all attempt to restrict their movements, and react with fear and anger when the girls push back. However, the power of those old structures is no longer absolute; despite multiple kinds of pressure, both girls are eventually able to assert their right to live differently than their mothers did. Once they do so, the unprecedented nature of their choices leaves them
unanchored, at once dizzyingly free to chart their own courses and frighteningly alone on those journeys. As they come up against the old borders of girlhood, they find themselves able to contest those borders, and even stake out new ones.

As I analyze these two powerful narratives, I will focus primarily on two key elements: the internalization and individualization of the process of girlhood, and the abjection of the mother. Both elements are pillars of the new subjectivity these two girl-protagonists are building for themselves in these works. As I have indicated, both narratives bear witness to a resolutely modern embracing of subjectivity-in-process steered by a markedly masculine brand of agentivized individualism. By keeping her own counsel and refusing traditional femininity by abjecting her mother, the girl narrated by these authors can cultivate her own agency in a way that ultimately explodes previous definitions of Quebec womanhood, even as previous definitions of French-Canadian identity are exploding all around her. Does her escape stem from, point to, or provoke this cultural shift? And where will it all lead?

The two quotes I included as epigraphs to this chapter come together to open a powerful new chapter of Quebec girlhood expressed through narrative: the girl’s radical pursuit of her Self as a consuming, transformative force in her life, a microcosm of a much broader cultural trend toward the sovereignty of the individual, one predicated upon the abjection of the
maternal and built around a subjectivity that is fluid rather than fixed. This pursuit pushes the Quebec girl (as it pushes her society) beyond the brink of the known and into the gouffre insondable of possibilities and uncertainties that opens up before her as she launches herself irreversibly forward. Her ferocious push toward sovereignty and self-realization may allow her to escape the alienation her foremothers experienced, but in the end replaces it with a new, liberated, lonely kind of alienation: that of the sovereign female subject.

**Part I: One girl's quiet revolution in La Route d'Altamont**

Gabrielle Roy's luminescent set of four novellas, published in Montreal in 1966, chronicles episodes from the girlhood of protagonist Christine, a young girl growing up in Manitoba. The separation between these four subtexts is marked by title pages for each of the novellas: “Ma grand-mère toute-puissante,” “Le vieillard et l’enfant,” “Le déménagement,” and “La Route d’Altamont.” While specifics of ages and dates are absent from the text, elements of each novella allow us to gather that the four episodes are in chronological order, and cover parts of Christine’s life from when she is roughly seven or eight until she is approximately college-age. In both form and content, Roy’s four novellas together form a sort of “novel of adolescence,” a genre defined by literary scholar Barbara White as usually involving “estrangement from the social environment, conflict with parents,
disappointment in love, departure from home, and encounter with different people and ideas” (White 3) – albeit with the conspicuous absence of any romantic connection whatsoever. *La Route d’Altamont* offers a unique version of feminine becoming: one whose success is *not* measured (at least by the protagonist and the narrator) by success in love or arrival at the traditional feminine destination of wife-and-motherhood, but rather by success in tracing a new, individual path of professional advancement and self-driven personal growth.

As she reflects on this process, Roy’s narrator, an older-adult version of Christine, retraces her memories in graceful and disarming prose filled with equal parts happy nostalgia and unshakable melancholy. The irreducibly bittersweet tone of the novellas stems from a sense of homesickness that can never be relieved, a feeling that forward is the only direction possible for the main character. One major reason for this sentiment is the central conflict between Christine and her mother that builds over the course of the four episodes. In order for Christine to realize her own dreams of travel, discovery, and independence, she must resist her mother’s desires for continuity, stability, and connection, namely, her wish for Christine to stay at home with her. The four separate stories come together to clearly express Christine’s simultaneous, irreconcilable desires for both separation from and reconciliation to her mother. The tenderness and even complicity between Christine and her mother render their
separation all the more complex. In the end, the girl’s drive to achieve her potential as a sovereign, independent individual carries the day, bringing both resounding success and unresolved trauma.

At the core of *La Route d’Altamont* is Roy’s charming semiautobiographical alter-ego, Christine, who is depicted as a bright, thoughtful, imaginative girl, full of dreams and inclined to see magic all around her. She has an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, as well as an ever-deepening sense of wanderlust, which she sees as an inherited family trait. As she reaches the latter stages of her adolescence, she becomes more and more intent on discovering and then developing herself as an individual, someone whose heritage does not necessarily define the scope of her future. This means that although Christine expresses an abiding sense of connection to her family, especially her mother and grandmother, that connection is an encumbrance to be shaken off even as it is a comfort. Essentially, however happy it may be, home is ultimately as much of a prison as it is a refuge for the restless, ambitious Christine. Through the progression of the four novellas, the reader comes to understand that the overarching narrative of *La Route d’Altamont* is a tale of self-emancipation predicated upon an irreversible departure from inherited or expected patterns of subjectivity.

In my analysis of this text, I will focus primarily on the fourth novella of the set, “La Route d’Altamont,” in order to unpack the final stages of Christine’s coming-of-age as a figure becoming a woman. I will investigate
the steady progression toward interiorization and individualism in Christine’s girlhood process, as well as the looming abjection of Christine’s mother, a heavier and heavier presence with each page. Both of these elements reappear in *Une Belle Education*, a fact that demonstrates their importance and powerfully links the two texts together. By analyzing Christine’s inner conflict between sympathy with her mother and rejection of her mother’s lifestyle, as well as her perception of the route to individual sovereignty as a female subject, this chapter will uncover the crisis of subjectivity happening not only in Christine’s personal life, but also across many levels of Quebec society in particular, and Western civilization more broadly. As we will see, the core questions of Roy’s set of novellas provide a compelling predictive portrait of the core questions of girlhood in 1960s Quebec. The central problems of *Altamont* are renegotiating girlhood, motherhood, femininity, and subjectivity, and reflect not only Roy’s own precociously emancipated trajectory through life as a girl and then a woman, but also her situation as author and narrator writing a girlhood narrative while living as an adult woman within the spatial and temporal world of Quiet Revolution Quebec. Girlhood as expressed in Roy’s text is ideally situated to set the stage for its (re)iteration in *Une Belle Education* decades later.

In Christine’s case, the nature of becoming a woman (or a female subject) steadily becomes centered on the breaking of a cycle of inherited
feminine destinies in favor of a new, more linear drive toward a fundamentally different horizon of sovereign, autonomous, individualistic subjectivity. Breaking that cycle brings great liberation, but comes at the price of Christine’s closeness to her mother and, as a consequence, to all she knows of feminine identity. Such a departure sends her out into new territory, a space that she alone can and must explore, define, and inhabit as she renegotiates what it is to be and to become a woman. *La Route d’Altamont* gives us a close-up look at one precocious French-Canadian girl’s solo flight toward sovereign selfhood.

The drive toward emancipation at the heart of *Altamont* comes on steadily, gradually, as part of the overall process of Christine’s girlhood. Her desire to discover and develop herself is increasingly evident throughout the sequence of four novellas, progressing from a fascination with her matrilineal history in the first episode, to an insatiable curiosity about the world in the second and third episodes, and finally to an insistence on her right to pursue her own path in the final episode. Essentially, the more Christine comes to know of her world and of the scope of feminine identity within it, the more she hungers for broader horizons. Moreover, the more she pushes against the limits of what she knows, the more eager she is to keep pushing – to the point of breaking through those limits altogether. A perspicacious, affectionate, imaginative, driven, introspective, and increasingly independent girl, Christine steadily learns to see and then to
harness her own capacities and potentialities in order to propel her quest of self-discovery and self-enfranchisement forward.

**Christine’s self-building project**

By the beginning of the fourth novella, “La Route d’Altamont,” Christine is in the latter stage of her adolescence, a fact demonstrated concretely, by her ability to drive the family car, and more abstractly, by her general attitude of restlessness, resistance, and insistence on her own legitimacy as an adult individual. As this fourth episode progresses, Christine’s energy is increasingly oriented toward travel, education, and experience. The reader quickly sees that she believes ardently in her own potential, that she feels out of place in the world she currently inhabits, and that she feels summoned by an “appel imprécis mais puissant ... vers mille possibilités du destin” (119). Eager and hopeful even in her frustrations, she clings to her sense of “confiance illimitée en un avenir lui-même comme illimité” (123).

An essential feature of this unlimited future is that in Christine’s mind, it belongs to her alone. Despite her strong affective connection to her mother and grandmother, Christine manifests a distinctly “solo” attitude toward her own process of becoming. Her explicit goals in terms of career or life direction are vague and open-ended, and she holds fast to the freedom of that uncertainty, refusing to be saddled with expectations or limited by
commitment to a clearly-defined plan. She is clear about her desire to travel, specifically to Europe, but other than that, the most central of her goals is simply to find herself. The narrative makes it clear that, in her mind, this is a mission she and she alone can and will accomplish. She reflects that, “Peut-être faut-il être bien seul, parfois, pour se retrouver soi-même” (127), and that "c'est bien dans la solitude seulement que l'âme goûte sa délivrance" (141). Solitude and independence become fused in her mind as the two crucial requirements for her voyage of self-discovery – a journey whose destination is admittedly unclear, but upon which Christine aches to embark.

Essentially, what Christine is actively seeking in “La Route d’Altamont” is to engage herself in a process similar to the traditionally masculine narrative arc of the bildungsroman, in which an adolescent protagonist leaves home, has adventures, and finds himself, eventually becoming a whole, self-sufficient adult person. However, such a process would mean breaking away from the manner of growing up that her mother and foremothers experienced; self-discovery was a luxury Christine’s female ancestors could not afford. Christine’s mother, Eveline, admits that “Jeune, ... j’ai ardemment désiré étudier, apprendre, voyager, me hausser du mieux possible” (145), but that marriage and children quickly ended those dreams.

In the fourth chapter of “La Route d’Altamont,” Christine’s mother, Eveline, describes her experience of becoming a woman and then aging into her womanhood, a process that notably involved learning to understand her
own mother as she grew older. She tells Christine that "devenue elle [her mother], je la comprends," and hints that Christine will probably have a similar experience, saying: “On finit toujours par se rencontrer” (139).

Instead of being comforted or fascinated by such a poetic vision of cyclical feminine being, Christine is horrified, and immediately pushes back against “je ne sais quelle insupportable atteinte à la personnalité, à la liberté individuelle" (139) in the implication that she would eventually, inevitably become her mother.

Despite her love for her mother, Christine’s first allegiance is decidedly not to the patterns of identity laid down by her forebears, but rather to the sovereignty of her own individual subjectivity. She does not express the same sense of constraint, stemming from a need to conform to social and familial expectations, that impeded the movements of the other girl-figures we have studied so far, but rather demonstrates a deep conviction of her right to jurisdiction over her own life. The story’s narrator, presumably an elder version of Christine herself, retrospectively expresses a clear understanding of the exhilarating, unsettling power for self-determination contained in the naïve boldness of youth, whether masculine or feminine: “Cette liberté de tout accueillir, puisque aucun choix important n’en a encore entamé les possibilités, cette liberté infinie, parfois si troublante, ce doit être cela la jeunesse" (140). Even within the timeline of the story, Christine is acutely aware of the positive aspects of her own
potential as an unattached young person, and is determined to harness it for her own ends, even if just to see where it might take her.

A significant portion of Christine’s self-awareness in this area stems from a feature she shares with the other girl-figures we have studied so far: a strange voice that she hears within herself. Like Maria Chapdelaine and Elisabeth d’Aulnières, for example, Christine is “haunted” by a presence within herself that is at once part of her and separate from her. This “specter” of subjectivity nudges her to pursue her dreams, to listen to the desires of her own heart over the expectations of those around her. However, Christine’s inner voice has a new feature, which sets it apart as a harbinger of radical change: Christine characterizes her inner voice as masculine.

She writes:

Je l’avais entendu déjà, parfois, l’appel insistant, étranger – venant de nul autre que moi pourtant – qui, tout à coup, au milieu de mes jeux et de mes amitiés, me commandait de partir pour me mesurer avec quelque défi imprécis encore que me lançait le monde ou que je me lançais moi-même.

"J’avais réussi jusque-là à m’en délivrer, puis, sans qu’il ne me parlât beaucoup plus distinctement, j’en vins à l’entendre qui me relança partout. (Je dis il: comment nommer autrement ce qui devint peu à peu mon maître, mon tyrannique possesseur?) (143).

Christine’s gendering of her inner voice is telling on multiple levels: first, it reveals that agency, initiative, and self-determination are masculine qualities in Christine’s (and possibly Roy’s) point of view; secondly, it reveals
that these masculine qualities exist within Christine herself, because as she herself states, “cet être étranger en moi ... c’était aussi moi-même” (143). Thirdly, it complicates the question of Christine’s claim to sovereignty over her own life by implying that she is somehow being driven by some other force that is “possessing” her – and a masculine one at that. Overall, this brief passage makes it clear that in order to break free from the cycle of feminine destiny prescribed by her mother, Christine understood – consciously, subconsciously, or at least retrospectively – that she needed to tap into what she considered a masculine manner of being. In her mind, individual building of the self, taking control of one’s own devenir, could not happen purely au féminin.

This manner of thinking allows us to see the first (and clearest) connection between Christine’s narrative of accession to sovereign subjectivity on an individual level and the larger narrative of Quebec society’s parallel process toward the same goal on a collective level. In both cases, the evolution of subjectivity in the context of Quebec culture involves moving away from feminine or feminizing patterns of behavior and toward more masculine modes of being. Perhaps the most significant large-scale instance of this movement came in the 1960s, when a significant number of Québécois collectively left the Church. First, the état providence took the place of the Church as provider of social services and education; then, not
much later, attendance levels at Mass dropped dramatically, from over 85% to under 50% in little more than a decade.

Questions of gender were at the core of this massive cultural shift. Over the course of the postwar period in particular, frustration with the Church grew stronger in nationalist rhetoric, which sought to free Quebec from a “feminine” or subaltern state of being that was perceived to have been perpetuated by the Church. Quebec scholar Jeffery Vacante points out that some Quebec nationalists “argued that the Church was instilling ‘feminine’ values in boys and standing in the way of Quebec’s virile destiny” and that “The centralization of social services and education in the state during the 1960s, therefore, became the means to reverse the ‘effeminizing’ influence of the Catholic Church” (36). Vacante’s observations reveal that even as Christine felt alienated and held back by her mother’s insistence on her adherence to a crippling version of femininity, so Quebec’s nationalists felt alienated and encumbered by Church teachings, which they viewed as also espousing a cripplingly feminine version of social positioning – one on its way out. In the *Refus Global*, for example, a manifesto seen by many as a landmark QR document24, Paul-Emile Borduas describes the “état cadavérique” (14) of Christian civilization, associating the Church and its

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24 Written by Paul-Emile Borduas and a group of prominent Quebec artists and intellectuals in 1949. Whether it ought to be viewed as sparking the QR or simply as an indicator that it was already happening remains a subject of debate among Quebec historians.
authority with the ultimate abject – and therefore, necessarily, with the maternal and the feminine, in their most unbecoming forms.

While Roy’s choice to render Christine’s inner voice as masculine might appear to be a subtle, minor element of the narrative, the sociocultural context in which the novel was written brings out its true significance. In fact, it speaks volumes about the true nature and experience of Quebec girlhood, and ought not to be overlooked. This passage situates the girl and the nature of her process of becoming at the heart of Quebec’s larger cultural narrative in a fascinating way: here, we see how deeply-entrenched conceptions of gender made it impossible for the girl to become a woman on her own terms without consciously tapping into what she and her society perceived to be masculinity.

Although much of Christine’s increasingly masculine pattern of becoming happened in her inner world, its eventual manifestations in her expressed desires and in her choices did not sufficiently cohere with the feminine roles expected of her. This dissonance creates a rift in the narrative between Christine and her mother, who feels betrayed by her daughter’s unwillingness to remain contained within the small world of their family and local community. Christine’s intent pursuit of her own self, predicated upon a belief in the unique significance of each individual subject, runs contrary to Eveline’s view of the self as a shared entity whose existence is built on its being indebted and bonded to others. Christine tries to bridge the gap by
attributing her wanderlust to her mother (147), but her mother’s reply is
telling: “Et pour être toi-même, tu entends donc tout briser?” (147). For
Eveline, Christine’s quest to discover herself is egotistical and damaging, and
involves irreparable rupture. For Christine, however, eliminating her
dependent proximity to her mother and family creates space for powerful
personal growth. She reflects that: "cette vulnérabilité extrême me paraissait
et me paraît encore l’une des étapes les plus nécessaires à la connaissance de
soi" (149).

**Leaving mother(hood) behind**

On her path toward self-knowledge, Christine demonstrates an ever-
increasing willingness, even determination, to sacrifice her closeness to her
mother. Prominent Quebec scholar Lori Saint-Martin notes an "immense
ambivalence" toward the figure of the mother in Roy’s writings in general
(124), a feature that is certainly present in *La Route d’Altamont*. This small
collection of novellas is bursting with the irreducible blend of agony and
relief stemming from Christine’s (and arguably Roy’s, by extension)
departure. Much of this comes from the stifling sense of similarity between
Christine and her mother; both characters recognize, explicitly or otherwise,
that Christine is in many ways a youthful reincarnation of her mother, lit up
with the same flame of wanderlust and curiosity that her mother was forced
to snuff out when she married and had children.
Saint-Martin comments on this relationship from the mother’s point of view, explaining: "Combattre en sa fille les rêves que la vie a tués en elle-même, freiner l’élan de jeunesse qui a déjà été le sien : la mère sera ainsi divisée contre elle-même" (129). Eveline demonstrates such an inner tension in her contentious reactions to Christine’s plans to travel the world. Christine tells us that Eveline “éclata en reproches véhéments,” accusing her daughter of plotting against her: “Voilà ce que tu complotes” (146). After this interaction, we learn that: “Nous sommes devenues quelque peu ennemies, ma mère et moi” (148). The words hostile, s’opposent, en lutte, harceler, vaincue, and fit front in the following two paragraphs underline this sense of a battle between mother and daughter.

Although Christine laments the fighting between herself and her mother to some extent, she is mainly intent on continuing to pursue her goals, which means overcoming her mother’s objections. In fact, the more Eveline resists, the more Christine seems determined to escape. In large part, this determination stems from Christine’s understanding of the dissonance between her own inner voice and those her mother hears. While Christine’s voice is future-oriented, as we have discussed, Eveline hears “voix venues du passé” (135) instead. What is really happening between Christine and Eveline is a dispute over girlhood – Christine’s present girlhood, which is a threat to the stability of Eveline’s current life, and Eveline’s own past girlhood, which she revisits in memory but which is no longer truly
accessible to her. Simone de Beauvoir writes about this phenomenon in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, explaining that "[la] mère – on le verra – est sourdement hostile à l'affranchissement de sa fille et, plus ou moins délibérément, elle s'applique à la brimer" (97). More recently, Lori Saint-Martin writes that "L'immobilité forcée de la mère est explicitement mise en opposition avec les grands voyages que réalise la fille, comme si la mobilité de celle-ci s'achetait au prix de l'enchaînement de la femme aînée" (130). The sickness and tragedy of it all is, of course, the unavoidable truth that Eveline’s obstructions stem from her own indoctrination in proper femininity (which has brought her significant sorrow) and reveal her complicity in the repetition of that cycle. Christine’s girlhood represents both a luminous hope for Eveline, as a moment in which she is allowed to revisit her own dreams, and a source of fear, as the moment in which she is faced with separation from her daughter as Christine develops her own dreams. It is also a source of shame, as it points to Eveline’s past renunciation of her autonomous selfhood in deference to her feminine “destiny.” Seeing how Christine dares to seize the opportunities before her is therefore both exhilarating and devastating for Eveline, and ultimately illuminates the deep contrasts between mother and daughter. Based on Christine’s narration, it seems that seeing Christine succeed makes Eveline doubt her own choices as a girl and makes her fear losing not only her daughter’s nearness, but also her esteem.
However, from Christine’s perspective, leaving her mother is in fact the greatest act of loyalty she can perform. She writes of all that she wishes to do for her mother, and reveals these thoughts: “je me hâtais, je me pensais toujours au bord de ce que je voulais devenir à ses yeux avant de lui revenir” (156). This reflection brings us to the chasm at the heart of *Altamont* and *Une Belle Education*: the fact that in these narratives, once the daughter leaves to find her own way, there can be no going back – no complete reconciliation is possible. The cycle has been broken.

Not all scholars interpret *La Route d’Altamont* in this way. Lori Saint-Martin, previously mentioned, considers the written work of the novellas itself as a means of restoring the “liens de connivance et de réciprocité entre les générations de femmes” (134). She makes a convincing case for Roy-Christine’s effort to resuscitate the maternal voice through writing, and ultimately argues that in spite of herself, Christine does in fact “become” her mother despite how she once so vehemently resisted that destiny. By taking up her mother’s stories and acknowledging her mother as the origin of her own passions and gifts, Saint-Martin argues, and by expressing it all through writing, Christine (and Roy by extension) reestablishes the seemingly broken female generational cycle.

