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“Impossible to break into nice free stroll”
Canadian Re-citations of Paris
in Gail Scott’s *My Paris*

ABSTRACT: The narrator/writer of Gail Scott’s novel *My Paris* (1999) finds herself in an over-determined urban space of contemporary Paris. The space, already multiply written and rich in cultural associations, is re-worked again in the fragmented “diary,” in which the narrator both echoes and contests her literary guides, primarily Gertrude Stein’s work and Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*. Her Paris emerges as a re-citation of the Paris inscribed in those and other texts, reconfigured from a perspective marked by temporal remove, which is stressed in the novel. Scott explores multiple, criss-crossing spaces of the city: those of architecture, culture, race, gender, nationality. While the text’s concern is to move to and fro “across comma of difference,” and to avoid binary oppositions without obliterating the all-important comma, it politicises its postmodern concerns. The article explores the postcolonial dimension of Scott’s novel, which, though not necessarily foregrounded, provides an important conceptual thread of the text. The narrator, a bilingual Québécoise, considers spaces of alterity and otherness of Paris, explicitly relating them to Canadian national experience. From this perspective the enticement and impossibility of the unitary construct of a nation symbolised by the republics of France and the United States are explored. The postcolonial reflection is closely related to the notion of a non-unitary, nomad subject that emerges from the novel.

KEY WORDS: Quebec novel in English, Gail Scott, postcolonial urban space, Paris in literature, postcolonial Canadian literature, experimental writing in Quebec.

Gail Scott’s novel *My Paris* (1999) is written from an ambiguous vantage point of a contemporary anglophone Quebec writer, who creates her complex texts from within the multifaceted tradition of international avant-garde (including Anglo-American and French modernism and the American New Narrative movement of the 1970s and 1980s), and in particular the tradition of *écriture au féminin*, which flourished in Quebec in the 1970s and 1980s. Like other texts by Gail Scott, it is marked by formal experimentation, clear awareness of power

implications of language use, strong feminist/queer and political orientation: features displayed by much Quebec writing of the second half of 20th century, and often ascribed to the specific (post)colonial "conscience" of Quebec writers. Critics frequently point to the link between marginalisation, limited access to real power in the society, political as well economic tension and literary avant-gardism in Quebec (FLOTOW, L., 1995/1996: n. pag.). Scott's position, to a large extent replicated by the protagonist of her text, is that of a writer shaped, empowered and constricted by intersecting structures of power and powerlessness, many of which can be defined as postcolonial, though in a rather specific way. Aspects of this specific postcolonialism, explored in the text, include the contested nature of the postcolonial position of both anglophone and francophone Canada, the position of ethnic, racial and language minorities within both, Quebec's desire for independence and homogeneity, its history of politically motivated violence, the situation of women and sexual minorities as "colonised" by the regimes of patriarchy and normative heterosexuality. All of those are explored, though sometimes obliquely, or echoed in *My Paris*.

The writer/narrator of *My Paris* finds herself in an overdetermined urban space of contemporary Paris. The space, already multiply written and rich in cultural associations, is re-worked again in the fragmented "diary," in which the narrator both echoes and contests her literary guides, primarily Gertrude Stein, and Walter Benjamin of the *Arcades Project*. Her Paris emerges as a re-citation of the Paris inscribed in their texts and those of many others, reconfigured from a perspective marked by temporal remove, which is stressed in the novel. Scott explores multiple, criss-crossing spaces of the city: those of architecture, culture, race, gender, sexuality, nationality. She is re-mapping and re-(con)textualising Paris. While the text's concern is to move to and fro "across comma of difference," and to avoid binary oppositions without obliterating the all-important comma, it politicises its postmodern concerns. The specific moment when the writer/narrator finds herself in Paris adds poignancy to her musings and wonderings/wanderings. The year is 1991: the war is raging in the Balkans; the August Coup is thwarted in Russia; France is pursuing "the republican model of integration," clamping down on immigration and insisting on assimilation to counteract what is perceived by the political elites as the danger of the disintegration of the nation into warring ethnic enclaves (BLATT, D., 1997: 46); political unrest, protest marches and demonstrations of different kinds erupt intermittently in Paris.

My focus in this article is the reflection on an aspect of the "comma of difference" related to the question of the intertwining of national identity, subject constitution, race and textuality, which gives a postcolonial dimension to *My Paris*. As the narrator wanders through literal and textual spaces of Paris, she reflects, among others, on Canadian national experience, as well as the enticement and impossibility of a unitary construct of the nation symbolised by the republics of France and the United States. She speaks from a particularly sen-

sitive position of a writer and a bilingual, though primarily English-speaking, Québécoise familiar with cultures of both English and French Canada.