While this is a valid point, it remains very important to underline the fundamental disparity between Christine and Eveline’s lives: Christine chose to prioritize her own self-development, neither marrying nor having children
and materially supporting herself as an independent adult, whereas Eveline chose (arguably) to set her Self aside, marry, have children, and allow her subjectivity to be made contingent upon her belonging to her husband, children, and community. It is one thing to say that Christine ultimately grows to understand her mother, or that she gradually sees how much she and her mother are alike; it is another to add in the fact that the life decisions both women made ultimately make them into fundamentally different women, and set their processes of becoming women/feminine in opposition to one another.

In Roy’s concluding paragraphs, it is very clear that Eveline and her girlhood would always be past-oriented, and was thus doomed to remain estranged from Christine’s dynamic, future-chasing brand of feminine becoming – to the chagrin of both mother and daughter. In Christine’s own words, “je pense bien que cette hâte où j’étais de ce que je deviendrais m’a caché tout le reste” (156). The consuming nature of her thirst to take hold of a new manner of be(com)ing launched her well beyond the orbit of her mothers’ brand of femininity, so far that she broke free of that gravitational pull altogether.
“Toujours, toujours, je n’en étais qu’au commencement”\(^{25}\)

The contrast between these two models, as well as the abruptness of the shift between them, which occurs in *Altamont* from one generation to the next, can be read as a foreshadowing or a reflection of the dramatic changes in the conception of subjectivity, its nature, and its attainment on a cultural, social, and even national level in Quebec in the decade of *Altamont’s* publication.

The concluding pages of *Altamont* offer a brief account of Christine’s experiences as an independent adventurer in Europe, and serve to underline the increasing distance between Christine and her mother. Christine laments that Eveline’s destiny is to “attendre, attendre seule au fond du Manitoba, pendant que j’allais en quête de moi-même sur les grandes routes du monde” (155). Christine attempts to share her adventures with her mother through letters and postcards, but more and more, mother and daughter hide the truth from one another – so much so that Eveline sickens and passes away before Christine is even aware of her mother’s illness. This untimely death renders the physical separation between mother and daughter permanent.

What is most interesting in these final passages, however, is the fact that Christine’s process of self-discovery and becoming, so ardently desired throughout the four novellas, is only vaguely sketched out. Much or all of that process is left to the reader’s imagination. What we do know is that

\(^{25}\) “Always, always, I was only beginning” (*Altamont* 156)
“apprendre à se connaître et à écrire était bien plus long que [Christine] n’avai[t] pensé" and that she felt that "toujours, toujours, je n’en étais qu’au commencement" (156). Christine’s narrative of becoming a woman does not include signposts to designate her arrival at that identitary destination. Neither love, nor marriage, nor motherhood, nor even a career choice are included in her story. The ending is instead left open, ambiguous, indefinite; even Eveline is allowed to escape the limits of her womanhood in her daughter’s imagination by returning to the symbolic (and titular) route d’Altamont, the place where Christine glimpsed her mother’s girlhood self, on the other side of death.

It would seem that the result of Christine’s persistent pursuit of self-discovery was not the discovery of a complete self lurking out in the world somewhere, nor of the attainment of such a self through rites of passage or acts of self-construction. Rather, it was the opening up of an understanding of the self as ever-evolving, connected (but not bound) to the past and constantly redefined by continual discovery. Moreover, this self-exploring individual self was at the core of any broader pursuit or attainment of new patterns of subjectivity for the girl or for the woman she was supposedly becoming. These characteristics of Christine/Roy’s expression of girl-subjectivity foreshadow those that appear over twenty years later in the work of Julia Kristeva, for example, whose work features “a fundamentally conservative, totalizing view of human agency in which the individual subject
in isolation becomes the final repository of revolutionary change" (Huffer 88). Kristeva’s privileging of a masculine, imperialist brand of subjectivity clearly resembles the undercurrent of masculinity, individualism, and even conquest that is legible between the lines of Roy’s text. Beyond this association with then-forthcoming work on subjectivity, Christine also functions well as a literary representation of modern subjectivity (distanced from questions of gender) – modern as in belonging to the movement of modernity in Western culture broadly considered during the mid-twentieth century in particular.

In sum: *La Route d’Altamont* narrates a girlhood characterized by the privileging of a masculine, individually-driven, goal-oriented approach to claiming and asserting individual sovereignty; a focus on an introspective quest for the Self driven by the individual’s desire for experience; emphasis on rejection of the maternal edifice; and an overall valorization of independence, initiative, and autonomy. Moreover, it has a surprising end result, namely, an open-ended kind of becoming that extends the fluidity of girlhood indefinitely. Christine’s relentless thirst for self-actualization echoes with the same sentiment as the Quebec nationalist movement’s famous slogan “maîtres chez nous;” what she (and, as we will see, Théoret’s protagonist, Evelyne) desires most is to be the captain of her own destiny, sovereign over her own identitary territory. In a text emerging at a critical moment in Quebec’s struggle toward the same goal, the notion of a young girl
daring to shake loose from centuries of status quo in order to assert herself as a capable, thinking, dynamic subject is striking indeed. Whether or not the timing of Altamont's publication really reflects any intention on Roy's part to make a social statement, I maintain that it remains significant that Roy was thinking through and writing out her own adolescence during the height of Quebec's collective adolescence.

As we move into a parallel reading of Une Belle Education, we will see how the open-ended blend of nostalgia and optimism at the end of La Route d'Altamont morphs into a darker, more defiant (but no less certain) view of the future of becoming feminine from the perspective of a writer who grew up during the QR and has been writing about be(com)ing a woman ever since. Leaving one's mother behind is a different sort of trauma in Une Belle Education, but no less crucial.

**Part II: Insurgent girlhood in Une Belle Education**

France Théoret's novel Une Belle Education is the first-person account of several episodes in the life of Evelyne, a young girl growing up in the Saint-Henri neighborhood of Montreal and in the village of Saint-Colomban. Evelyne is both protagonist and narrator, and she delivers her narrative in the first person and primarily in the present tense. Her account is a frank, almost detached series of anecdotes and observations about her life in a
stifling working-class milieu that is decidedly too constricting for her curious, perspicacious mind.

The novel is broken into six chapters, entitled Septembre 1956, Janvier 1957, Juillet 1957, Janvier 1958, Juin 1968, and Octobre 1985, respectively. Evelyne tells us that she turns fourteen in October 1956 (UBE 20); this means that the first four chapters cover the middle stages of her girlhood, while the two final chapters cover a summer working in Saint-Colomban when she is twenty-five and a brief encounter with her aging mother when she is in her forties. Incidentally, several of the details and important episodes of Evelyne’s adolescent life as described in the novel are almost direct quotes from one narrative thread of Théoret’s 1988 work Nous parlerons comme on écrit, in which a young girl named Louise Valois had a life very much like Evelyne’s. Une Belle Education incorporates these episodes into a more developed narrative that almost scientifically observes and decodes the ins and outs of girlhood in Evelyne’s context, one which coincides on many points with Théoret’s own life.

A significant element of the matrix of girlhood in Théoret’s novel is the experience of Catholic education, especially Catholic femininity training, both institutionally and at home; Evelyne’s experience links her individual girlhood narrative firmly to the larger changes happening in Quebec culture in the 1960s. The core values of her education also link her to Christine in La Route d’Altamont, as they are very like those that Christine had to resist in
order to move beyond her own milieu. When seen as coinciding with the mass departure of the Québécois from their belonging to the Church, the shared narrative of traumatic separation from an oppressive, reductive feminine past in both of these two texts mirrors the narrative arc of this profound change in Quebec society to dramatic effect. In all three cases, we can observe an outwardly quiet, inwardly unconquerable, and entirely unapologetic revolution taking place – and in all three cases, the battleground of choice is a renegotiation of be(com)ing feminine, the territory of girlhood.

Théoret’s portrait of adolescence through Evelyne is very distinctive. Evelyne, her protagonist and narrator, is a markedly introverted figure whose inner world is vast and complex. She is endowed with a sophisticated level of critical awareness of the many moving parts of her narrow world, a fact that alienates her from her surroundings even as it allows her to understand them on a deep level. She is highly sensitive, but she is not fragile; rather, she is resilient and pragmatic. She is caught between the suffocating poverty and ignorance of her family’s circumstances (which seems almost inescapable) and the dim promise of a different future (which seems almost within her grasp). As she moves through girlhood, she is acutely aware of both the weight of expectation placed upon her and the dark future those expectations would prescribe for her, and so she is constantly on her guard, watching for ways to escape.
My analysis of *Une Belle Education* will elucidate the elements of the text that mirror and build on key elements in Roy’s collection of novellas, and will link these and other relevant particularities of Théoret’s text to the larger questions of this chapter. What follows will include analyses of Evelyne’s process of pursuing individual sovereignty on two levels: how she came to keep her own counsel in regard to her future, and how she came to break ties with the past in the form of her mother. I will also investigate the results of Evelyne’s success in this pursuit, which bears a strong resemblance to the conclusion of Christine’s story in *La Route d’Altamont*. Through this analysis, we shall observe how Evelyne’s growing ambition and self-dependence ultimately brought her to claim radical self-definition from within a system that insisted on the girl’s self-effacement, a truly revolutionary endeavor.

**Claiming individual sovereignty in Une Belle Education**

As a first step, it is important to clarify the radical nature of Evelyne’s self-making project in the sociocultural context of the novel. In her novel *Entre raison et déraison*, Théoret claims that “La subjectivité au féminin est une appropriation au sens d’une conquête” (7). This is certainly the reality she articulates in *Une Belle Education*. Like Christine, Evelyne has to push against heavy social and familial pressure in order to assert her sovereignty as an individual. This means that the development of Evelyne’s personal
ambitions as an internal, introspective, individualistic, and independent project is not only the core narrative of *Une Belle Education*, but also the key point of contention in the novel. Evelyne’s gradual process of recognizing, then claiming, her own inner self as sovereign brings her to radically re-situate the girl as a figure who can claim authority over her own developing subjectivity – and with it, the right to pursue and shape its development, establish and defend its borders, and even assert its independence, with or without the input of others.

Interestingly, one of the first steps Evelyne takes on this journey to individual sovereignty involves an initially repressive practice she is taught as part of her strict Catholic education: the *examen de conscience*. This exercise involves introspectively analyzing oneself to find sin or deviance, confess it, and repent of it. It places the individual on trial, and can bring humility or humiliation, depending on how it is taught. In Evelyne’s experience, it is part of a set of teachings designed to abash all self-interest in her and her classmates, and to make them doubt their own virtue enough to make them submissive to the external moral authority of the Church, represented by their teachers (nuns), rather than their own internal moral compasses. In the second chapter of *Une Belle Education*, Evelyne gives this description of her experience:

Il est impossible de parler de soi. Cela nous rend mal à l’aise. Ceux qui parlent d’eux-mêmes sont des orgueilleux, nécessairement des vantards, des
égoïstes centrés sur leur personne. Nous pouvons nous livrer à l’introspection, à l’analyse de nos errances, de nos manquements, l’enseignement religieux nous y convie. Penser à soi, cela correspond à l’examen de sa conscience (48).

For Evelyne and her classmates, a girl’s inner self is potentially her own worst enemy; it is a domain susceptible to sin, a flawed entity prone to pride and selfishness, which must be contained through severe discipline. It is an obstacle to the proper integration of the girl into society as a future woman, whose self must be utterly effaced in order for her to devote her life to the service of others. The only right way for the girl to think of herself is through repeated self-suppression. This has the unstated intent of making the girl, potential revolutionary, into a docile, self-policing, entirely cooperative entity as she becomes a woman.

This passage aligns with descriptions of doctrines of Catholic femininity training in scholarly works such as Elizabeth Evasdaughter’s book on *Catholic Girlhood Narratives* (1996). Evasdaughter carefully unpacks the intense difficulties faced specifically by Catholic girls desiring to establish themselves as subjects. She highlights a deep inner conflict between “self-effacement and a determination not to be effaced” (9), arguing that Catholic education for girls, both at home and at school, has historically leaned on a series of prohibitions that, “if obeyed, remove almost all paths to self-development and personal history from the landscape girls must set out on” (12). These prohibitions, along with ideas of female sexuality as inherently
sinful, of the natural irrationality of women, and of the subaltern role women are destined to play at home and in the Church, all come together to form a set of teachings that relentlessly repress the individuality of girls.

Evelyne’s matter-of-fact delineation of the *examen de conscience* supports Evasdaughter’s point of view. In Evelyne’s description, the self is a taboo subject, a potential source of shame; any right to express individuality is strictly circumscribed, if not forestalled altogether, within such a framework.

Despite this severe training, as the narrative progresses, Evelyne has something within herself that makes her able to resist the repression of her Self: an inner voice, not unlike that which motivated Christine. Little by little, this vague inkling gains ground, and allows her to change her *examen de conscience* from a guilt-inducing exercise to a self-knowing and self-developing tool, one that gives her control not only over herself, but also over her own future. Evelyne describes this change as “une illumination” (134). Opening up a dialogue with this inner self, both part of her and separate from her, leads Evelyne to explore her own dreams and desires, and to regard *herself* rather than others as the key voice of reason in her life. This shift turns Evelyne into a secret revolutionary, an insurgent inhabiting the innocuous body of a “good girl” – a powerfully subversive figure. By daring to see her own self(hood) as an ally, a project, and her own sovereign territory to explore and cultivate, Evelyne turns the *examen de conscience* on its head. She does not corral and punish her unruly thoughts; rather, she questions
them. She does not crush her own dreams as selfish foolishness; rather, she dives into them, even pursuing them. Introspection becomes an exercise in liberation and growth instead of a pattern of shrinking and suffocating individuality. Actively seeking to know and develop herself in this way places Evelyne shoulder-to-shoulder with Roy’s Christine on a path toward radically different girl-subjectivity: one fueled by the curiosity and confidence of the girl herself, against all odds and in defiance of every prescription.

As she grows older, Evelyne’s developing inner self becomes more and more complex. Her creative, investigative mind quickly causes her to bump up against the edges of her small, narrow-minded world. Prominent Francophone literature scholar Metka Zupancic points out that in Une Belle Education, "L’avenir de la fille s’inscrit seulement dans les ’besoins’ de la famille ... alors que la fille vit par les livres, en continuant d’élargir son esprit, tout en subissant les duretés de son existence ... pour pouvoir arriver à ses propres fins" (Zupancic 141). However, this is not a linear process, nor is it easy to measure. Rather, the novel as a whole is almost painfully slow-moving, elliptical, and repetitive. Evelyne’s escape from her repressive origins happens inch by agonizing inch, and often involves taking two steps forward and one step back. The reader clearly senses how Evelyne is swimming upstream, even without openly defying her parents, teachers, or society. By never outwardly rocking the boat, she carefully avoids any insuperable restrictions on her project of self-development. Her
orchestration of her own enfranchisement is like a game of chess – subtle, careful, at times involving sacrifice, but always looking ahead to the next move. As she tells her reader, “Je cultive mon indépendance” (17).

One important battleground along Evelyne’s path toward “indépendance” is a time-honored war zone of girlhood: the girl’s negotiation of her own sexuality relative to what her society teaches her about it. Although rooted in the very concrete landscape of her developing body, Evelyne’s exploration of her own sexuality primarily takes place within her imagination, making it another element of her inner self-building and self-knowing project. She tells us: “Je regarde les jeunes hommes, je rêve d’eux, de leur approche” (104). Within her imagination, Evelyne allows herself to dream of any number of possibilities. In the outside world, however, Evelyne’s sexual development, along with that of her younger sister, is deliberately repressed.

For example, Evelyne’s mother attempts to neutralize her daughters’ nascent sex appeal through clothing. Evelyne describes how her mother uses a new set of coats and boots to obfuscate the budding femininity of the girls’ developing bodies (22). Evelyne tells us that “le manteau semblable à une tente rigide surmontant les bottes masculines me donnent l’impression d’être un personnage asexué” (23); the strange getup not only creates a barrier between Evelyne and the potential desiring male gaze, but also has the effect of alienating Evelyne herself from the sexuality of her own body.
This is a pattern that continues throughout the novel; much later on in the narrative, we learn that Evelyne's mother has moved on to making her daughters wear voluminous, anachronistic bloomers in her continued effort to distance them from their own sexuality. We also read that she violently resists when Evelyne's sister asks to go to a pool party with friends. In each case, Evelyne submits – not blindly, but in order to have peace. Once again, she is playing the “long game,” making short-term outward concessions along her path toward long-term liberation.

Beyond these outward restrictions, Evelyne tells us that the systematic repression of her sexuality continues behind closed doors; apparently, her mother keeps entirely “mum” (pun intended) about anything to do with the birds and the bees. Her refusal to speak plainly frustrates Evelyne, probably because it stems from two illusions: the illusion of the mother’s control over her daughter’s knowledge on the subject, and the illusion of Evelyne’s own naiveté in that realm, which Evelyne finds almost insulting. “Ma mère n’a aucune franchise,” she muses. Evelyne tells us that “je pense à la sexualité nue et crue” – she has knowledge, awareness, and curiosity despite her mother’s silence, even though “Le sexe, personne n’en parle.” For Evelyne, "Un univers caché existe, un monde dissimulé, pressenti" (96). This final descriptor, pressenti, meaning foreseen but evoking the tingling, almost supernatural sensation of something being felt or sensed (senti) before it is actually experienced, lends a sense of destiny or even
inevitability to the idea of sexuality presented in the novel. Evelyne somehow knows that sexuality belongs to her future, the same future she ardently pursues, even without being explicitly told. The fact that her mother especially will not share in this anticipation or help her in her process toward that future is deeply frustrating to Evelyne, and further deepens the growing chasm between mother and daughter.

Unfortunately for Evelyne's mother (and so many others like her who tried the same tactics), repression breeds curiosity and resistance at least as often as it compels compliance. Evelyne tells us, “Être une bonne fille, cela n’est pas facultatif, c’est une obligation constante. ... La mauvaise fille existe dans l’imagination” (65). Deviant behavior is so forbidden as to be separate even from reality. However, because Evelyne’s chosen plane of existence is her imagination, she is able to circumvent the interdictions of her mother and her society, and access the mauvaise fille within herself. She is gradually able to interrogate this hierarchy of good and bad behavior, and even secretly become her own brand of mauvaise fille, if she so desires. The rising of her inner voice and the growth of her imagination steadily destabilizes her conception of herself, a liberating disruption that opens up countless new possibilities. However repressive her environment might be, tapping into her inner self allows Evelyne to cultivate a powerful level of clarity. She is able to separate herself from the pain of restriction, question the rules binding her,
and choose whether to comply with them once she becomes her future adult self.

Evelyne’s matter-of-fact, analytical manner of thinking allows her to combat the fundamental fear of the sexual aspect of girlhood present in Quebec culture throughout the twentieth century (and even beyond\textsuperscript{26}). Fear of what the girl will do and/or become if left to her own devices is a tangible presence throughout this novel, rumbling just beneath the surface like water about to boil. Such pervasive anxiety can have disastrous results; for Evelyne, understanding is her best defense: “La connaissance, ce n’est pas le vrai, le beau, le bien, les catégories idéalistes qu’on nous enseigne. C’est un rempart contre l’ignorance” (UBE 122). In Evelyne’s case, the girl’s desire to take control of her own process of becoming, including the sexual elements of that process, deeply trouble her society, because the implications of that level of enfranchisement are unknown. In order to evade this fear and its consequences, Evelyne keeps her resistance underground.

However, despite her efforts at discretion, Evelyne’s pursuit of knowledge does bring her suffering. Her devotion to her studies continually ruffles her parents’ feathers because it is alien to them and because it has the effect of pulling her away from their working-class, family-oriented way of

\textsuperscript{26} One has only to look at 21\textsuperscript{st} century debates about the hypersexualisation of girls through the media, etc. in order to see the continuing presence of this particular specter in Quebec society.
life, which they consider important. Their sense that Evelyne is rejecting them seems to be both threatening and insulting to them.27

Even so, like Christine in La Route d’Altamont, Evelyne follows the promptings of her inner voice throughout this process. For Evelyne, much like for Christine, it is the realization of her own ignorance (“Je sais que je ne sais rien” (49)) and the subsequent ignition of her desire for knowledge that fuel her pursuits. Her resulting studies lead her to understand herself in relation to others, and that understanding – while not outwardly liberating her from existing power structures – gives her a great deal of power, because she comes to see and understand her place in society with a critical, even scientific detachment. Following what is often considered to be a masculine pattern of compartmentalization, Evelyne separates herself from the exhausting, alienating, annihilating constraints of her social location, and inwardly soars beyond.

Eventually, like Christine, she forms dreams – more like plans – to travel the world, study extensively, and gain command of a solid breadth of understanding. By any means necessary, and in spite of the many obstacles presented by her narrow-minded milieu, she carves out a pathway to expanding her own thought and eventually breaking free of the identities preconstructed for her. In her words, “Ma voix secrète murmure: si je le veux,

27 See Une Belle Education pp. 53-54 for an episode in which Evelyne’s father fustigates over her study of Latin.
Belief in her own agency makes it real; deciding to be her own person makes that her reality. Much like Christine, Evelyne rarely if ever seeks the approval of others, or allows others to meaningfully alter her trajectory. This is a radical change in the pattern of Quebec girlhood we have observed thus far; unlike Maria Chapdelaine, for example, who made more than one decision in her own mind but was moved to change her mind out of obedience to others’ needs, Evelyne claims the right to make up her own mind, whether or not anyone else knows about it or validates her position. Near the end of the novel, we discover that she has achieved extraordinary success, as she defiantly declares: "J'entends conserver ma raison avec ses délires arborescents qui vont à grande vitesse" (146). Study of self, of others, and of the world provide Evelyne the means to form and even defend strong personal borders for her sovereign self.

With every step Evelyne takes away from her family’s way of life and the expectations of her society, she moves further into the unknown territory entre raison et déraison, ultimately aligned with neither camp. In relation to her milieu, Evelyne’s academic ambitions have put her into a dangerous zone past the edges of what her parents consider “reasonable” for a daughter of theirs. Her hunger for knowledge, arguably for a closer relationship to raison or rationality, is déraison to them; she must therefore constantly compromise between the two, as we have seen. Secondly, however, Evelyne’s composure in this moment, the very image of reasonability, contrasts sharply with her
father’s dramatic reaction, making a new hierarchy of *raison et déraison* locating *raison* as being squarely in Evelyne’s possession. Théoret’s brilliant juxtaposition of the disciplined studiousness of the “deviant” girl to the almost barbaric volatility of the “conformist” father is powerfully effective in this scene, and the multiple layers of reason and unreason here combine to push Evelyne into the no-man’s-land between established definitions and her own.

By laying claim to this identitary no-man’s-land, by embracing her own alternative and fluid subjectivity-in-process, Evelyne establishes individual sovereignty on her own authority. She situates herself within her own imagination, the domain of the *mauvaise fille*, and charts a bold course toward defining a new kind of good girlhood – one which corresponds to her own definition of that term, regardless of the opinions of others.

*Stifling and separation: Evolving ethics in the mother-daughter relationship*

While Evelyne’s attainment of sovereign selfhood through girlhood is certainly radical, and gives her access to new power over her own destiny, it comes at a cost, just as Christine’s enfranchisement did in *La Route d’Altamont*. Once again, in order to pursue the new path to subjectivity that she has discovered within herself, the girl must first detach herself definitively from the old pattern of feminine subjectivity embodied by her
mother. Just as Quiet-Revolution Quebec was convinced that breaking free of the Church was an inevitable condition of its attainment of new, sovereign, self-determining existence, so Evelyne (and Christine) sees the abjection of her mother as the final step toward attaining that kind of subjectivity for herself as an individual (supposedly) becoming a woman.

During her adolescence, Evelyne feels at once deeply connected to her mother and deeply alienated from her. On one hand, she describes a strong compassion or complicity with her mother, acknowledging that “je suis trop proche d’elle” (28) and “je me confonds avec le corps de ma mère” (30). On the other, she increasingly realizes that she does not understand her mother's inner self, which is marked by several forms of mental instability, ranging from chronic misery and depression stemming from her hatred of her current life to bursts of fury pointing to deep past traumas. Evelyne describes that “le monde intérieur [que ma mère] extériorise est d’une vacuité fatale, c’est celui d’une nature profonde habitée par le désespoir” and cites her mother’s "malaise sans bon sens" (81). The more Evelyne comes to understand herself, the more she realizes that she and her mother are fundamentally different, and moreover, that her mother is toxic – truly the abject to Evelyne’s subject. If Evelyne is to achieve a different outcome than that of her mother, then she will need to focus on widening the gap between them.
For much of the novel, understanding her mother is part of Evelyne’s obsession with understanding herself; her consuming desire to know both stems from her wish to grasp and control her own process of becoming (a) woman. As she progresses through her adolescence, Evelyne keeps trying to figure out why her mother is the way she is, how she ended up married to Evelyne’s father, and how she came to abandon her dreams in favor of a miserable existence. She loathes her mother’s life, and resents her outlook, but she also loves her mother, and longs to see her clearly. However, the key to this clear vision is knowledge of Éva’s life before marriage, which is forbidden territory. Evelyne is left to guess on that subject, and none of the answers she comes up with are satisfactory. Moreover, the wall of silence Éva maintains around her own girlhood compounds her parallel unwillingness to talk to Evelyne about her girlhood. Girlhood itself, the process of becoming a woman, is taboo or even anathema to Éva – but it is all Evelyne thinks about. This is the core disconnect between mother and daughter: Éva refuses and represses girlhood; Evelyne embraces it and immerses herself in it.

In her critical text Le nom de la mère, Lori Saint-Martin writes that "la fille, chez France Théoret, refuse d’un élan viscéral le sort de sa mère et tend, de toutes ses forces, vers un autre destin" (202). At the same time, she notes a recurring theme of desired but impossible dialogue between mothers and daughters in Théoret’s work. “La mère est ... interdiction; elle est aussi interdite d’expression, interdite à sa fille qui rêve de s’approcher d’elle"
The fundamental blockage in Une Belle Education, for example, is that while Evelyne longs to be let into her mother’s confidence, to grow into a woman-to-woman relationship as equals, her mother is only willing or able to connect with Evelyn through a heavy-handed authoritarianism marked by a thick layer of artifice and systematic, hierarchical distancing between mother and daughter. Evelyne emphatically does not wish to be like her mother, but rather wishes to know and understand her mother while at the same time being respected as her own person. Éva, on the other hand, is incapable of such intimacy, and shuts Evelyne out.

For most of the novel, the result of Éva’s distance is an aching curiosity and longing for nearness in Evelyne, an impossible wish for reconciliation to the intimately unknown that is the mother. About halfway through the novel, at age fifteen, Evelyne tells us: “Je la vois partout, cette femme qui m’a donné la vie, que j’aime plus que moi-même. L’énigme de ma mère acquiert une puissance inconnue” (83).

Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis expect that a young girl will at some point push away from her mother, attaching herself to her father for a time through an “Electra complex” until she eventually reconciles with her mother and the two become closer than ever. However, in Une Belle Education (as in La Route d’Altamont), this is not the case. Rather, Evelyne’s father, Rémi, remains peripheral to the story – looming on the edge of Evelyne’s world as a foreign, incomprehensible, and loathsome figure whose
only role is to threaten, insult, and diminish through his sporadic outbursts and rigid, alienating expectations. Her mother, Éva, is much more central in Evelyne’s inner world, but no less foreign. Éva is demanding, often cold, rarely if ever affectionate. She never speaks about her own past, and never has open conversations with Evelyne or her other children on any subject. However, Evelyne is highly sensitive to her mother’s tragic situation: bound for life to a husband who berates her, doomed to serve her children and husband’s interests before her own, totally subjugated by her role in society – and aware of this, and angry about it, but unable to act to free herself.

Evelyne’s intelligent, observant nature allows her to discern the nuances of her mother’s situation, and her sensitivity and sympathy for her mother causes her to absorb it deep into her understanding of the world. The result is that she feels an unhealthy amount of guilt toward her mother. At the same time, she also feels both her mother’s frustration and her own frustration with her mother for continuing to live in this false and intolerable situation. “Je pense à ses désirs inexprimés lorsque ses yeux fixes au fond de leur orbite mettent en évidence un rictus dément et amer. Je ne la comprends plus. Cela va ensemble, je ne me comprends plus” (29). Evelyne’s understanding of herself is inextricably bound to her understanding of her mother, and this is a puzzle she struggles with throughout the novel. She must negotiate both her intense desire to liberate her mother and her equally intense simultaneous desire to liberate herself – in part, from her mother.
It is only in the latter stages of the novel that Evelyne begins to see two harsh truths: first, that she will never know or connect with her mother in the way that she longs to; and second, that the free, healthy existence she desires can only be hers when she is no longer entangled in her mother’s trapped, tragic, *malaise*-ridden narrative. *Une Belle Education* paints a portrait of irreparably damaged feminine subjectivity through Éva, a figure ruined by a broken cultural system’s impossible demands and her own futile frustration. Éva, the mother, represents everything that was seen to be wrong with Quebec society during the Grande Noirceur: militant ignorance; blind, bitter submission to a predetermined fate; belief in a rigid, frankly inhuman code of “good behavior;” and a conviction that the best thing for society is to perpetuate the existing system, despite its obvious misery. Evelyne, the girl, catches a glimpse of a different future, and that is enough to make her push back against the predetermined destiny that would smother her. Evelyne grows up under the thumb and in the shadow of her mother; as soon as age and experience push her slightly beyond that oppressive position, she becomes determined to throw off the encumbrance of the life her mother represents (and advocates!) in order to transcend both.

This pursuit of transcendence echoes that longed for by Maria Chapdelaine and other girl-figures we have previously encountered; what sets Evelyne’s quest apart is her ultimate success, and the shift in priorities she makes in order to achieve that success. Evelyne’s subversion of the
examen de conscience and her reliance on her inner voice lead her to view her own worth as entirely separate from any comparison or allegiance to her mother. They also give her the audacity to see the simple sovereignty of her individual self as reason enough to pursue her own path through life, regardless of her mother’s approval. By viewing her own reason as superior to her parents’, and by viewing the preservation of the sovereign territory of her own self as primordial – more important even than family ties, tradition, or socially-constructed obligations – Evelyne is able to step outside the cycle of submission and self-erasure that consumed her mother. Like Christine, Evelyne refuses to sacrifice her self, even if that refusal alienates her from everything she has ever known.

However, unlike Christine, Evelyne’s departure cannot be cleanly encapsulated into one moment or choice. Rather, her process of separating from her mother and the lifestyle she grew up in is a slow, laborious, messy series of movements backward and forward, with each orbit-like episode taking her further and further out until she finally breaks free of her family’s gravitational pull altogether.

Whereas the first four (of six total) chapters of the novel focus on a relatively narrow window of time, two years in total, the last two chapters break rather dramatically from this chronology and pace. To begin with, although the sixth chapter (set meaningfully in June 1968) is narrated in the present tense like the rest of the novel, its events seem to come from the
whole decade intervening between the fourth and fifth chapters. Evelyne’s passage from dependent daughter to independent woman, from teenager to twenty-something, is narrated in a fluid, murky, elliptical collection of separated segments of text. The reader learns that Evelyne studied in Montreal, became politically active, was engaged at one point, and continued to work at her family’s hotel in Saint-Colomban. She tells us, “Il ne s’est rien passé pendant sept ans. Mais je ne suis plus la même” (128). Without even quite realizing it herself, Evelyne has shaken loose from the chains of her adolescence, and has become someone else.

The contentious relationship between Evelyne and her mother again evokes the intimate yet alienating/alienated relationship between Quebec’s people and the Church in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Just as Quebec’s movement away from the Church involved both overt, even violent surges followed by subtler waves and even steps backward, Evelyne’s resistance and eventual escape followed an elliptical, uneven path. Part of this stems from necessity; Evelyne had to make concessions along the way, and was forced to play the waiting game due to her continued financial dependence on her parents. Evasdaughter notes that such a pattern is common for young girls raised under Catholic femininity training who try to free themselves from that rigid set of codes. She writes that: “Among these girls, false and temporary surrenders took place frequently” and “When antagonism was overwhelming, they surrendered soon enough to avoid
collapse, and then waited till they grew up or had the financial means to act on their consciences” (170). This difficult process reflects the complexity of the relationship between mother and daughter, believer and institution.

Another strong parallel between Evelyne’s (and Christine’s) movement away from the femininity modeled by their mothers and Quebec’s movement away from the Church is in the ethical shift needed for both transformations. Evelyne becomes able to attain a kind of subjectivity unthinkable for her mother by placing herself in the position of ultimate authority over her own life and by giving herself permission to prioritize her own aspirations ahead of the expectations of others. In the same way, Quebec left the Church’s overwhelming shadow by rejecting the Church’s authority and asserting the individual’s right (and responsibility) to self-determination. Both of these narratives involve the rejection of submissive, self-effacing, preservationist mentalities perceived (negatively) as feminine in favor of assertive, independent, sovereign selfhood. Moreover, both view this shift as a point of no return. The past, once transcended, must be left behind altogether in order for the present to exist freely. In other terms, the mother/Church must be abjected in order for the girl/society to attain whole, autonomous subjectivity.

In *Une Belle Education*, the abjection of the mother is subtle. Although Éva is portrayed as an abject figure throughout the narrative, one strongly
linked to death, decay, and misery\textsuperscript{28}, Evelyne is unable to truly separate her mother from herself – truly put her off as abject - until the very end of the novel. The final chapter of Théoret’s text, set in “Octobre 1985” (143), marks Evelyne’s arrival at the crucial point of departure hinted at in the epigraph to the penultimate chapter.\textsuperscript{29} Evelyne is an adult by this point, in her forties, and describes meeting with her mother at Evelyne’s home in Montreal. She proudly tells the reader that she is “une femme qui a beaucoup voyagé” (143), indicating that this chapter comes from the perspective of one far removed from the girl at the center of the rest of the novel. She describes her interaction with her mother as a “jeu de rôles” (144) in which Evelyne conserves the secret power she had as a girl: that of one who sees the game being played, and only joins in because it suits her purposes. Her goal is to get her mother to tell her more about her girlhood, a subject the two women have never openly discussed. Having heard that her mother was a runaway, Evelyne wishes to connect with her on this new level, and tries one last time.

As soon as Evelyne broaches the subject, her mother becomes violent, defensive. “Ne me parle jamais de cela,” (145) she says. Evelyne laments that "Éva est devenue inaccessible, perdue dans son envoûtement morbide" (145). Clearly, Éva’s girlhood was traumatic, and Éva’s solution is to cut it off

\textsuperscript{28}See defeatist attitude (UBE 29), miscarriage episode (UBE 31-32), mother’s inhabitation of her own “monde insondable” (UBE 75, 83), etc. Eva is continually depicted as a dead woman walking, almost a ghost – a figure with no past and no future, living in a present which she resents and disavows without actually resisting it.

\textsuperscript{29}A quote from Kafka : “A partir d’un certain point, il n’y a plus de retour. C’est ce point qu’il faut atteindre” (119).
from her present self as definitively as possible. In place of that abandoned
girlhood identity, she has built a new selfhood out of her wife- and
motherhood. Evelyne states that: “Éva a l’habitude de dire: quand je me suis
mariée ... Éva est née ce jour-là, le jour de son mariage avec Rémi. Avant son
mariage, il n’y a rien eu” (146). Here, we see a prime example of an erased
girlhood, albeit for different reasons than those that caused other girl-figures
we have examined to surrender their girl-selves.

For Evelyne, this abortive conversation is apparently her last attempt
to connect with her mother on a meaningful level. Seeing once and for all that
her mother is determined to remain “perdue dans son envoûtement morbide”,
Evelyne finally lets go of Éva. The passage that follows, which is the final
section of the text, is a poetic interpretation of Jean Sibelius’s Finlandia, a
composition representing national resistance against an oppressive invading
regime. Evelyne tells us that “la page est tournée” (147), that she, like the
notes of the symphony, is at last free to fly “vers le refus de perdre la raison,
vers l’indépendance” (148). Evelyne chooses hope, freedom, and her own
raison, even if that means permanent disconnection from her mother.

**Past the point of no return?**

On the whole, Evelyne’s isolated condition is unique and puzzling. She
is not really an exemplary figure, nor much of a heroine. She has none of the
universality or representative value of a traditional autobiographical subject
or even of a young protagonist from a *bildungsroman*. Moreover, unlike figures from Théoret’s earlier work, Evelyne resists categorization as an example of the 1980s life-writing subject evoked by Mary Jean Green as recognizing “the interconnectedness of female identity, its grounding in a complex network of relationships” (WNI 109). While Evelyne certainly orients her understanding of herself in relation to her mother, her sister, her teachers, and her classmates, her foremost guidance comes from a source within her individual self, and her deepest commitment is to the primarily independent accomplishment of her own self-making project. Evelyne expresses a sense of self as alien to that from which it came and as determinedly future-oriented, aimed toward a self-to-be(come) that *she*, the girl herself, ultimately defines. As a result, she narrates the process of becoming that self as a process (once again) of rupture and departure, of continual forward motion.

Essentially, the girlhood expressed in *Une Belle Education* is quite a departure from that expressed in Théoret’s earlier work – even though Théoret reuses multiple significant episodes in her novel that appeared decades earlier in her text entitled *Nous parlerons comme on écrit* (1988). Readings of Théoret’s work along the line of Green’s commentary in *Women and Narrative Identity*, which of course predates the publication of *Une Belle Education* by more than fifteen years, seem to reveal a sense of rupture or at least evolution even within Théoret’s own corpus. In *Une Belle Education*, the
fractured episodes of Louise Valois’s life sprinkled across the pages of *Nous parlerons comme on écrit* in 1988 reappear, undoubtedly, but within an entirely different structure with radically different implications. Whereas Louise Valois’s stories were enmeshed within a multivocal, fairly nonlinear set of other narrative tidbits, creating a sense of shared selfhood among multiple female voices contained within one text (as Green astutely points out), the same scenes, recycled into Evelyne’s narrative, become a coherent progression of iterations of the same “je” – a narrative of the univocal progression of one person’s story. Evelyne’s vision of the self is distinctly self-contained, and not shared. Moreover, the novel’s conclusion, which involves Evelyne’s realization that she will never know her mother’s story or hear about her girlhood, cements this separation of selves – breakage between generations, between female selves, and between the individual and a domineering but alienating maternal edifice. This new brand of girlhood is decidedly different from Théoret’s earlier work, because it frames girlhood as fundamentally predicated on accepting the existence of an insuperable generational gulf between mother and daughter, despite their circumstantial proximity. Like Christine, Evelyne ultimately taps into a new feminine destiny: one which the girl makes for herself, one which allows her to save her Self, and one which is gloriously, dizzyingly open-ended.
**Perpetual girlhood as the new norm?**

What becomes legible in reading these two texts together is ultimately the Quiet Revolution Quebec girl’s determination to countermand the decades-deep prescription of the very definition of feminine destiny. Beauvoir writes of how generations of girls have had to ask, over and over, “comment renoncerai-je à mon Moi?” (100). So many girls, like the protagonists we saw in Chapters 1 and 2, possessed the desire but not the wherewithal to defy the self-effacement their society required. Christine and Evelyne are portents of a new, alternative form of feminine becoming, even of femininity itself: one built upon the perpetuation of certain core aspects of girlhood. Most importantly, both of these girl-figures pursue futures that allow them to retain a level of identitary incoherence, indeterminacy, and integrity (in the sense of wholeness). Echoing historical figures like Joan of Arc, who wrapped herself in her unmarried virgin status as a shield and used it as permission to claim unheard-of agency, these two girls choose to pursue neither marriage (Evelyne’s briefly-mentioned engagement does not go beyond that stage) nor motherhood as they become women. Christine never once mentions a romantic presence in her life, and Evelyne’s interest in the opposite sex is only pursued insofar as it allows her to gain useful knowledge about herself or about the world. Evelyne and Christine choose radically “solo” adult lives, at least as far as the reader can tell based on the information they give. Even if both marry and do not mention the fact, the
very absence of those details in their narratives is extremely significant. One might argue that the kind of girlhood these girls narrate is one that they manage to render functionally eternal.

In the context of a Quebec eager to leap off the edge of modernity, leaving much of its former identitary framework behind, Evelyne and Christine’s stories ring with the same iconoclastic fury of a nation eager for revolution. Their daring move to claim a new kind of subjectivity formed around experience, discovery, and continual reinventions of the self is quite as dramatic as the social changes wrought in Quebec during the 1960s. It would be difficult not to admire their bold initiative, as well as their willingness to take giant strides away from their comfort zones. Despite the sorrow both protagonists express at their inability to bring their mothers along with them on their journeys, these two narratives set themselves forth as stories of hope and victory. Theirs is the optimism of the men and women working to forge a new, sovereign Quebec nation, an open-eyed hopefulness that is ready to face hardship in order to progress – a sentiment nicely expressed in the concluding sentence of Théoret’s novel: “L’espérance est un cri, une blessure, un pacte pris à la lettre, une ligne mélodique, une violence constante devant le désir” (148). This hope is active, dynamic, forceful, and costly; as the conclusion to a narrative of girlhood, it is an expression of the new kind of being-feminine that results from a revolutionary girlhood like Evelyne’s.
The conclusions of both of these novels insist on the great value of the Quebec girl's accession to individual sovereignty, and express a very hopeful view of the future of both girlhood and womanhood in Quebec going forward. For Théoret and Roy, the girl is an overcomer, a sign and source of hope for future generations. However, the opening up of identitary possibilities brought by the Quiet Revolution and other sociocultural changes also had a dark side; as we will see in the fourth and final chapter of this project, new freedoms also bring new dangers. Moreover, the unresolved issues stemming from the rapid (even violent) progression of change in Quebec culture and society during the 1960s left many questions unanswered. As we will see, the future of the Quebec girl at the close of the twentieth century remains at once unlimited and incredibly lonely.
CHAPTER 4

Les insoumises: Defying the abjection of deviant girlhood in *Tu as crié Let me go* by 
Anne Claire Poirier and *Putain* by Nelly Arcan

"Je suis entrée dans ton monde inconnu, 
je suis entrée dans la marge."

(Anne Claire Poirier, *Let Me Go*, p. 31)

"Je suis trop lourde de ma chair ... un corps qui me rappelle trop 
celui de ma larve de mère et que je tyrannise de ma fureur en le repoussant 
de toutes mes forces, en le fuyant comme si j’allais finir par lui échapper."

(Nelly Arcan, *Putain*, p. 46)

After all the battles fought by and for girls over the span of the twentieth century in Quebec, it would seem logical that ground would have been gained, that the girl would have taken hold of her own destiny and soared into new, free, groundbreaking modes of being. This was the hope and expectation so earnestly dreamed and ardently pursued in each of the works we have seen so far: that once the girl shook free of the bonds of traditional, Catholic, French-Canadian femininity, she would be able to truly be herself, and change the world. However, the reality of
Quebec girlhood at the close of the millennium is rather different from that idealistic hope.

This final chapter addresses two accounts of girlhood coming from the other side of the bridges burnt in the previous chapter between “tradition” and “modernity”, revealing how the linearity of the trajectory of girlhood is surprisingly disrupted in the final decades of the twentieth century. Exploring the narratives of two Generation-X girl-figures, Anne Claire Poirier’s daughter Yanne and Nelly Arcan’s autofictional doppelgänger Cynthia, elucidates the new realities facing Quebec girls at the dawn of the new millennium. Despite the passage of time, the girl remains a locus of desire and distrust in this context, being a figure who simultaneously embodies both ideals of enduring youth and fears of failed subjectivity. Many parallels exist between the situation of the girl as represented in these narratives and the situation of the Quebec nation at the time. Indeed, the two girls in crisis featured in these works reflect the widespread angst, disillusionment, and alienation roiling under the surface of Quebec society at the end of the twentieth century. They also express new manifestations of the self-destructive attitudes that seem inherent to Quebec girlhood across the century.

The complicated presence of the abject and of abjection in these two texts is of primordial importance. Poirier and Arcan express shared frustration at their society’s construction of the deviant or transgressive girl (addict and prostitute) as abject, a figure to be repressed and ignored, when her deviance in fact points to broad collective distress that needs to be addressed with candor, humility, and
tolerance rather than shaming, denial, or hypocrisy. However, the deviant girl is not the only abject figure central to these works. Rather, both feature a parallel interrogation of the abject aspects of the maternal presence in the girl’s life, and of the girl’s relationship to her own potential/future (abject) maternity. Poirier’s film confesses her daughter’s need to disentangle herself from her mother, a drive expressed in the film’s very title – *Tu as crié Let Me Go*. Arcan’s novel is rather more virulent in its rejection of the mother, apostrophized as a *larve*, and yet the protagonist’s loathing of herself, while camouflaged, is equally strong. *Putain* also addresses much more literal abject elements such as ejaculation and vomiting, and even its paragraph structure creates a subtext of bingeing and purging that is itself linked to abjection. In both narratives, abjection moves in multiple directions, and causes multidirectional trauma, alienation, and disillusionment. At the same time, both narratives also work to subvert abjection, rendering the abject visible, refusing to apologize for its ugliness, and demanding that it be recognized as part of the human experience. Together, Poirier’s film and Arcan’s novel come together to dismantle the narratives that revile the deviant girl and repress broader social trauma, and push instead for reconciliation and a restoration of *accès au sacré*, as Poirier so eloquently (and subversively) evokes in her film – for both the girl and Quebec society as a whole.

These narratives are broadly accessible millennial stories, tales of uncertain times and rapid transformations on a global scale. They are also deeply, distinctly intimate accounts of two girls’ chaotic, tragically foreshortened lives as paradoxical
victims of their own illusory liberty of being. The girl-protagonists in these two final works exhibit a deep sense of angst stemming from a feeling of being at once unanchored and relentlessly scrutinized. The pressure to perform, resistance to that pressure, and the fallout from that battle are central to both narratives. Both Cynthia and Yanne find themselves as ardently, ruthlessly hunted, haunted, and repressed as their predecessors. The violence of both girls’ defiance stems from their harrowing sense of inadequacy and estrangement from themselves, their families (especially their mothers), and their society. Their pronounced rebellion against old taboos springs from defiance against persistent pressures placed on the girl (still desired as virtuous, stable, and compliant), and is counterbalanced by a persistent wish to truly belong – albeit on their own terms. Drawing from this harrowing pair of accounts, one wonders: Is there any hope left? What does this set of downward spirals say about the new face of Quebec girlhood at the dawn of the twenty-first century?

Answering these questions meaningfully involves understanding of multiple trains of thought across Quebec, Canada, and the West in general at the end of the twentieth century. While a good deal of the pain and frustration expressed in Yanne and Cynthia’s stories is part of the larger narrative of evolving girlhood (and person- and nationhood) across many Western societies, there are certain elements of these two narratives that remain distinctly relevant to the context of late-twentieth-century Quebec, a sociohistorical space shadowed by a great cloud of uncertainty and angst quite similar to that expressed by these two girls’ narratives. As the great
surge of the Quiet Revolution ebbed, with sovereignty twice voted down in the space of two decades, the Quebec national project found itself “becalmed,” out to sea with no wind for its sails. Multiple Quebec scholars from the 1990s and 2000s write of unfinished business, of an incomplete or even failed revolution. At the same time, philosophers from the same period wondered how Quebec culture would anchor itself now that it insisted on shutting the door on its Catholic roots. Quebec as a nation seemed (and continues to seem) caught in a crisis of adolescence, with no end in sight, an argument upheld by prominent historians and philosophers such as Paul-Emile Roy or Michael Gauvreau.

Moreover, the way these critics talk about Quebec’s situation highlights the feminine aspects of Quebec’s posture within Canada and struggle to affirm itself as a sovereign nation. As a province, Quebec remains “une société minoritaire ... longtemps colonisée” (Bouchard LeDevoir 2012, NP); just as Quebec’s married women remained minors under the law until 1964, Quebec itself remains legally subaltern under the auspices of greater Canada, despite its efforts toward sovereignty. The continuing desire for a more masculine, virile course of action is still evident in the words of Paul-Emile Roy, for example, who laments Quebec’s failure to “se prendre en main” (n.p.) since the QR. Roy, Gauvreau, Bouchard, and many other Quebec intellectuals express concern over Quebec’s seeming “crisis” – stagnation in a perpetual collective adolescence, all the while overshadowed by a continuing, if diminishing, feminization and colonization under Anglo-Canadian
dominance and the new specter of globalization. I will address these issues in more detail at the conclusion of each section revealing how they relate to the two works in question in this chapter.

This concept of an adolescence in crisis, and of a mythic destiny lying in ruins, is at the heart of both of this chapter’s narrative works: Anne Claire Poirier’s poetic documentary Tu as crié Let Me Go (1996) and Nelly Arcan’s autofictional novel Putain (2001). These two narratives powerfully address issues facing one of the last generations of girls to come of age within the twentieth century. Both focus on a common narrative of “lost” girlhood – lost in many senses of the word. Poirier’s film offers a detailed portrait of the world of drug use and prostitution in which her daughter, Yanne, immersed herself until she was murdered at twenty-six. It probes haunting individual questions of lost connection between mother and daughter, but couches them within a broader argument about a sickness spanning a whole generation, and probes the possible source of the uncertainty, instability, and despair at the root of that sickness. For its part, Arcan’s novel offers more of an inside perspective on this idea of “lost” girlhood. It recounts the narrator’s deliberately chosen life as a prostitute, offering a strong critique of the hypocrisy of “proper” society and psychoanalyzing the nation as a whole. The narrator and protagonist, a young woman named Cynthia, brings us deep into the agonies of a paradoxically authentic and artificial girlhood, one plagued with insecurity and

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30 See Bouchard (2007), Roy (2007), or Gauvreau (2012). Guillaume Tremblay’s 2014 documentary film L’heureux naufrage also provides a very interesting survey of Quebec (and French) intellectuals on the subject of dechristianization in Quebec society.
profound loneliness. Her stories uncover the ways in which the girl remains the ultimate object of desire, and how new ways of perpetuating girlhood hold up false promises of happiness, worth, or even eternal life. The heart of Putain's narrative burns with a longing for meaning even as it cynically ridicules the emptiness of life. Essentially, girlhood in both of these texts is only liberated on the surface; within, the girl is as chained, haunted, and smothered as ever.

As we dig through the ashes of Yanne and Cynthia's lost girlhoods, we will see how the hollow victories and tragic demises of these girls reveal the wide-ranging sense of emptiness left in the wake of the Quiet Revolution in Quebec's identitary narratives. While the people of Quebec were undoubtedly facing the broader issues of postmodernity present across the West, from the death of the Subject to globalization and a general questioning of the very existence of absolute or objective truth, these larger questions had very specific local counterparts within the province. In particular, the steady legislative weakening of the loi 101, the supposed bastion of the French language in Quebec, as well as the two failed sovereignty referenda (in 1980 and 1995), cast doubt on Quebec's will and ability to truly establish its sovereign subjectivity as a nation.

As we will see, the more things change, the more they stay the same. Even at the dawn of the new millennium, the Quebec girl remains trapped by an ideological framework that circumscribes her individual subjectivity(-in-process) within codes of acceptable behavior and deeply-entrenched systems of representative value. In the context of a society struggling to find itself, the girl, symbol par excellence of
liminality, immaturity, and dependence, is a threatening embodiment of her culture’s identity crisis. Her deviant behavior reveals the cracks in modern Quebec society. As Poirier and Arcan show, the deviant “bad” girl becomes the sacrificial lamb of her society, bearer of its sins and embodiment of its failures, abandoned once again, although in a much more visceral way, to her own self-destruction – as always, supposedly for the sake of the greater good.

**Part I: Retracing the path of girlhood in Tu as crié Let Me Go!**

As a point of entry into the experience of girlhood in late-twentieth-century Quebec, Anne Claire Poirier’s film *Tu as crié Let Me Go* offers a rather grim prognosis. This film is primarily Poirier’s solemn re-membering of the fiercely independent girl who was her daughter. It is also an exposé on the patterns of despair and self-destruction Poirier traced in youth culture of the time, which she elucidates through a series of raw, frank, perspicacious interviews with former addicts, other parents who lost children in similar circumstances, and medical and social professionals. These testimonies contextualize Poirier’s project within the larger narratives of drug addiction, social changes, and family tensions within 1990s Quebec society. Pairing these interviews with her own haunting, poetic narration, Poirier retraces her daughter’s path through life, and strives to explain what went wrong, both to herself and to her audience. She and the other figures interviewed all point to a fracture at the core of life in Quebec society of the time: the idea that something crucial had been lost in the advancement toward a freer future. *Let Me Go*
points to more than the tragic loss of one life, indicating as its root the deep sense of stagnation and loss of bearings swirling under the surface of life in Quebec.

Nearly twenty years before Poirier’s film, Quebec thinker Jacques Grand’Maison described the proliferation of “quêtes de sens en dehors des circuits habituels ... Comme si les institutions et les lieux quotidiens n’étaient plus porteurs de signification” (93). As figures already marginalized by their age and their not-yet-established social standing, adolescents and teens in Quebec were arguably more sensitive to these quêtes de sens. Indeed, adolescence itself can be partly described as an individual’s search for meaning, or at least the launch point for that quest. However, in an unstable world such as the Quebec of the 1980s and 1990s, a disillusioned society hungry for coherence, purpose, and progress, the girl once again appears as a disruptive figure, although in a slightly different way from that of previous generations. “Desired and incoherent” as always (Driscoll 62), the girl is the bearer of the promise of a new, modern nation; she is expected to shine. When she does not, however, she becomes the embodiment of her society’s collective décrochage in the face of a waist-deep swamp of stillborn promises and unreached dreams.

On a practical level, many forces combine to complicate girlhood in 1980s-90s Quebec. To begin with, ever-evolving educational structures offer more and more opportunities to lengthen adolescence through schooling. Easier access to contraceptives and a social devaluation of marriage since the Quiet Revolution (to this day, Quebec stands out significantly from other Canadian provinces in terms of
relatively low marriage rates, as well as high abortion rates\textsuperscript{31}) mean that traditional markers of the attainment of womanhood, marriage and maternity, can be indefinitely postponed. At the same time, the rise of postfeminism, and with it a magazine culture glamorizing perpetual youth, puts a premium on remaining (or appearing to remain) within one’s girlhood for as long as possible. The girl is the ultimate sex symbol, desired for her nubility, her freedom from attachment, her freshness, and now the woman is expected to retain those aspects of her girlhood for as long as possible. These factors combine to make girlhood even more fluid than ever by occulting the meaning of becoming a woman almost entirely.

Rising in parallel to these trends is an increasing pressure upon young people to become productive, high-performance adult members of society. In a 2003 article for Enfance et psychologie, child psychologist Marie-Denyse Boivin cited a “course à l’excellence et à la rentabilité” in the Quebec school system of the 1990s (n.p.). Hungry for self-sufficiency, the nation looked to its promising younger generation to power it forward into sovereignty. However, “[le] mûrissement des projets ne peut pas être un processus instantané. Mais, souvent, les milieux familial, scolaire et social cherchent à orienter rapidement l’adolescent, comme s’il n’était pas un être qui croît encore, en devenir et en projet” (Boivin n.p.). Increasing pressure for swift, clear success in life paired with a sense of deep disorientation

\textsuperscript{31} Between 2007 and 2014, Quebec caught and even surpassed Ontario in terms of numbers of abortions within the province, despite the fact that Ontario consistently had a population roughly 5 million higher than that of Quebec during that time (see http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/backrounders/statistics-abortion-in-canada.pdf).
brought about a widespread problem of *décrochage scolaire* in the province. This trend aligns with a similar timeline of increase in drug use in the latter decades of the twentieth century in Quebec. According to government records, over 30% of young people in Quebec between 1992-1995 turned to drug use, compared with only 5% of the adult population (Quebec 3). In her 1990 book *Teenage Wasteland*, American sociologist Donna Gaines points out that illicit behavior became an important outlet for teens of the time. While her study is focused on a group of youths in the United States, her argument that "It was impossible for anyone to imagine any autonomous activity that non-conforming youth en masse might enjoy that would not be self-destructive, potentially criminal, or meaningless" (86) rings true of the drug-use situation among Quebec youth of the 1980s-1990s as well. However, once again, what sets the Quebec youth situation apart from the general angst stirring amongst Gaines's subjects is the deeper issue of national identity crisis that was occurring in Quebec at the same time. And once again, it is the girl, eternally viewed as the bearer of her nation's future, who finds herself at the epicenter of Quebec's continuing battle for self-affirmation.

This is the climate into which Poirier inserts herself, the daughter of another generation altogether. These are the deep wounds inflicted preemptively upon young people, girls especially, that lead them to self-destructive behavior. In my analysis of her work, I will reveal what Poirier has to say about the powerlessness, disillusionment, and alienation her daughter faced, as well as the consequences of her society’s culture of silence and prohibition on a generation of youth aching for
meaning, belonging, and hope. As we will see, the ultimate message of *Tu as crié Let Me Go* is one of reconciliation – a call to break down the barriers of fearful misunderstanding that separate parents from their children, as well as those that obstruct the integration of Quebec’s history into its present. With the girl-figure of Yanne as the film’s absent core, reconstructed interstitially as a phantom of lost dreams, Poirier’s film disrupts the narrative of taboo in Quebec society regarding both repression of the “toxic” past and denial of the deep suffering of the present generation in the face of an impenetrable future. As film critic Janine Marchessault points out, “The question [Poirier] asks is not why her daughter was a drug addict—this would lead to a very different kind of film involving family history. Instead, she asks why being a drug addict condemned her daughter to a life of shame and danger, ‘a life with few alternatives.’” (Marchessault 29). Using her film to respond to this question, Poirier enacts a dramatic reversal of the process of abjection, a *grossesse à l’envers*, to use her own term – the radical reabsorption of the lost girl (addict and prostitute), an abjected figure, into the symbolic. Yanne is no longer able to speak for herself; she has been eliminated from her society in the most irreversible way possible. However, her mother’s film serves to restore the legitimacy of her voice, and even to make it heard.

**Subverting abjection in *Tu as crié Let Me Go***

One essential feature of *Let Me Go* that makes it unique among the works I have chosen for this project is that the girl at the center of this particular narrative is
conspicuously absent from the work itself. The film contains no images of Yanne herself, no recordings of her voice, no direct access to her interiority. All the audience knows of her comes either secondhand from Poirier’s testimony through the recounting of her memories, or indirectly through elements of Poirier’s interviews of other people whose stories echo elements of Yanne’s own. While Poirier’s position as witness on her daughter’s behalf is beautifully executed and profoundly effective, it is also deeply troubling, as it continually points to the irretrievable evacuation of the girl from the present. Yanne is a spectral presence in the film, but her ghostly girlhood is the opposite of that of Marie in Poirier’s earlier film *La fin des étés*. Whereas Marie was visible and audible to the viewer, but detached from her own diegetic present, Yanne is invisible and inaudible to the viewer, but the vacant spaces of her former “haunts” resonate with her evacuated presence. What Yanne and Marie share is their alienation from a present world that does not recognize the legitimacy of their reality as part of the larger whole of their society’s narrative. Both were repressed girls, *refoulées*, abjected because of the improper, indigestible nature of the narratives they expressed. However, one lost her subjectivity, while the other lost her life.

In both cases, Poirier’s choice to give voice to deviant girlhood is highly subversive. In the case of *Let Me Go*, which can be classed as a poetic documentary, this is particularly true. Not only does this film address taboos regarding drug use and widespread but unspoken despair among the youth of Montréal, but it also defiantly gives homage to a decidedly transgressive girl, claiming her right to “accès
au sacré” in the face of her heroin addiction, prostitution, and itinerancy, which together spelled her exclusion from society during her lifetime.

In the first chapter of her book Amending the Abject Body (2004), Debora Covino argues that “Kristeva’s counterposition of the abject against the Symbolic, with the Symbolic understood as the articulate social order, indicates that the individual in a struggle against her own dissolution is also in a struggle against social alienation” (Covino 28). In light of this argument, this film can be read as a radical effort to contest the need for or justice of such a struggle. Let Me Go can be seen as an attempt to resurrect the “femme noire” evoked at the end of Kamouraska, or even sanctify her as a subversive martyr. It offers a powerful rewriting of the history of the deviant, “hysterical” girl, rejecting her erasure under her culture’s accepted responses of silence and shame, testifying instead to her legitimate status as an indispensable part of the broader narrative of Quebec culture and humanity as a whole. Composed from within a society knee-deep in its own quête de sens, Poirier’s film is a personal search for meaning, centered on the director’s hunger to understand the mysteries of her daughter's life and death. Through a compelling combination of poetic narration, evocative mise-en-scène, and suggestive filming, Poirier renders her daughter's life accessible, even real, to her viewer, reinscribing the lost girl with the labels bien-aimée, forte, and insoumise rather than simply addict, victim, whore, or criminal. Through the voice of the mother-writer-cinéaste, Yanne’s voice resurfaces, and she herself becomes universally knowable rather than individually obscure.
The first level of this cinematic reconstruction of Yanne is Poirier’s narration of the film, written in collaboration with Marie-Claire Blais. This rebuilds Yanne as an individual person, someone’s daughter, with specific traits, a past, connections. She was a wanderer, a dreamer, described as *fulgurante, impatiente*, and *acrobate du coeur*. She was frustrated with the limits, taboos, hypocrisies of her society. She was troubled and undoubtedly at risk, but she was not a failed person, and might have had a meaningful impact on her society had her life not been cut short.

Reading from a poetic text, Poirier re-members her daughter in the film as a part of herself even as she was apart from Poirier’s self. She expresses her imperfect knowledge of Yanne (LMG 32), even as she refers to her daughter’s body as “ton corps de mon corps” (LMG 36). More significantly, she describes a sensation of reverse labor pains at the sound of her daughter’s name during the trial of Yanne’s murderer, “comme pour un accouchement à rebours, qui me garde enceinte de toi pour toujours” (LMG 37). Poirier reiterated this idea in a 1997 interview with *La Presse*, calling the project as a whole a “grossesse à l’envers” (Roberge C1). This phrase is extremely important to our understanding of the film as a whole, but also to our understanding of the film’s portrayal of girlhood from without, through the eyes of a mother instead of through the eyes of the girl herself.

Poirier’s concept of a reverse pregnancy means that she is rethinking abjection primarily on three levels: First, she is refusing the social (metaphorical) abjection of her daughter, the junkie, choosing instead to immerse herself in her daughter’s life and reabsorb as much of Yanne as possible into herself. Second, on an
individual level, she is renegotiating her daughter’s abjection of her, the mother, the abject figure *par excellence* in Kristeva’s work. Indeed, the very title and driving narrative of the film – a mother’s battle to at once recover and release her daughter, a daughter’s struggle to at once escape and reconcile with her mother – speaks to this. Finally, she is creating a striking space of tension between herself and her daughter as two different kinds of abject figures: the subconsciously or psychoanalytically abjected (m)other, Poirier herself, and the more consciously, deliberately abjected Other in the form of the social deviant, the transgressive border-crosser, the reminder of her society’s secret deathliness and thirst for risk – Yanne, the junkie and prostitute. These evocations of a conflict between self and other, other and (m)other, two kinds of abject bodies eternally separated from one another and yet somehow becoming one again, going from refuse to re-fused, clearly point back to Kristeva’s work on the abject on multiple levels, at once confirming Kristeva’s arguments and contesting them.

Poirier verbally negotiates these tensions through her narration on a very deliberate level by going back and forth between describing her daughter using possessives (calling Yanne for example “*ma* tourmentée,” (36, my italics) “*ma* tendre difficile” (43, idem)) mixed with standard articles (“*la* belle, *la* difficile” (39, idem), etc.). This vacillation has the effect of at once affirming, even celebrating, her daughter’s individuality while at the same time reinforcing the mutual belonging-to-one-another that fuses mother and daughter in Poirier’s argument. For Poirier, Yanne is at once separate from her – having moved on and become her own adult
self – and part of her, born of her flesh, bearing a strong resemblance to her. Poirier (re)claims and acclaims Yanne rather than rejecting her, and this act serves at once to insist on the human dignity of her daughter (by extension, of drug addicts and prostitutes like her daughter) and on that figure’s belonging with and to her mother (by extension, to society).

One especially powerful iteration of this reincorporation of the deviant daughter comes near the middle of the film. As she reflects on her daughter’s murder trial, Poirier reveals that she felt unable to attend court on the day of the medical examiner’s testimony. “[Ça], je ne le pouvais pas! on parlait d’un cadavre, d’un corps … le tien, ton corps manipulé, ton corps humilié, ton corps de mon corps, Yanne ma tourmentée” (36). Here, Poirier identifies strongly with her daughter on a physical level, going so far as to inscribe her daughter’s humiliation, torture, and death onto her own body. For Kristeva, a significant element of abjection involves the rejection of reminders of death – especially the corpse – and the refusal to look upon or recognize such things. At the same time, the mother is a significant figure of abjection in Kristeva’s framework, as she represents all that the subject flees in order to exist as such (Powers 13). Poirier’s example, however, subverts these ideas. On one hand, it is the mother who acts as speaking subject in the film; Poirier bears witness to her daughter’s life and death, shaping the viewer’s perception of Yanne through her narrative. The (supposedly) abject is therefore subject here. On the other, a blatant abject element of the narrative, Yanne’s deceased, drug-tainted, and prostituted body, is significantly reclaimed. Although Poirier does avoid actually
looking upon her daughter’s dead body or hearing it spoken of in scientific detail, she nevertheless verbally embraces that body as part of her own, reabsorbing it in the aforementioned process of reverse birth. As a whole, this example reveals Poirier’s effort to dismantle the stigmatization of the abject on multiple levels through deliberate movements toward reconciliation – a radical act not only of love, but also of defiance of standard hierarchies of meaning, legitimacy, and subjectivity.

One more particularly important piece of narration comes at the film’s conclusion. Here, Poirier accepts Yanne’s death and departure as both part of her and separate from her. She links Yanne’s death with her own, noting that “ton deuil m’a appris à vivre avec ta mort, il m’apprend à vivre avec la mienne” (64), and then states that "il faut que mon cœur cède, que mon corps soit rompu. Tu dois partir, mon cerf-volant, vers ton infinie solitude" (65), a statement that reveals an inevitable chasm separating her from her daughter. Poirier’s determination to draw near to her daughter once more culminates, ironically, in accepting the ultimate failure of that effort. In order to fully acknowledge her daughter’s subjectivity, legitimacy, and sovereign selfhood, she must obey Yanne’s wish, and let her go.

Overall, Poirier’s verbal process of grief is very striking. Through her film, she passes from experiencing Yanne’s life as an inflicted wound, a source of shame and alienation, to understanding it as a received trauma, the sign of a broader sickness affecting Quebec and Western society, even a manifestation of the same deep sensitivity and hunger for transcendence that Poirier herself confesses. Yanne’s lifestyle ceases to be abject, and is instead understood as a type of
subjectivity. By the same token, her tragic death is no longer experienced as abject (aberrant, out of order, *indicible*), but rather accepted as part of the real. This deliberate, subversive, generous process echoes Cixous’s assertion that “Woman ... does not mourn, does not resign herself to loss. She basically *takes up the challenge of loss* in order to go on living: she lives it, gives it life, is capable of unsparing loss” (Cixous 54, original emphasis). Responding to her daughter’s imagined cry of “Let me go,” Poirier at once reiterates her oneness with Yanne – declaring that her own body must be broken in order for her daughter to depart – and accepts her separateness, surrendering to her daughter’s right to be released. She takes on her daughter’s difference as a thing of beauty, and harnesses the power of her own grief to pursue healing for others.

Beyond Poirier’s verbal narration, the inclusion of several apparently extradiegetic sequences shape the argument of the film, adding a significant semiotic/extralinguistic dimension to the poetic reinscription of Yanne as worthy, a legitimate part of the greater whole of her society. These short sequences, predominantly non-narrated and never explicitly linked to the other content of the film, do not add to the concrete, investigative side of the film, but rather to the more abstract *quête de sens* undertaken by Poirier as mother of a lost daughter. They also build parallel narrative threads alongside Poirier’s more linear filmic journey of retracing of her daughter’s last steps. Among these enigmatic, evocative, and poetic sub-plots, three examples stand out in particular: the iceberg sequences that open and close the film, the gymnast sequences punctuating certain moments of the film,
and a brief but powerful shot of a pool hall overlaid with the sound of throat-singing. When viewed in the light of the film’s broader arguments, all three function as cinematic affirmations of Yanne’s belonging to a larger narrative of feminine youth rooted in the specific social location of 1990s Quebec.

Poirier’s film opens with dramatic footage of icebergs breaking off of a glacier, shot in black and white, accompanied by a deeply unsettling soundtrack of violins and a chorus of female voices. One violin repeatedly creates the effect of a scream, while others respond with intense, tragic strains of composed music. The female chorus chimes in to sing an ethereal, foreboding, slightly dissonant set of notes. This cycle repeats several times, building an atmosphere at once bleak, desperate, harrowing, and surreal. The looming vertical whiteness of the glacier’s edge contrasts dramatically with the restless horizontal blackness of the sea, adding a visual impression of coldness and alienation. Together, image and sound plunge the reader into a liminal space between death and life, at the edge of human endurance – a space of grief. Only then does Poirier’s voice make itself heard, reciting in a sad, matter-of-fact tone: “18 octobre 1992. Cinq heures, vingt minutes. Dimanche matin de fin du monde. Une jeune femme est morte, étranglée dans un appartement envahi par le désordre. Elle faisait de la prostitution, elle était héroïnomane, elle était belle, elle était ma fille” (LMG 00:01:25).

This opening sequence has often been interpreted as an expression of some form of transcendence. Canadian film scholar Janine Marchessault describes the shots as an evocation of the sublime, calling the falling ice “an image of mourning, a
metaphoric gravestone, from which the filmmaker will attempt to imagine, and make sense of, her daughter’s death” (Marchessault 26). Along the same lines, Quebec film critic Martine Roberge wrote that the sequence creates the following effect: "le sordide est transcendé par la beauté d’un iceberg géant, symbolique de la finitude des humains assoiffés d’absolu” (Roberge C2). In both cases, the iceberg evokes both life and death, both a form of continuity beyond the tragedy of the film and an inescapable finality contained within that continuity.

By opening her film in this way, Poirier establishes a wordless, timeless, entirely symbolic space from and through which she can communicates her sorrow, pain, fear, and anguish. Her powerful use of image and sound renders her very personal grief accessible to any person, regardless of origin or language. She also evokes the sacred and the transcendent, implying that this personal pain is not only knowable to all humanity, but more importantly, relevant to all humanity. Before ever naming her daughter, Poirier prepares the viewer to receive her story as a dramatically significant tragedy, one at once unique and universal.

When she returns to the icebergs at sea at the conclusion of her film, this time on a day bursting with sunshine, this collision of personal and collective sorrow is brought to a hopeful next stage. The brightness of the images, as well as Poirier’s physical presence in the shot (versus her absence in the opening sequence) indicate acceptance and healing. It seems apparent that the light Poirier shed into the shadows of her daughter’s marginalized life through her film has set them both free –“vers un ailleurs qui les transformera” (LMG 01:42:40). When interpreted
together, as a pair of bookends for the film, the iceberg sequences serve to anchor Yanne’s tragic experience of girlhood within not only the natural world, but also the supernatural or the sacred. Poirier both verbally and visually equates her ostracized, abjected daughter, the druggie and whore, with the larger-than-life purity and eternity of an iceberg, reincorporating her into the world as its daughter as well as her own.

While this broad reinscription of Yanne within the human experience and within nature is important, Poirier also uses other sequences to “zoom in” and link Yanne more directly to her own temporal, cultural, and geographical context. One example of this comes in the latter portion of the film, during a sequence of shots taken in a pool hall, presumably frequented by Yanne and her friends in the past. This scene comes just after a series of shots of a dark Montreal street, indicating a very specific location – one of Yanne’s old haunts. The very first seconds of this sequence are particularly interesting: first, we see a pool table set with a triangle of pool balls, which an unseen player soon splits to begin a game. Several subsequent close-ups of balls being hit into various pockets follow. Over these images, we hear first the high cry of a flute of some kind, and then the sound of throat-singing, an art form distinct to the Canadian Inuit population, and one traditionally performed by women, usually two women as a duet. This brief interlude soon gives way to Poirier’s continued narration, and seems unimportant at first, but the symbolic value of incorporating music deeply tied to indigenous female identity should not be overlooked. Juxtaposing this ancient art form with images of a modern game that
Yanne herself played (as evidenced by a subsequent shot of a pool cue engraved with Yanne’s name) serves to knit Yanne’s life into a tapestry of distinctly Canadian femininity, or distinctly feminine Canadian-ness. It is a deliberate blurring of lines between cultures and time periods, bringing together tradition and modernity through the continuity between a multiplicity of feminine identities existing in one geographical space. This covert nod to the other erased female population of twentieth-century Canada, namely indigenous girls and women, links Yanne’s abjection to theirs. This tiny moment within Poirier’s film speaks volumes on subjects of hybridity, interconnectedness, and mutual relevance across cultural lines. It makes Yanne’s story not only universal and human, but also Canadian and female.

As a complement to the iceberg sequences and the pool hall scene, one more set of seemingly superfluous sequences serves to reintegrate Yanne into the narrative of her own generation. At two different points, Poirier includes brief sequences of individual young female gymnasts in training, the images of their exercises accompanied by thoughtful, slightly melancholy choral music. The first sequence is a thirty-second shot of one gymnast – or aerialist – who appears to be a teenager or young adult, swinging gracefully back and forth through the air on a large hoop in a gym-like space with tall windows. (1:01:15-45). Her movements relative to the camera take her back and forth between darkness and light, as one side of the gym is in shadow whereas the other is strongly illuminated by the windows. The acrobat’s movements are simple and controlled, her expression
neutral. The absence of narration brings us back to a semiotic, symbolic mode of expression, relying on evocation of meaning rather than verbal expression. The acrobat herself is a girl, of course, but her vacillation between darkness and light, her suspension in midair, and the vagueness of her situation relative to a specific time or space all underscore her representative value as an embodiment of girlhood – subjectivity in process, identitary uncertainty, suspension in time. Indeed, the images are reminiscent of the question of sursis in La fin des étés, which tied girlhood to the legal concept of a suspended sentence.

The evocative image of the gymnast reappears later on in the film. A second sequence of equal length, featuring another gymnast, comes just after an interview of a male therapist or psychologist, who speaks of relapses and the difficulties that come with sobriety. (1:17:10-43) This time, we see a young female athlete practicing slacklining or tightrope-walking. She stands on a narrow cord, carefully holding her balance, and repeatedly leaps into the air, landing again on her feet as the cord shivers beneath her. We see shots of either her feet on the cord or of her head and shoulders, all of which underline her extreme concentration and absorption in her task. Like her counterpart in the previous sequence, this gymnast and her training clearly represent elements of the experience of girlhood. Here, we see the tremendous care and attention required for proper performance, the dire consequences of failure, the necessity of an artful balance between grace and strength, and the emphasis on hiding all that tension and effort under a veneer of mastery and comfort belying the impossible level of skill required for the
achievement of excellence. We are also reminded of the artificiality of these precise movements, which echo the artificiality of the acceptable performance of femininity sought in the process of girlhood.

By including these two brief sequences featuring girls suspended in space, girls toeing the line, girls hanging in the balance, Poirier associates her daughter’s narrative with their movements, and illustrates the immense pressures involved with girlhood at the close of the twentieth century – old pressures, such as the obligation to maintain the continuity of the nation through building a family, and newer ones, such as the growing imperative for all young people to produce economically as well as reproduce. These were pressures that Poirier’s daughter had to face as a Gen-X Quebec girl, and that contributed to her ultimate and untimely demise. Yanne, whom Poirier describes as “acrobate du coeur” right at the beginning of the film, is undoubtedly present in these images of girlhood, undoubtedly implicated in her own struggle to balance expectations and her own sense of alienation from the world surrounding her.

By utilizing a combination of explicit verbal strategies in her spoken narration of the film and subtler visual compositions in her mise en scène, Poirier orchestrates a multi-layered contestation of abjection. She questions the social ethics of abjecting girls who use drugs or who work as prostitutes by reaffirming their belonging to the fabric of the human experience and thereby rendering their stories legitimate. She also grapples with the abjection involved in the separation of mother and daughter, examining the seemingly inevitable separation that comes
both in life (as the daughter becomes an adult) and in death (as one moves outside the world of the other). Because Yanne’s death precedes her own, Poirier faces a time that is out of joint, bringing us back to questions of haunting. Because Yanne chose a path down which Poirier could not fully follow, Poirier also faces a choice: either to reject her daughter’s lifestyle choices altogether, cutting off contact with her, or to accept the reality of her daughter’s pain, wade into it with her, and risk being tainted with that despair in order to have a chance to reconnect with Yanne. Through her film, Poirier chooses compassion, and entreats her viewer to do so as well.

**Confronting impuissance: Yanne’s pain as universal**

Poirier’s filmic argument for listening, empathy, and recognition in dealing with the drug use epidemic of the 1990s in Quebec stems from her core argument that a society-wide trauma is at the root of the problem. As she systematically anchors Yanne’s experience within Quebec girlhood, Canadian femininity, and humanity in general, Poirier points out both her daughter’s belonging to these categories and her alienation from them. The lonely beauty of the gymnastic scenes, the faceless intensity of the pool-hall scene, and the raw glory of the icebergs is countered by a parallel insistence on Yanne’s deep-seated sense of disillusionment, lostness, and hunger for transcendence. For Poirier, these sentiments are at the root of Yanne’s drug use, and are the common foundation for many other problems in the Quebec of the 1990s. Reflecting on her daughter’s addiction, Poirier insists that
"[son] état n’avait rien à voir avec le vice et le péché," and that in fact, "[elle] ne cherchait pas dans la drogue le plaisir et la volupté, mais une anesthésie à l’excès de souffrance" (59). Seeing anxiety and pain as significant or even causative factors in drug addiction is a relatively straightforward conclusion to draw; however, pinpointing the one or many sources of that suffering is another matter altogether.

Part of the work of Poirier’s film is to find meaning in the seeming senselessness of Yanne’s turbulent life and violent death, but again and again, the viewer sees that such an endeavor can only ever be partly successful.

The difficulty of this *quête de sens* – quest for meaning – resurfaces again and again in Poirier’s film. It is particularly audible in the repetition of the word *impuissance*, literally meaning *impotence* or *powerlessness*, along with its adjectival forms, *impuissant(e)(s), impotent, powerless*. This word is linked to the angst expressed by the family and friends of drug addicts when faced with the task of understanding, addressing, and hopefully resolving the problem of addiction from without. The sheer scale of the drug epidemic in Quebec coupled with the myriad complicating factors involved in each individual case of addiction leaves most, including Poirier herself, feeling overwhelmed and insufficient.

In addition, the secondary meaning of the word *impuissance* is the same as that of the word *impotence* in English. In the context of this chapter, wherein questions of abjection and subjectivity in crisis are of critical importance, this underlying implication also has great importance. On a literal level, we have the families of young Québécois(e) drug addicts faced with an incomprehensible
medical and psychological issue, of which “les causes ... ne sont pas connues” (LMG 00:17:25). Below the surface, we also have a post- QR Quebec attempting to (re)affirm itself as a strong, coherent nation, and working to engender a new, virile, even sovereign society fueled by the sweeping changes of the previous generation, finding itself unable to fully accomplish that mission – in a sense, impotent. With this in mind, one begins to see that the “excès de souffrance” plaguing Yanne and presumably other drug users may in fact be linked to the psychological suffering of their society as a whole.

Part of this suffering stems from the inevitable challenges of globalization and the rise of consumer culture affecting not only Quebec, but also the West at large and the world as a whole. Within Quebec, part of the impact of these phenomena has been changes to national priorities in terms of economic and social projects, which have coincided with concurrent changes to the nation's cultural self-defining projects. In particular, emphasis on performativity, productivity, and measurable value have shaped the experience of adolescence – particularly girlhood – in late-twentieth-century Quebec.

In a 2003 article for the journal Enfances et psy, child psychologist Marie-Denyse Boivin points out that increasing pressures related to productivity caused significant anxiety in Quebec teens, who often had difficulty deciding who or what they wanted to be as adults. Boivin argues that "souvent, les milieux familial, scolaire et social cherchent à orienter rapidement l'adolescent", and that "[on] peut se demander si... on ne stigmatise pas les adolescents dans leur indécision en les
culpabilisant de ne pas savoir tout de suite" (par. 15). Hesitation, searching, and doubt, all of which have the potential to be either damaging or productive (or both) in the long-term development of adult subjectivity, threaten the continuity and the pace of development in an increasingly high-speed Western society such as Quebec.

This stigmatization of uncertainty is undoubtedly present in Poirier’s filmic argument. In one of the first interviews included in the film, a segment more like a testimonial than an interview due to the minimal presence of any interlocutor other than the camera, Jean Lacharité expresses his own grief process after having also lost his daughter, France, to drugs and violence. He states his conviction that "France, bien sûr, était à la recherche de quelque chose" (11 :10), a sentiment echoed by many other voices in the film. The recovering addicts in the film speak of an attraction to danger, excitement, and risk as the root of their addiction – an attraction thinly masking an overwhelming fear of meaninglessness, boredom, and alienation, to which they also admit.

For Poirier, this desire for danger is also a desire for transcendence, an ideal that seems lost in the imaginary of dechristianized post-QR Quebec. She views the burgeoning problems of mental illness and drug addiction\textsuperscript{32} in her society as a symptom of a much deeper malaise. Speaking to Yanne, she reflects : "tu voulais

\textsuperscript{32} One of the interviewees in Let Me Go is Louise Nadeau, a professor at the University of Montreal specializing in drug use and women’s health. During her interview in the film, she insists that "les causes de la toxicomanie ne sont pas connues" (TIME), which is an important fact to absorb for Poirier and others close to drug addicts. In a 2001 article on the subject of the comorbidity of drug use and mental illness, Nadeau criticized the Quebec health system’s separation of these two issues, arguing for communication and cooperation between the two areas in the interest of better serving patients who as a rule, according to Nadeau, tended to be dealing with both problems at the same time.
aller plus loin, aller chercher ailleurs. Tu voulais entrer dans l’inconnu pour trouver l’apaisement” (59). Poirier views and depicts Yanne’s suffering as a representation of that of her society – speaking to an unrecognized hunger for transcendsence and meaning roiling just below the surface of the Québécois consciousness – especially that of its youth. Her film casts drug use among young people as their way of numbing the pain from wounds they did not cause and do not know how to heal, the wounds of a society still trying to find itself. In Poirier’s own words: “Pourquoi la drogue? Peut-être pour échapper aux ruines du vieux monde qui ne laissent aucune place à la dissidence, au risque et à l’engagement” (40). Yanne and her fellow addicts felt alienated from the world they lived in, unable to find their place in it. They were, in the words of Anne-Marie Girard, one of the recovering addicts interviewed in the film, “décu de l’être humain” (LMG 54:55). As a result, they disengaged with the social structures surrounding them, embracing a marginal, inevitably damaging alternative existence in order to seek other forms of fulfillment or escape.

This profound disillusionment speaks to the growing angst at the heart of Quebec society at the end of the twentieth century. In a 2007 article for the website “Vigile,” Quebec sociologist Paul-Emile Roy reflected that:

“Le Québec actuel offre tous les signes de la crise d’adolescence. Il voudrait s’affranchir mais n’ose pas. Il s’affirme et se nie en même temps. Le Québec se sent étranger dans son propre pays comme l’adolescent dans la maison de sa belle-mère. Il est insatisfait mais ne sait ce qu’il veut. Il est aussi mal à l’aise envers son passé qu’envers son avenir” (NP).
Two decades earlier, in 1979, noted philosopher Jacques Grand’Maison pinpointed a trend in Quebec society on the downdraft after the QR, describing: "la perplexité profonde, le désarroi, le sentiment d’impuissance, l’attrait de l’irrationnel, la fuite dans l’imaginaire" (92) developing in the post-QR generation. Both thinkers accurately characterize the increasing stagnation of the momentum of the QR and its effects on the youth of Quebec, seen as the bearers of its future. Quebec itself became locked in a crisis of adolescence at the turn of the twenty-first century; this reality is best reflected in the lives of the province’s adolescent population – particularly those of its girls.

Poirier’s film does not directly insist on a particularity of feminine adolescence within the phenomena she explores, but nevertheless, the girl is inevitably at the heart of her film’s narrative. Once again, we must consider the uniqueness of girlhood relative to other identitary territories. It is a space historically associated with legal minority, subalternity, and incompleteness; it is antithetical to coherent, stable, adult subjectivity. In Quebec, it has long been an identitary hinterland, liminal and unreliable – to be contained and brought fully under the colonizing control of the nation’s patriarchal structure, which was itself, ironically, in just the same position relative to Anglophone Canada. In the context of the post-QR Quebec of the 1990s, girlhood remains a dubious zone, at once desired for its connotations of youth, nubility, and potentiality and reviled for its associations with transgression, nascent sexuality, vulnerability, and incoherence.
In the end, Poirier’s film points out the fact that in a society that no longer believes in transcendence as it once did, the girl becomes one of the most privileged (and warped) figures of new attempts to grasp at immortality. Being and staying a girl, with all the potentiality, desirability, wealth of life, purity, innocence, ripeness, etc. that identity implies, is a postmodern and postfeminist means of grasping at eternal youth when the eternal life of the soul is no longer certain or assured. Obviously, this means that immense – if at times subliminal – pressure is placed on the girl, who bears just as much representational value as always; all that has really changed is the sociotemporal context. With other icons of salvation demolished, the girl is one of the few idols remaining in post-Quiet-Revolution Quebec society.

Poirier’s film sees the incredible destructiveness of this pressure, which crushes so many girls through drugs, prostitution, etc. as they try to find a way out, evading traditional femininity and destroying themselves before others can do it for/to them, and asks, how can we save the girl? How can we alleviate this pressure? How can we make a new world in which girls do not self-destruct?

While one of the central messages of Poirier’s film is that there are no easy answers to such questions, perhaps the clearest response she does give can be read in her own decision to accept her daughter’s death. “Je te laisse partir … je te laisse aller. I let you go, mon amour” (Poirier 65). In a sacrificial act of surrender, Poirier relinquishes her hold on her daughter, coming to terms at once with Yanne’s death and with her life. She acquiesces to Yanne’s much-repeated cry of “let me go,” finally facing her daughter’s departure on multiple levels. Poirier figuratively lets Yanne go
by accepting the very fact that she is already gone, and accepting the radical change in her own understanding of the world that must come as a result. She also surrenders her hope of saving Yanne, of rehabilitating her, or of ever restoring her as her idyllic childhood self. In so doing, Poirier also uses her personal surrender to point to a larger-scale surrender that might help heal her society, suggesting that perhaps accepting the loss of the old image of the girl (as a saving figure, as a pure icon of transcendence or national coherence, or as a symbol of potential or renewal) is the necessary condition for allowing each individual girl to exist in a new way as part of the whole messy tapestry of human and Québécois existence. Perhaps the only way to give her the “accès au sacré” Poirier mentions, or to reach the end of Poirier’s *quête de sens*, is in fact to remove the girl from her pedestal and allow her to simply be human.

As we will now see in greater detail, this idea of acknowledging the girl’s humanity is also central to Nelly Arcan’s incendiary novel. However, *Putain* comes to us from the opposite direction: from the girl herself, caught in the maelstrom where her agency, desires, developing subjectivity, and heavy uncertainties clash with her society’s flaws, hypocrisies, and contradictory expectations. If *Tu as crié Let Me go* points to the need to release the girl from the impossible weight of her idol-status, *Putain* insists that the girl must also be set free from her role as scapegoat for the ills of her society if she is ever truly to become *souveraine*. 
Part Two: Through the looking glass? Femininity and the new millennium in Putain

The final work I will address in my project is Nelly Arcan’s incendiary 2001 novel Putain. Often described as autofiction, the novel is an account of the life experiences of “Cynthia,” a twenty-year-old from rural Quebec who moved to Montreal to become a student, and who subsequently also became an escort.

As the association with autofiction implies, Nelly Arcan herself had similar life experiences to those described in her novel. Born Isabelle Fortier, Arcan grew up in the rural Cantons-de-l’Est, and left home in order to pursue university study in Montreal. She studied literature, notably writing a Masters thesis on Daniel Paul Schreber’s Mémoires d’un névropathe. Her incisive intellect and considerable knowledge of psychoanalytic theory shape the narration of Putain, making it an unprecedented account of the experience and significance of prostitution in a postmodern, hypersexualized, media-manipulated society.

Arcan is a singular figure in the world of Quebec literature and culture. Renowned Canadian essayist, novelist, philosopher, and theorist Nancy Huston describes Arcan as a philosophe in her remarkable foreword to Arcan’s final work, Burqa de chair, a posthumously-published collection of short stories. Huston and others point out that from the beginning, Arcan found herself trapped between two selves: the prostitute/escort-self she portrays in her novel and uses to gain fame, and the author-self who writes those stories, and demands recognition on an entirely different level. On a more basic level, Arcan is trapped between her physical
(sexual) body and her intellectual (textual) self. As Huston describes, “Elle sera lue, photographiée, filmée, interviewée, jamais tout à fait prise au sérieux, admirée pour son culot et pour son cul, et Dieu sait qu’elle jouera sur l’ambiguïté, difficile pour une jolie jeune femme de ne pas jouer là-dessus, difficile, oui, même en étant, comme elle, d’une lucidité javellisante” (Burqa 7). Perpetually trapped in the space of tension between these two selves, Arcan manages to channel that tension into a series of powerful narrative works exploring millennial femininity in Quebec.

_Putain_, Arcan’s debut novel, is fierce, raw, and full of pain and loathing. Her prose features long, breathless sentences, which force the reader to read her thoughts through to their conclusion without the gentleness of a break, and makes him/her swallow each new chunk of dark musings whole. Arcan force-feeds her audience, forcing him/her to join her in a self-destructive cycle of continually re-devouring similarly unsavory portions of her suffocating childhood and toxic adolescence. Some critics, such as Barbara Havercroft, have compared this writing style to the repeated ejaculations of Arcan’s clients. However, I view it as more reflective of Arcan’s pattern of corporeal obsession, especially as manifested in her struggle with eating disorders as an adolescent. The text is at once forced bingeing on the part of the reader, repeated purging on the part of the narrator, and then continual reiterations of the same horrors with further details, creating a traumatic, nonlinear narrative cycle reminiscent of the Biblical “dog returning to its vomit”.

This text serves as a kind of grim herald of the false promises of the new century,

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33 See Proverbs 26:11
highlighting the strange truth that despite all that has seemingly changed in Quebec since Maria Chapdelaine, “rien ne doit mourir et rien ne doit changer” – even in 2001, the girl’s performance as one becoming a woman remains at the core of Quebec’s struggle for a stable national identity.

Unlike most girls and young women involved in prostitution across the globe, Nelly Arcan’s protagonist, like Arcan herself, made a deliberate choice to enter into that world. Having moved to Montreal to attend university, she then became an escort in order to help pay for her schooling – although, significantly, it is in no way clear that she would have been in financial difficulties without becoming an escort; her choice was therefore not motivated by dire need, but rather opportunism. In this way, she simultaneously harnesses two seemingly paradoxical, highly complicated identitary development vehicles: one, becoming a student, implies a path toward autonomous subjectivity and away from traditional, family-based femininity, in the tradition of La Route d’Altamont and Une Belle Education. The other, deliberately becoming a prostitute, could arguably be a form of sexual liberation, but in reality is clearly a kind of surrender to feminine destiny – a vortex of objectification and extreme, even grotesque, subjugation of women. Taken together, these are two bold, deliberate, contradictory life choices, reflecting the profound confliction at the core of Cynthia’s self and, by extension, of Arcan’s own. Being at once escort and student is but one of many seeming equivocations Cynthia embodies in the novel.
What is unequivocal about Arcan’s narrator is her motivation for both choices. The past Cynthia tries to escape from through education and prostitution is a grotesque allegory of so many of the narratives already discussed here. According to Cynthia, her mother is an undesired “larve” who never gets out of bed, the complete caricature of the self-effaced traditional woman, and her father is a religious zealot and fervent agrarianist, who Cynthia believes secretly frequents prostitutes. For Cynthia, attaining a certain level of adult femininity and using it for her own advantage is a means to escape her father’s control, her mother’s misery, and the artificial, immobilist lifestyle they represent.

However, this novel is as much about resisting the future as it is about fleeing the past. At twenty, Cynthia considers herself to have arrived at the peak of her own desirability, and as she calculates her worth as a person by that same desirability, she is terrified at the prospect of watching it all slip away until she becomes a larve herself. Ultimately, this leaves her locked in a fierce (yet inevitably doomed) battle to remain a girl for as long as possible. Although she seems to long for sovereignty and self-determination, and although she sees herself as superior to her chosen situation because of her critical awareness of its true meaning, she is also crippled by her insatiable need to be desired, a need that places her in a position of dependence upon men for personal validation. In order to cater to her clients’ desires, she needs to forestall the completion of becoming a woman for two reasons: first, because her youth and nubility are her primary assets for maximum gain as an escort, and second, because in her own eyes, truly becoming a woman means
engaging in a slow downward spiral into immobility and – worst of all – disappearance due to loss of desirability.

As a girlhood narrative, *Putain* constructs Cynthia's girl-body as at once iconic (the daughter-body, idealized as innocent, intact, and pure), commercialized (the fantasized, marriageable body, exuding procreative potential; the ultimate “hot commodity”), and reviled (the whore-body, the repressed site of enacted fantasies, the abject, the hideous). The novel’s key argument is a subversion of her society’s facile abjection of the last of these, the girl-as-whore. Cynthia/Arcan strongly condemns the hypocrisy of using the prostitute as a scapegoat. At its heart, *Putain* communicates a deep tension between the competing desires for the girl to become and not to become (a) woman, a tension that creates the space for a deeper desire: a longing for transcendence. As a conclusion to my project, *Putain* provides a compelling representation of the experience of millennial girlhood in Quebec.

*Intersecting identities: Girlhood as a crossroads between motherhood, daughterhood, and prostitution in Putain*

In my first chapter, I addressed the situations of Maria Chapdelaine and Florentine Lacasse as figures becoming women who were trapped within a very rigid, economically- and sociologically-motivated structure of femininity, one that predetermined that both would ultimately be required to pass from daughterhood to motherhood, more or less instead of passing from girlhood to womanhood. I drew the framework for that analysis in part from Irigaray’s *This Sex Which Is Not One.*
Irigaray identifies “mother, virgin, and prostitute” as the three “social roles imposed on women” (186) in patriarchal societies. In Maria Chapdelaine and Bonheur d’occasion, the focus was primarily on the tension between mother and daughter (virgin); the prostitute did not play a role in either narrative. In Putain, however, all three of these iterations of patriarchal femininity or womanhood are strongly present. Indeed, all three social roles uncomfortably cohabitate within Cynthia’s girl-body. This triangle of identitary tension leaves Cynthia trapped in a borderland of female/feminine subjectivity, constantly grappling with her identification with each role even as she rejects them all. On a very visceral level, Cynthia’s body itself is a battleground in the novel. Textually, the novel Putain is a literary embodiment of tortured girlhood: desired (but not desiring), incoherent (but devastatingly lucid), and beset on all sides – even from within.

To begin with, despite her regular work as a prostitute, Cynthia has not yet disengaged from her identity as daughter (read: “virgin”) within Irigaray’s framework. This is primarily for two reasons: the cult of youth in postmodern Western society, which glorifies the perpetuation of girlhood, and Cynthia’s unresolved relationships with her parents. Throughout the novel, Cynthia reminds us of her obsession with clinging to the extreme desirability of her twenty-year-old body even as it evanesces before her eyes. She tells us of her drive to "habiter mon corps d’adolescente le plus longtemps possible" (94); she is fully aware of the attraction of "la souplesse de la chair qui n’a pas fini de grandir et qu’on veut attraper au vol" (49-50). This stems from the fact that she is surrounded by the
hypersexualization of late-twentieth-century North America, and sees how increasingly insatiable male desire is projected onto younger and younger girls' bodies, "de nos jours où on maquille les fillettes et où on doit avoir dix-huit ans toute sa vie" (101). She readily admits to the heavy toll that this cult of girlhood as the height of feminine sexuality inflicts upon her generation, telling us that: "quand j'ai eu douze ans j'étais déjà devenue étrangère à moi-même, à cette chair mûrissante [...] et ce corps qui n'est plus celui d'un enfant ni tout à fait celui d'une femme n'est toujours pas le mien" (168). Cynthia is constantly both fixated on policing the youth of her body and alienated from it as the object it is in the eyes of men, dependent on the artificial "high" of being desired and full of loathing for the enslavement it brings.

In terms of her unresolved daughterhood, Cynthia is equally ambivalent. While she is ferociously contemptuous of both her mother and her father, she is also undeniably wounded by the brokenness of their family dynamic. In her introduction, she describes her process of becoming a writer (as well as a student, prostitute, woman – becoming herself) in the following way:

"Ce dont je devais venir à bout n'a fait que prendre plus de force à mesure que j'écrivais, ce qui devait se dénouer s'est resserré toujours plus jusqu'à ce que le nœud prenne toute la place, nœud duquel a émergé la matière première de mon écriture, inépuisable et aliénée, ma lutte pour survivre entre une mère qui dort et un père qui attend la fin du monde" (17, original italics).
Cynthia’s narrative is that of a girl who has already been buried alive, to a significant extent, by her parents’ suffocating presence and the heavy pressures of her society, and who is actively working to dig herself out of that premature grave.

In one of her short stories in *Burqa de chair*, Nelly Arcan writes that “Les mères seront toujours la première prison des filles” (40). This idea is certainly reflected in Cynthia’s view of her mother in *Putain*. Cynthia depicts her mother as a miserable being trapped in a body that is unequivocally, even grotesquely, abject. She writes, “Je me souviens de la forme de son corps sous les draps … un débris de mère qui s’aplanissait lentement” (9). Cynthia holds her mother in contempt because she (the mother) is no longer desirable to her husband, and yet she also deeply regrets the chasm of silence that separates mother and daughter: “comment ai-je pu m’éloigner de toi à ce point, à mille lieues de ta vie d’où tu n’entends plus ma voix, comment ai-je pu te laisser seule dans ce lit où tu meurs” (83). Echoing Gabrielle Roy and France Théoret, Cynthia/Arcan sees the trauma of the disconnect between mothers and daughters, and mourns it.

However, for the majority of the book, it is contempt for her mother’s seeming embrace of abjection that wins out over her regrets. Cynthia tells us that "le corps de ma mère va à l’encontre de l’instinct, du viable" (34). She rails against what she sees as her fate as a woman: to perpetually push back against, but ultimately succumb to, becoming a *larve* like her mother. She laments that she is "du mauvais côté de la vie, celui du lit de ma mère, de sa cave humide de sorcière" (100), telling us that "j’ai ma mère sur le dos et sur les bras, pendue à mon cou et roulée en boule
à mes pieds" (139), and insisting that "je deviendrai quelqu'un qui ne sera pas elle, je serai morte sans doute mais j'aurai accompli un exploit, celui d'être la fille de personne" (139). Throughout the novel, Cynthia fights to distance herself from her mother; fear of repeating her mother's "vieillesse souterraine" (10) fuels her burning desire to cling to her fleeting youth, to remain in girlhood for as long as possible.

Cynthia's relationship to her father is equally toxic. She introduces him as a man who "ne dormait pas et qui croyait en Dieu, d'ailleurs il ne faisait que ça" (11), adding that "mon père n'a jamais cessé de dire son horreur de la grande ville" (13). She goes on to depict him throughout the novel as a hypocritical man, insisting that he frequents prostitutes even as he vilifies them – although never presenting any concrete evidence to that effect, or any at all, other than her reaction to the way he looks at girls and young women. Her father's desiring, potentially incestuous gaze is the same as that of Cynthia's eventual clients, a fact that she continually emphasizes in her narration. Her obsession with clinging to her own youth (read: desirability) is her clearest and most indelible link to her own rapidly-evanescing girlhood, although it is undeniably a neurotic, even poisonous connection. Her gnawing insecurity and brutal domination of her own body stems from her cynical understanding that "il ne faut pas vieillir, surtout pas ... il faut rester coquine et sans enfant" (35). Truly becoming a woman, i.e. leaving girlhood, is essentially equivalent to death in Cynthia's arguments – a new spin on the same sentiment evoked by girl after girl in this project.
In sum, Cynthia's identity as a daughter is one of simultaneous pride, cynicism, and self-loathing – one that pushes her to pursue the destruction of the established gender identity structures she grew up with in order to set herself free from repeating the cycle she witnessed. However, this enfranchisement is far from successful, as the further Cynthia advances in her new life as student, prostitute, philosopher, and writer, the more she is forced to return, over and over, to her broken relationships with her parents. Moreover, the longer she persists in her pursuit of desirability, the more she senses and expresses the looming inevitability of ultimate failure. Time and age will eventually overcome even her best efforts, as she well knows. Girlhood cannot truly be prolonged, at least not for girls themselves.

As she gains clearer understanding of the psychology of prostitution (for both clients and prostitutes), one of the most salient concepts Cynthia sees is that her own struggle is also present in the industry she has become involved in, as – in her view – prostitution’s primary foundation is the father-daughter incest taboo. This idea of the man/father (the patriarchal subject) desiring the girl/daughter, hungering after what she represents of his own youthful virility, is the chief object of the rage of Arcan’s text: the insatiable desire for perpetual girlhood in Western, patriarchal, postmodern societies like that of 1990s Quebec, which demands ever fresher, ever more nubile, ever more appetizing crops of adolescent girls for its visual and physical consumption. Her novel is fixated on this idea, grappling with the mixture of reluctant pleasure and concomitant horror of the daughter as she sees herself displace her own mother as the object of the father’s (read:
subject/male’s) desiring gaze. She hates her father for the unacceptability of the desire she attributes to him, and hates herself for the responding desire she herself feels – a desire that is bound inextricably to her desire for death, or self-destruction. The transgression of the incest taboo, frequently reimagined in Putain, is never fully accomplished, leaving its consequences uncertain, but the implication seems to be that it is the last line to cross, a point of no return that would sever the last thread holding up the old rules of femininity and familial relationships.

In Cynthia’s imagination, such a transgression might possibly bring a form of female empowerment. Having already ruptured one wall within the established triad of feminine roles by being at once daughter and prostitute, Cynthia dreams of the possibility of breaking down the barrier between mother and daughter. The narrative she creates is that of a sisterhood of women, multiple generations all begotten by one man:

"je me raconte l’histoire d’une grande famille de femmes comblées par un seul homme, je me raconte une mère et ses deux filles, une mère qui serait la fille d’un homme et de qui elle aurait eu ses filles, j’imagine les deux filles portant l’enfant de cet homme qui serait à la fois leur père et le père de la mère ... elles formaient un clan indivisible ... partout dans le monde elles feraient l’objet d’un culte amoureux, elles seraient vénérées par des hommes qui se battreraient entre eux ... pour être le prochain géniteur, le père d’une lignée de filles-épouses, de mères-sœurs" (75-76)

The antithesis to the alienating, crippling obsession with the female body is, for Cynthia, the reversal of roles: to make men battle to be the most desirable, to remove the exchange basis from the patriarchal economy, to put power into the
hands of women who no longer need *men*, but rather a *man* of their choosing.
Girlhood blended with motherhood, sisterhood and wifedom scrambled together, all levels and facets of femininity dissolved into a *lignée de femmes* born of each other.

However, Cynthia’s daily life as a prostitute falls far short of this “utopic” vision. While Arcan’s narrator-protagonist is able to force her dual identities as daughter and prostitute to cohabit her one body, intentionally profiting from the powerful tension between the two, her incorporation of maternity proves more problematic. While she continually reiterates her paranoid certainty that she is slowly becoming her mother, she is not *pour autant* becoming a mother. In fact, her choice to pursue prostitution is a direct rejection of maternity and her own entanglement in familial living. Despite her career engaging in supposedly procreative acts, she describes herself as “stérile, incendiée,” insisting that “tout le sperme du monde n’arriverait pas à éveiller quoi que ce soit en moi” (23). Indeed, her prostitution situates her more or less permanently between daughterhood and motherhood, delegitimizing her as either even as it inevitably refers back to both. She is simultaneously the proxy daughter who may be sexually possessed by the father without breaking the incest taboo, and the proxy would-be mother who bolsters male virility while never actually being expected to bear children. Nancy Huston writes, “Le corps prostitué est jeune par quintessence, donc fécond, mais stérile. Cela fait partie de sa définition. C’est un « je sais bien mais quand même » ambulant” (*Burqa* 24). Cynthia is all too aware of the raw procreative potential of
her body, “mon corps qui pourrait porter l’enfant de toutes les nations” (59).
Although she rejects her own mother, and is terrorized by the possibility of resembling her, this perpetually-deferred or abeyant maternity dormant in her own body is the one form of mother-identity she does claim.

At once (forestalled) mother, (fabulated) virgin, and (speaking) prostitute, Arcan’s narrator demonstrates highly ambivalent alignment with each role. Many critics characterize her life as paradoxical; it is constructed upon simultaneous connection to and alienation from both sides of a long list of binary opposites. In the triad of femininity, she lays claim to a tense “neutral” territory (à la Barthes). She inhabits and embodies each imperfectly, regarding them all with deep ambivalence. Because she is still a girl, her body and mind continually engaged in a conscious process of becoming a woman/becoming feminine, Cynthia herself is a borderland, an undecided territory on which femininity is being battled out in real time. All boundaries become permeable in Cynthia’s view as her body, itself an incarnation of excess, incorporates an overflow of femininity, consuming it to the point of vomiting it up and then devouring it again. Putain’s tormented narrator radically swallows up every abject aspect of femininity: the self-less vacancy and potentiality of the virgin/daughter, the incumbent larve-ness of the mother, and the nameless, interchangeable corporeality of the prostitute.

This excess of femininity does not liberate her, however, but rather imprisons her under an overload of subalternity. Breaking down barriers between these three roles is bold and subversive, but it is not an act of self-enfranchisement,
as it still leaves Cynthia ultimately trapped within an identitary framework that forestalls female subjectivity, erases the name of the girl/woman, and perpetuates the same pattern of female self-annihilation that has haunted each girl we have encountered so far. The only way in which Cynthia breaks free is through her consciousness – her act of seeing, understanding, and bearing witness through her writing. This is what upends her text as what would otherwise be a torrid tale of female suffering: the fact that this girl/woman sees beyond and does not in fact annihilate her self on the inside.

“Qui croyez-vous que je sois?34: Putain as a narrative subverting abjection

Indeed, it is the expression of Cynthia’s consciousness, her act (and Arcan’s) of bearing written testimony to her experience of femininity from within a body at once mother, virgin, and prostitute, a blatantly abject and non-unified “subjectivity,” that makes Putain a truly subversive text. It is what allows her to contest the very conventions and problematic social structures in which she is openly complicit. By deliberately performing and writing excessive, even shocking femininity, by daring to identify as “je” while speaking an incoherent self, Cynthia radically, openly, and critically negotiates her own girlhood as it happens, laying it out for her reader as not only a painful, garish spectacle, but also an honest set of wounds laid bare with cold, unflinching, scientific precision. This intense self-awareness and critical, deliberate philosophical approach links Arcan and her novel to Kristeva

34 “Who do you think I am?” (Putain 108)
postmodern feminism, and announces Arcan as a bold prophetic voice of a new
generation of *écriture feminine*, or “écriture limite,” as described by Dawne McCance.
Never portraying the prostitute or her clients as victims, Arcan instead focuses on
the sickness of her society as a whole, and her own entrapment and complicity
within a broken, patriarchal system. In so doing, she powerfully expresses the
profound fracturing of the female subject within this narrative.

Indeed, in a very different way from that of Anne Claire Poirier in *Tu as crié
Let Me Go*, Arcan also strongly contests the abjection of the prostitute – and with her,
that of the mother and the virgin/daughter. At the same time, she contests the way
in which that outward abjection drives the girl to splinter into multiple selves,
definitively precluding the girl’s attainment of coherent adult subjectivity. In *Putain*
and in her other works, Arcan disputes her own abjection and alienation in relation
to the society that made her what she is: a girl and then a woman doomed to a life of
enslavement to the need to be desired. She decries the repeated infliction of this
same destiny upon generation after generation of women, “incapables de réinventer
leur histoire … inépuisamment aliénées à ce qu'elles croient devoir être” (*Putain*
42). She blames women themselves for their immobility as *larves* and insecure,
insatiable self-obsession as *schtroumpfettes*, of course, but she also strongly
criticizes the hypocrisy of men in her text. Relative to girlhood, both of these ideas
are central to *Putain*: the girl’s refusal of (and inability to escape) feminine destiny,
and her objectification by (and complicity with) patriarchal male figures who desire
her girlhood.
In relation to the idea of abjection, which remains crucial in this chapter, the most important narrative thread in Putain is Cynthia’s criticism of her clients, whom she reads as incestuous hypocrites. On one hand, she condemns their view of her, as an interchangeable body that can be inscribed with any number of names and identities (a proxy, a palimpsest); on the other, she denounces their dishonest relationships with their own daughters, as figures with whom they maintain artificial relationships predicated upon the dissimulation of their true desires, enacted upon the prostitute, Cynthia. Abjection enters in because of the use of the prostitute as a scapegoat figure, a very literal receptacle for all of the forbidden overflow of deviant masculine desire. Simone de Beauvoir evoked this vision of the prostitute in Le Deuxième Sexe, stating that “La prostituée est un bouc émissaire ; l’homme se délivre sur elle de sa turpitude et il la renie” (429-30). The denial of the prostitute’s humanity is the price of the maintenance of proper, patriarchally-acceptable relations between men and their daughters in Arcan’s argumentation. Moreover, the muted, infinitely repeated violence of the relationship between prostitutes and their clients mars all concerned with an indelible wound. She writes, “même en fuyant très loin pendant toute une vie, rien ne nous fera oublier la dévastation de ce qui a uni la putain à son client” (61).

This devastation stems from Cynthia/Arcan’s argument that under all the layers of fabulated femininity mass-produced by the media, and under all of the unnamed, objectified, interchangeable bodies of prostitutes like Cynthia, the incessantly-desired ideal woman in fact does not exist. Cynthia sees clearly that her
youth and sexiness are ultimately illusory, a smokescreen; she describes it as "la jeunesse de mon corps derrière laquelle apparaît le cadavre de leur femme" (32). Here again, we encounter the already-dead femme noire of Kamouraska. Once again, that which the girl is trying both to attain and to avoid in Putain is the same fate of her foremothers: self-annihilation.

Baudrillard’s theorization of the simulacrum enhances understanding of this theme in Putain. Baudrillard argues that postmodern society has substituted layers of models and representation for the real that they once represented. This is certainly true for Cynthia in Putain; she is profoundly aware that her own selfhood or consciousness is always divorced from her body, which, though a real physical body, serves in fact as a simulacrum, an icon of youth, energy, and potentiality, through which her clients attempt to reconnect with their own already lost vigor or, worse still, revive their already-dead hope of transcendence. Arcan’s description of the idealized girl-body in her novel is therefore also related on many levels with the spiritual crisis happening in Quebec society at the end of the twentieth century.

As she narrates this multi-level alienation in the space between herself and her clients, Cynthia also traces a parallel narrative of self-inflicted abjection legible in Cynthia’s deeply troubled relationship with her own girl-body. To begin with, she is alienated from her body through her prostitution. “[C]e n’est pas ma vie qui m’anime, c’est celle des autres,” she writes, describing her body as "mon corps réduit à un lieu de résonance" (20). As we have already seen, she is acutely aware of both the power and transience of her girl-body "de nos jours où ... on doit avoir dix-
huit ans toute sa vie" (101), when girls and women are "impérativement désirables" (105). She wryly remarks that "Chaque jour en est un de trop dans le monde de la jeunesse" (117). She sees clearly that "en vieillissant les hommes se détournent des femmes qui vieillissent, pour qu'elles portent leur impuissance" (32-33); it is much easier and less frightening for the decaying male subject to prop himself up through a dual motion of abjecting the physically decaying maternal/mature female body and objectifying the physically fresh daughter-like girl-body. Sensing herself trapped between the two, doomed to lose her girlhood and become a larve, Cynthia loves and loathes, fears and worships her own body in its girlhood. Even her writing cannot free her entirely, as she writes: "vous verrez que je mourrai de ça, de ces mots qui ne me disent rien car ce qu'ils désignent est bien trop vaste pour m'interpeller, bien trop peu pour me dissocier de ma mère" (144).

On every level, therefore, the girl-body in this text is a battleground, a contested territory. It is hotly desired and closely monitored on all sides, and it suffers in its very physicality the destructive consequences of its own contestation. Cynthia’s body is every inch the body too much – lusted after beyond all reason even as it is loathed, delegitimized, scorned, and abjected. For each of her endless clients, Cynthia’s body is a hinterland, an unoccupied extra space outside the scope of his “legitimate” daily life that is available for his use when needed. Her name and identity are irrelevant, beyond making sure that she is “celle dont on lui a parlé” (Putain 154). For Cynthia herself, her body is alien, other, an external, physical mechanism to be perfected in order to achieve maximum desirability, which she
perceives as the pinnacle of feminine currency or potency. She systematically surveils, disciplines, analyzes, and punishes her body. While she thrives on the attention it brings her, she also deeply resents its artificiality, and despairs of ever being free of her own hypersexualized corporeal obsession or that of her clients.

Cynthia’s narration of her girl-body aligns well with decades of feminist thought. Her discussion of prostitution brings her into the argument among feminists over whether prostitution can be a form of feminine liberation. While some support this view, Arcan is much more in line with those who view prostitution as a manifestation of masculine subjugation of women. In a 1992 address to the University of Michigan Law School during a symposium on "Prostitution: From Academia to Activism," Andrea Dworkin insisted that “every hierarchy needs a bottom and prostitution is the bottom of male dominance” (14). De Beauvoir put it this way: “Il faut des égouts pour garantir la salubrité des palais, disaient les Pères de l’Église” (429) – a sentiment certainly echoed in Kristeva’s Pouvoirs de l’horreur. In Putain, Cynthia has no illusions about her role in society; she knows that she incarnates the abject, that despite her supreme desirability, she is only desired in secret. She embodies the unspeakable, invisible borderland cushioning the supposed legitimacy of her society. Indeed, she speaks of her choice to become an escort as a sort of religious sacrifice: “je me suis faite putain pour renier tout ce qui jusque-là m’avait défini, pour prouver aux autres qu’on pouvait simultanément poursuivre des études, se vouloir écrivain, espérer un avenir et se dilapider ici et là, se sacrifier comme l’ont si bien fait les sœurs de mon école
primaire pour servir leur congrégation" (8). She even admits that "Il a été facile de me prostituer car j’ai toujours su que j’appartenais à d’autres" (15).

Arcan’s subversive equation of becoming a prostitute with becoming a nun is reminiscent of Marie-Claire Blais’s unforgettable character Héloïse in Une Saison dans la vie d’Emmanuel (1966), who engages in both in her effort to save humanity. The parallels between these two paths for girls and/or women are striking: both involve an erasure of the girl/woman’s identity through the use of an alias (as Arcan notes in her prologue), both require utter self-annihilation, both encourage alienation of mind and soul from body, both definitively exile the girl/woman from engagement in wifehood or motherhood, placing her procreative potential permanently in abeyance. The key difference between them is that one choice makes the girl sublime, wedded to eternal life before she dies, while the other makes her abject, bound over to death while she yet lives. Ultimately, though, both make the girl into a living specter, no more than an ambulant image of femininity that can no longer be possessed by any one man.

Unfortunately, Cynthia’s “easy” sacrifice brings her no peace. Cynthia discovers that only the prostitute herself clearly sees her own role in society, without illusion, repression, or denial. The men who visit her are totally blind to their own vice, unwilling or unable to recognize their own hypocrisy. What Cynthia most furiously disputes is the refusal of her clients to see that their frequentation of prostitutes means that they hate women. She is baffled and infuriated by the fact that her clients deny that their contempt for girls and women, demonstrated in their
extracurricular activities, should logically (and indeed does) extend to their own wives and daughters. "[M]ais qui croyez-vous que je sois," she writes; "je suis la fille d'un père comme n'importe quel père, et que faites-vous ici dans cette chambre à me jeter du sperme au visage alors que vous ne voudriez pas que votre fille en reçoive à son tour" (108). Although she has chosen an occupation that negates female subjectivity, she resents the erasure of her own humanity. Although she consciously pushes back against adult femininity, clinging instead to the space of becoming-a-woman that is girlhood for as long as possible, she is also frustrated that her clients do not see her as of equal agentive potential to their own daughters, who might be her age. Although she is no longer the archetypal daughter figure, she hates that her clients are unable to see her interchangeable equivalence to their own daughters. Even as she deliberately assumes an abject social position, she rejects the aphasia that ought to accompany her anonymity. Having erased her own name, and embodying a split, incoherent, incomplete subjectivity, she still claims a voice.

In fact, Cynthia's relationship to her own abjection and to that of the prostitute in general is yet another of her many paradoxicalities. On one hand, as a desirability junkie, she thrives on her own nameless, illusive seductive "power." Being a sex object makes her feel powerful, and having the intellect to fully understand the power dynamics involved in prostitution gives her a sense of detachment and freedom. On the other hand, the agency and subjectivity – the sovereignty – she ascribes to herself only exists because she voluntarily surrenders it over and over again. De Beauvoir points out that through prostitution, "la femme
réussit à acquérir une certaine indépendance. Se prêtant à plusieurs hommes, elle n'appartient définitivement à aucun” (DS 447). However, at the same time, she depends on masculine desire for the preservation of that independence (449). This means that her sovereignty is precarious at best, and more often heavily mitigated if not entirely compromised. In Cynthia’s case, her utterly crippling need to be desired is constantly counterbalancing her perspicacity and the strength of her voice.

This tension extends beyond the scope of Putain itself into the reception of the text in the early 2000s. Most of the televised interviews and newspaper articles about Arcan and Putain hover like moths around the flame of her titillating sexuality, relegating the truly subversive aspects of her text to the background. Arcan herself struggles between thriving on the attention (thirsting after desire in spite of herself) and being demeaned, horrified, and infuriated by it.

Irigaray argues that:

"In our social order, women are 'products' used and exchanged by men. Their status is that of merchandise, 'commodities.' How can such objects of use and transaction claim the right to speak and to participate in exchange in general? ... women have to remain an 'infrastructure' unrecognized as such by our society and our culture. The use, consumption, and circulation of their sexualized bodies underwrite the organization and the reproduction of the social order, in which they have never taken part as 'subjects.'" (84)

By writing, by asserting the legitimacy of her own voice coming from the body of a prostitute, by bringing testimony out of abjection, Arcan subverts the entire system.
of her society, which even in the year 2000 still propped itself up by objectifying girls and women. However, because of her complex relationship to her own status as a commodity on multiple levels – her physical and textual bodies being open for mass consumption at various times during her life – Arcan’s subversive power and sovereignty as a speaking subject remain shadowed with doubt.

“Ni mère ni fille de personne36: The desire for transcendence in Putain

At the end of her novel, Cynthia fantasizes about a sexual encounter with her psychologist. She associates him with her father, much as she does her clients; this makes such contact with him the same kind of proxy incest she describes over and over again in her experience of prostitution. The inevitability of sexual contact with her psychologist is an idea she reiterates at several points in the novel, one that signals her chronic difficulty in dissociating relationships from sexuality, or in connecting meaningfully with others through any other medium but her body. Only writing offers a glimmer of hope for true belonging; as Cynthia/Arcan writes in the prologue: “j’écrirai jusqu’à grandir enfin, jusqu’à rejoindre celles que je n’ose pas lire” (18, original italics). Within the space of human interactions described in the novel, however, and within the space of her own life, Cynthia is irremediably bound to the troubled, contested territory of her body.

As we have seen, that body is an abject body, one that serves as a reminder of death even as it pretends to dissimulate that death. The last line of the novel

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36 “Neither mother nor daughter of anyone” (Putain 43)
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powerfully expresses Cynthia’s awareness of her abjection. She describes herself as someone who “interpelle la vie du côté de la mort” (187); she senses that she has exiled herself to the wrong side of existence, that she has forestalled not only her maternity, but also her accession to any form of subjectivity that might successfully integrate into society. Her choice to engage in work as an escort and then to bear witness to that experience was clearly subversive, and involved tremendous sacrifice: even without marrying and/or becoming a mother, Cynthia (/Arcan) still had to make the same choice as the protagonists of Maria Chapdelaine, Kamouraska, La Fin des étés: she had to annihilate herself. Eight years before Nelly Arcan tragically took her own life, her debut novel already expressed her feeling that she was, in a way, already dead.

In her foreword to Burqa de chair, Nancy Huston postulates that “la scène prostitutionnelle est érigée sur une série de fictions conçues pour pallier les vertiges propres à notre espèce. Le vertige du vieillissement. Celui de la mort. Celui du temps qui passe. Celui, aussi, tout simplement, d’être l’enfant de quelqu’un et le parent de quelqu’un” (22). This reading is clearly applicable to prostitution as portrayed in Putain. Cynthia’s narrative is that of a girl trapped in a generational cycle – her own identity is a Möbius strip of simultaneous mother- and daughterhood that was written for her before she even existed. She senses that she is destined to become a mother, to become her mother. She also senses that she is bound to her father’s desire through her daughterhood. Her own words, already cited once in this chapter, encapsulate this best: “Il a été facile de me prostituer car j’ai toujours su
que j’appartenais à d’autres” (15). Even before she undertook it, she knew that her attempt to circumvent her prescribed identity through prostitution would ultimately be no escape, but rather a sideways confirmation of both roles.

In each of the texts I have covered so far, the girl-figures featured have expressed a hunger for transcendence, for a means to access another version of subjectivity, one that would not involve the destruction of their girl-selves, but would allow them to engage in the adult world as equals – as sovereign, autonomous, agency-wielding subjects. From Maria and Florentine to Yanne and Cynthia, the girl-protagonists I have examined have all shared a desire for a place at the table, for “accès au sacré”, to quote Anne Claire Poirier once more. Cynthia’s ideas on the subject are much less idealistic than those expressed by Evelyne in Une Belle Education, or Christine in La Route d’Altamont, for example. Cynthia’s strongest statement about her desire for a new definition of female subjectivity comes when she states that she wishes she could be(come) "ni mère ni fille de personne" (43), finally able to enjoy the power of her desirability by removing the threat of competition with other women, finally sovereign, finally detached from her belonging to her parents and her own potential parenthood. Transcendence for the girl in Cynthia’s mind involves a new form of identity, and a new social structure to uphold it. She also finds hope in the possibilities stemming from her writing – another means for the girl to construct a sovereign selfhood, perhaps? In interviews, Arcan herself expresses the same hope, and is continually frustrated that her readers seem unable to detach her text from her body. Her anger echoes that of
every other girl-figure we have seen, each of whom has expressed deep frustration with her imprisonment within an iconic body, one inscribed (without her knowledge and even against her will) with meaning far beyond the scope of her individual self, identity, or existence.

Throughout this project, I have addressed the quandary of Quebec girlhood as a culturally-charged space uneasily inhabited by would-be future sovereigns, and the girl-body as the disputed, desired, borderland domain of the girl as becoming-woman. In my first chapter, we observed that the girl-body can be seen as a representation of the national body. Its procreative potential represents the ideal of Quebec as a fertile promised land, in which “une race ancienne a retrouvé son adolescence” (Hémon 197). Quebec itself as a territory is strongly associated with youth, vigor, freedom, and possibility in the French-Canadian imaginary; the robust, marriageable girl-body is no more than a human extension of this idea. Moreover, the integrity of the girl-body is strongly associated with the righteousness of the Quebec nationalist project; the pure French-Canadian virgin à la Maria Chapdelaine is the sacred vessel destined to bring forth the next generation as an unadulterated continuation of its forebears. In subsequent chapters, we saw how this construction of the girl was disputed and ultimately dismantled over the course of the QR, although it remains as a spectral presence, haunting each new generation of girls trying to break free of it in their own process of becoming. In each case, the potentiality of girlhood brought with it anxiety about what the girl would become, and how that would affect what the nation became.
Because the girl embodies the "ambivalence of boundaries around crucial territories such as the State, the Mother, and the Law" (Driscoll Girls 30), she signifies the precarity of the French-Canadian cultural project/mission. In this chapter, we see that precarity increasingly gnawing at the edges of supposedly stable Quebec society. Sociologists like Roy, Bouchard, Grand’maison, and Gauvreau lament the crumbling of the Quebec nationalist agenda at the turn of the twenty-first century. In a 2007 article, Paul-Emile Roy argues that:

"En 1960, le moment était venu de corriger le désastre de 1760. L'opération a échoué à cause du manque de détermination de nos hommes politiques. La tentative timide de se prendre en main s'est transformée en refus de soi, en refus de son identité, et spécialement de son identité profonde, son identité religieuse. Les conséquences d'une telle démission sont désastreuses. Un peuple n'existe pas, s'il n'a pas une certaine conscience de son identité. Et comme dit Jacques Grandmaison, 'on ne se crée pas une nouvelle identité à partir de zéro'' (n.p.).

He even goes on to say that "La culture québécoise est le produit d'une longue expérience chrétienne et la négation de cette donnée est assimilable à une forme de suicide" (Paul-Emile Roy).

As I have argued throughout this project, the anxieties of Quebec-in-progress over the course of the twentieth century are powerfully legible across the bodies of its girls. Just as Poirier's film passionately pleads for a new look at patterns of abjection in relation to femininity in Quebec society, Arcan's novel strongly criticizes the multifarious identitary neuroses eroding that same society through abuse of the girl and the woman in the industrialization of sex and sexuality. Both also point to a
fundamental disconnect between generations of women, especially between mothers and daughters. As I argued in Chapter III, this disconnect has clear resonance with the parallel sense of disconnect between Quebec culture and its traditional maternal edifice, the Church. However, in Chapter III, the separation of daughter from mother through the adoption of male patterns of accession to subjectivity through the abjection of the mother was seen as a form of victory, of liberation. In the two works we have just analyzed, that sense of victory is heavily mitigated, even negated, by the deep trauma it has caused. These two works bear witness to a profound sense of alienation, lostness, and meaninglessness hidden just below the surface of millennial Quebec society.

In 2014, the Québécois filmmaker Guillaume Tremblay produced a documentary film entitled L’Heureux Naufrage, which investigates the sense of spiritual emptiness present in post-Christian and postmodern Quebec society. Tremblay’s film includes interviews with an impressive list of thinkers, artists, and writers from Quebec and France, including Paul-Emile Roy, Jacques Grand’Maison, Denys Arcand, Bernard Émond, and Pierre Maisonneuve. Throughout the film, the primary question is whether Quebec was too quick and too thorough in its abandonment of Catholic and Christian traditions during and after the Quiet Revolution. Alongside that line of inquiry is a parallel concern about the future of French-Canadian culture, which many of the people interviewed consider intimately, irreducibly bound to its Catholic heritage.
In one segment, Quebec filmmaker Bernard Émond states that “J'ai le sentiment [...] de vivre dans une culture qui est en train de s’autodétruire par manque d’intérêt, que ce fonds culturel canadien-français qui informe toute notre culture est en train de se perdre carrément” (clip featured at heureuxnaufrage.com). This idea of passive self-destruction through apathy or lassitude is perhaps incongruous with the more active, deliberate self-destruction asked of and performed by girls across the chapters of this project. However, the idea of a society that has somehow already accepted its own death, and that looks upon it with indifference, resonates with the same bleak sense of inevitability as that which Cynthia expresses as one who “interpelle la vie du côté de la mort” (187).

Whether or not a return to Christianity is the solution to Quebec’s existential angst at the dawn of the new millennium, and whether or not such a renewed connection would be at all beneficial to the Quebec girl, it seems clear that just as reconciliation with the mother seems to be a necessary step for the rehabilitation of the abject girl, coming to terms with its own Christian past is a necessary step toward a truly sovereign Quebec.

**Concluding questions: Renewing the quest for the Quebec girl’s “accès au sacré”**

Arcan’s text and Poirier’s film signal a fundamental hunger for transcendence at the heart of Quebec society at the end of the twentieth century, a hunger palpable in the continued abjection and objectification of the girl-body. They also clearly testify to the still-unfinished quest of the QR and of the Quebec women’s movement.
It appears that as a society, twenty-first century Quebec will need to find a “door number three” – neither isolationism through stone-walled sovereignty, nor total surrender to dissolution and disappearance through globalization. This mirrors the tension in twentieth-century Quebec girlhood between either maintaining a closed cycle of matrilineal repetition, predicated upon self-annihilation, or breaking that cycle, which meant either abjecting the mother or becoming abject herself. Both the Quebec girl and the Quebec nation spent the twentieth century searching for a way to maintain a coherent subjectivity able to productively engage with the rest of the world without being consumed by it, subsumed under it, or fundamentally altered beyond recognition. Sovereignty is the elusive goal for both: recognized subjectivity and the recognized authority to govern oneself.

Each of the girls we have seen in this project have sought access to subjectivity, to inalienable rights, to the recognition of their sovereignty – equal selfhood and self-determination to that enjoyed by their fathers and brothers. The evolution of girlhood we have traced in these chapters is the struggle of the Quebec girl to gain that access, and then her final obligation to surrender that dream. Again and again, we have witnessed her efforts to obtain that access through marriage, motherhood, education, work, travel, or drugs and prostitution. In every situation, the girl has come up against a fundamental lack of choice; either her destiny is predetermined, or the other options available to her are intolerable. This lack of choice for the twentieth-century Quebec girl is the crux of this whole project; the girl in each text senses that she will never have a seat at the table as an equal amongst
the ranks of humanity, and so she rails, resists, and then either (a) acquiesces and disappears, (b) refuses openly and traumatically abjects her mother, or (c) evades becoming a woman, and becomes abject herself. Each of the girls we have seen desires another option: (d) access to the same kind of free, self-determined, autonomous, sovereign subjectivity available (promised) to males of their kind - whole subjectivity, integrity.

However, as the quest for sovereignty seems ultimately stymied for both the girl and the nation at the end of the twentieth century in Quebec, one begins to see that perhaps sovereignty was not too high of a goal, but rather too low. Projects like *L’Heureux Naufrage* remind us that all the earthly authority and freedom there is will never save us from our fear of death, or satisfy our hunger for meaning or transcendence. The pain, rage, and sorrow of works like *Tu as crié Let Me Go* and *Putain* testify to a continuing desire to keep fighting – a desire for life, for renewal, for authenticity, and for hope. Although neither Quebec nor the Quebec girl were able to fully realize themselves in the twentieth century, perhaps the twenty-first century will bring a new season of mutual respect and help. In any case, it seems clear that the girl and her fate will remain critical to the fate of the Quebec nation. Only time will tell whether that fate will be continued mutual wounding, alienation, and stagnation, or rather a shift toward healing, reconciliation, and growth.
CONCLUSION

"Mais ce que j’aurais aimé partager, c’est cette indicible fierté d’être moi, entièrement moi, sans maquillage et sans parfum, dans cet horizon de bois et de blancheur. De grandeur, qui rend humble même les plus grands de ce monde."

( Naomi Fontaine, Kuessipan, p. 90-91)

When viewed as one continuing narrative arc, the trajectory of Quebec’s evolving, insurgent girlhood over the course of the twentieth century is above all a narrative of ambivalence. Each of the individual stories included in this project is an account of an unfinished revolution, a process of transformation forever left incomplete, a project always either abandoned, cut short, or left open-ended. They each express a fundamental battle between competing desires – primarily, simultaneous desires for preservation (continuity, belonging, sameness) and for transcendence (change, independent selfhood, difference). These conflicting objectives could also be labeled survivance and sovereignty. As parts of a narrative body, these stories reveal deep connections between the experience of being a French-Canadian (then Franco-Québécoise) girl and Quebec’s continuing negotiation of its existence as a nation. Within the temporal scope of this project, despite many surface-level changes, neither the Quebec girl nor the Quebec nation
truly resolve this essential inner conflict, and so both remain caught in a state of perpetually ambivalent *becoming*.

In his 2006 book *Que veulent vraiment les Québécois?*, noted historian Jocelyn Létourneau writes that "l’intention politique et ... l’affirmation nationale des Québécois ... s’appuient sur l’ambivalence comme mode d’êtres, comme forme du devenir et comme lieu de l’évolution collective" (104). Létourneau identifies ambivalence as a key feature of Quebec national identity. He pinpoints several paradoxical desires at the heart of being Québécois, most notably a “désir de collaboration” counterbalanced by a “désir d’autonomisation”, as well as a “désir de transformation” competing with a “désir de continuation” (18). His descriptions of Quebec’s inner conflict closely resemble Catherine Driscoll’s descriptions of the girl in her work on feminine adolescence, as cited in multiple parts of this dissertation. It is clear, therefore, that girlhood and French-Canadian identity are profoundly alike in many ways, and therefore that French-Canadian girlhood is a uniquely rich, complex territory in need of further study. My work thus far has certainly convinced me that continued investigation of this subject has much to offer at least to Quebec Studies and Girlhood Studies, if not also to other disciplines. Let us briefly review what we have observed to this point:

In Chapter I of this dissertation, we observed the construction of the girl as an iconic figure, one whose acceptance and performance of the “right kind” of femininity, meaning the surrender of her own desires and subsumption of her individual subjectivity under her expected adult role as wife and mother, stood as a
pillar of the perpetuation of her culture, and was therefore non-negotiable. This makes her a figure of continuity and "collaboration" in Létourneau's framework. At the same time, as an individual would-be subject, the girl (as represented by Maria Chapdelaine and Florentine Lacasse) expresses strong competing desires for autonomy and change. Within the mentality of *survivance* pervading the French-Canadian cultures portrayed in *Maria Chapdelaine* and *Bonheur d'occasion*, the individual desires of the girl had to be subordinated to the prerogatives of her society. However, that does not mean that they disappeared; rather, they were "voluntarily" repressed. The temporal and geographical contexts of these works make the girl a strong parallel to the Quebec nation of the time, especially the protectionism stemming from fears of primarily Anglophone-driven processes of modernization happening in North America at the time (Létourneau 70). For some groups within Québec, these concerns even led to flirtation with separatism. Prominent cleric Lionel Groulx famously stated that: "Qu'on le veuille ou pas, notre État français, nous l'aurons: nous l'aurons jeune, fort, rayonnant et beau foyer spirituel, pôle dynamique pour toute l'Amérique française" 37. In this uncertain context, the individual girl systematically dissolved (herself) into her representative value, becoming a semi-sacred icon of a nation's virtue and vigor, and the chosen vessel for assuring its survival.

37 From a speech given on June 29, 1937 during the Deuxième Congrès de la Langue Française. See ptaff.ca/blogue/2014/10/25/extrait_dun_discours_de_lionel_groulx_le_29_juin_1937/.
Chapter II, whose two featured works appeared during the 1960s, as the Révolution tranquille gained momentum, reveals how women writers and filmmakers began to question this pattern in the middle decades of the century, and how they expressed frustration at this unjust repression of girlhood. Kamouraska and La fin des étés asserted that requiring the girl to sacrifice her own happiness and individuality left the adult woman haunted by the specter of girlhood, both her own and that of her foremothers. Demanding the girl’s submissive self-destruction became visible as a traumatizing burden from their perspectives. Something had to give. In their 1965 preliminary report on Canadian bilingualism, André Laurendeau and Davidson Dunton warned that: "Le Canada traverse la période la plus critique de son histoire depuis la Confédération. Nous croyons qu’il y a crise: c'est l’heure des décisions et des vrais changements; il en résultera soit la rupture, soit un nouvel agencement des conditions d’existence" (quoted in Lacoursière 171). Emerging at the same time as important legal reforms ensuring that Quebec women "ne sont plus considérées comme des mineures" (Lacoursière 170), La Fin des étés and Kamouraska function as portents of coming change in the meaning of being Québécois and of being a Quebec girl.

This change takes form in the two novels from Chapter III, in which we witness the new trauma that came when certain girls of the same generation dared to break the cycle of self-immolating girlhood, and asserted their right to pursue their own dreams and cultivate themselves as individual subjects. Rather than become their mothers, these girls shed theirs like old skins, and projected
themselves into new patterns of selfhood, proactively pursuing transcendence of their supposed “lot” as women-to-be. No longer revered, the old definition of femininity, equated with the mother and bound to the teachings of the Church, became abject, an obstacle to the girl’s accession to sovereign subjectivity, an unspeakable burden to be discarded. By this point, the scales had been tipped: No longer did continuity and collaboration take precedence, but rather, autonomy and transformation. This portends the rise of the Quebec sovereignty movement in the 1980s and 1990s, including the two failed referenda.

Up until the end of the Quiet Revolution, the trajectory of girlhood – from voluntary self-erasure to unapologetic self-affirmation – was therefore relatively linear. One would expect a continuing evolution along the same lines. What complicates this linearity, however, is the strange stagnation and uncertainty we observe in Chapter IV. Rather than triumphant stories of life on the other side of feminine (feminist) enfranchisement, Poirier’s film and Arcan’s novel are stories of tortured, disillusioned, violent, even suicidal girlhood. Their stories hold little of the furious energy of the earlier texts, because these two girls are of the generation that supposedly “arrived” at the destination desired by their self-effaced foremothers – only to find that enfranchised girlhood has myriad problems of its own. The confusion and angst of these texts strongly aligns with that which becomes legible in Quebec’s national identitary trajectory at the end of the twentieth century. In 2007, noted Quebec sociologist Paul-Émile Roy wrote of Quebec that “Il est insatisfait mais ne sait ce qu’il veut. Il est aussi mal à l’aise envers son passé qu’envers son avenir”
Roy argues that at multiple points in its history, and especially after the
Quiet Revolution, Quebec failed to follow through on its revolutionary ambitions. He
states that "La tentative timide de se prendre en main s’est transformée en refus de
soi" (N.P.). This state of having arrived at an impasse, unwilling to embrace either
past or future, faced with a stale, abortive self-making project, is clearly echoed in
the girlhood narratives of Yanne and Cynthia. These are two girl figures who, to
quote Arcan once again, “interpelle(nt) la vie du côté de la mort” (Putain 187). While
the two girl figures from Chapter III seemed to declare victory and escape, Cynthia
and Yanne testify to a deep-seated disillusionment in the wake of that supposed
triumph. Their narratives reveal that the chronic ambivalence inherent to both
being a (Quebec) girl and being Québécois(e) remains very much a reality at the
dawn of the twenty-first century.

Having arrived here, then, the question becomes: What next for (the) Quebec
(girl)? As discussed in *Putain*, the 2000s brought new concerns about the
hypersexualisation of the media, which led to the heightened sexualization of
younger and younger girls. The “moral panic” surrounding this issue surfaced on a
national level (Quebec and Canada) with multiple organizations studying and
endeavoring to address the issue. As in many Western countries, the growth of
social media and the advent of the smartphone have only increased concerns about

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39 For example, the RQASF (Réseau Québécois d’action pour la santé des femmes) held a conference in 2008 on capitalism, the beauty product market, and other important factors in women’s health, which included multiple presentations on the hypersexualisation of youth – particularly, girls.
body image, “premature” sexuality/sexualization of children, and new ways in which the girl is once again imprisoned – without her consent – within iconic visions of what her body is supposed to be, signify, or look like. In addition, the Millennial generation across the Western world is known for ever-lengthening adolescence, which means that millennial girlhood is noticeably longer, slower, and more fluid than that of previous generations. At the same time, evolving notions of sexuality, maturity, and gender mean that definitions of proper adult femininity or (arrival at) womanhood continue to multiply, making the end result of girlhood ever more uncertain. Indeed, we may one day look back on the early 2000s as a time when girlhood became, on many levels, indefinite.

For the Quebec nation, the ever-accelerating globalization brought by the internet age is equally threatening. How will this profoundly unique, ambivalent, artificially-authentic identititary territory defend its borders against an invasion of fluid, spectral, omnipresent Otherness that washes over it like an ocean, slowly, steadily wearing away the unique features of Quebec, especially its language? That singular struggle is very much like that of the Quebec girl, who must struggle to exist in a sea of artificial images, to be(come) a woman when that destination is more nebulous each day.

Both areas can be meaningfully traced through further study of the French-Canadian girl. What would add a great deal of nuance, interest, and depth to this work would be incorporating narratives of First-Nations and immigrant girlhood from within Quebec, first of all, and secondly, expansion beyond the temporal space
of this project. Study of girlhood in the early days of colonial Quebec, during the time of the Rebellions of 1837-38, or during the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century in contemporary Quebec are essential next steps for this field of research if the goal is to understand where French-Canadian identity comes from, where it is going, and what it truly has to do with girlhood, and vice versa. The fate of the girl and her girlhood in Western society is very much up in the air in 2017.

In an inspiring TED Talk in India in 2009, Eve Ensler articulates a central element of what I see as the interest in studying girlhood: the fact that much of what constitutes girl-ness is viewed as weak, unreliable, defective, and even dangerous – a threat to the dominant narratives of the world we live in, discourses that cross national and cultural borders on a massive scale. Citing her own experience of working with girls and hearing their stories in multiple social locations, Ensler explains: “I think the whole world has essentially been brought up not to be a girl. ... To be a boy really means not to be a girl. To be a man means not to be a girl. To be a woman means not to be a girl. To be strong means not to be a girl. To be a leader means not to be a girl. I actually think that being a girl is so powerful that we’ve had to train everyone not to be that” (2:28).

Ensler’s basic argument, which echoes Driscoll and others as well, is that the deep ambivalence of girlhood is not only troublesome (and uncomfortable for the girl!), but also powerful. It is an in-between space not unlike Roland Barthes’s Neutral, one that is constantly engaged in the “ardent, burning activity” of “outplay[ing] the paradigm” (Barthes 7). The girl inhabits the subversive, disruptive,
untenable space phase of a corps frontalier – a border-body, one at once forming and
disputing the boundaries of the identities it abuts (childhood/womanhood,
virginity/sexuality, daughterhood/motherhood, minority/majority,
objectivity/subjectivity, to name a few). For a brief period, the girl, as one who is
becoming, exists (albeit uncomfortably) outside of binary “either/or” systems of
definition or identity. Barthes’s Neutral, like girlhood, is or can be an actively-
occupied neither/nor space - a no-longer/not-yet space. At the same time,
Létourneau’s argument on ambivalence situates Québec in the same zone of
perpetual becoming, never fully committing to one state or another.

Ultimately, such an existence ought to be untenable ... however, Quebec’s
determined ambivalence speaks to a powerful possibility: that an alternate form of
individual and/or collective subjectivity, one that strongly resembles girlhood,
might in fact be possible as a prolonged, even permanent, state of being. Létourneau
hypothesizes that Québec might be(come) une “nation mineure” (quoting Bill
Marshall’s work on Quebec National Cinema and inspired by Gilles Deleuze’s concept
of “littérature mineure”); is it purely coincidental the word “nation” in French is au
féminin? Létourneau describes the “nation mineure” as “celle qui n’a de cesse de se
métamorphoser, de s’acclimater ... d’innover dans ses formes, de proliférer dans ces
 façons d’êtres et donc dans ses modes de devenir” (Létourneau 129, original italics).
Could this be the answer not only for Quebec going forward, but also for its girls?

Only time will tell whether this mode of be(com)ing can open an alternative
door for Quebec’s existence as a nation, or whether Quebec’s girlhood must come to
an end, like that of so many of its girls. In any case, this dissertation has confirmed my opinion that the unique relevance, value, and interest of studying Quebec (and of girlhood!) comes from the subversive potential of this nation’s feminine adolescents/ce to interrogate the status quo, explore creative alternatives, pursue them, and ultimately dare to act out new ways of be(com)ing in the world.
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