At one point, she places herself as

[...] subject with foreign queen on dollars. I.e. nostalgic. For distance. Of 19th-century novel. As in *I* purveying P's bare arm. Holding up phone. Simultaneously trying to grasp some point in future. By eclipsing **I** of certain early-20th travelling republicans. Who having abolished comma. Drawing all of us. In portrait of about three words. But if comma of translation disappearing. What of French-speaking America remaining.

SCOTT, G., 1999: 49

This quotation succinctly sums up major intertwining postcolonialism-related images and thematic vortexes of the text.

“comma of translation”

The concept of the “comma of translation,” or “comma of difference,” which constitutes part of Scott’s ongoing preoccupation with the loss of translation in its multifarious aspects, is literalised in *My Paris*, and expressed through punctuation. The book is written in sentence fragments separated by periods. Commas are used only to separate and simultaneously link French words and phrases and their English equivalents. The narrator becomes herself a locus of difference and an ongoing movement of translation. She inhabits both anglophone and francophone cultures; she lives, and herself becomes, in a sense, the space in-between, punctuated by the comma. She is denied any easy sense of cultural belonging. This necessitates, as Scott reflects in her autobiographical essay “A Visit to Canada,” a constant cognitive movement, a specific translation which allows the difference within “cultural doubleness” to survive, but also makes for a confused, internally split subject, always plural and in the process of becoming (SCOTT, G., 1989: 50). In accordance with Scott’s conviction that “writing is conversation” (SCOTT, G., 2008: n. pag.), and given the rich intertextual dimensions of the text, as well as the thematic importance of conversation within it, the writer/narrator of the text might perhaps be perceived not only as a subject sutured “out of distinctive ways of thinking, where two languages meet” (SCOTT, G., 2008: n. pag.), but a “subject in conversation,” momentarily constituted and dissipated under the pull of a multitude of discourses.

In *My Paris* the anglophone/francophone Canadian conundrum, which necessitates the process of internal intercultural translation, is exacerbated by Paris

as the locus of the text, and in a sense, also a shadowy locus of identity as well as a towering spectre of authenticity and excellence. As a Québécoise, and in particular as a writer, the narrator perceives her trip to Paris in terms of return. In Paris, however, her difference is both annulled and made more visible. For her Quebec colleagues whom she meets in Paris, the narrator is clearly not "the real thing": "Your accent's lovely saying one. Meaning **not** authentic. (Mother being English.) Measuring my heavy diphthongs. Against her rhythmic québécois phonemes. Parisians looking down on" (SCOTT, G., 1989: 16). For Parisians, in contrast, she is, above all, "la petite cousine québécoise, the little Québec cousin" (SCOTT, G., 1999: 49), a marginal (post)colonial subject, a North American, her internal cultural split erased.

The question of how expectations of others, of the audience, shape subject's responses and texts she produces, which Scott explores in "A Visit to Canada" under the French term of *le rapport d'adresse*, is both in the essay and in the novel resolved in terms of a changeable performance of cultural identity for a selected audience. The audience, ideally, should be responsive, their postures changing as much as the author's (SCOTT, G., 2008: n. pag.), so that "a dialogic process is set up" (SCOTT, G., 1989: 52), and the subject does not end up taking an essentialised position the audience expect. Nevertheless, context changes, and sometimes halts, the movement of cultural translation. In spite of the *My Paris* narrator's commitment to the comma of difference, as she glides over it, she is tempted by, often forced into, essentialised and false subject positions that annul the comma. Self-conscious of her "anglo accent" she desires to be a true Québécoise for her Parisian interlocutors, and at one time finds herself "vigorously claiming support of Québécois Independence," in an attempt to authenticate herself. Soon, however, she is "revealing complex nature. Of family tree. Only little French. Also English. Irish. Huron. Fairly typical mix" to her interlocutor "staring nonplussed" (SCOTT, G., 1999: 28). Paradoxically, in Paris, though neatly summed-up by her Quebec accent, she is at the same time unintelligible; a subject adrift, with no root that would tie down her identity, not in touch with her history.

As "the little Québec cousin" she is defined through the classic colonial metaphor of the imperial family, raising the spectre of the relations between the metropolis and the (post)colony. This is also how the narrator attempts to locate herself, at times, in the multilingual, multiracial contemporary Paris, as she expresses her solidarity with those living in the margins of Parisian life: the *sans papier* (refugees), but also the homeless, the working class. Also in this case, however, she has to recognise the difference within herself, and the privileges she enjoys as a white artist residing in a comfortable studio won in an arts competition. As France attempts to purge itself of the legacy of colonialism — the refugees and immigrants — it targets specifically "people from the 'south.' I.e. Africa. Maghreb" (SCOTT, G., 1999: 12). Difference is here fig-

ured through race, and so the narrator's fears of being arrested because her visa has expired are misguided. The split consciousness of the white (post)colonial emerges as white guilt in her dream of living in somebody else's house infested with "rhinoceros. Or hippopotami. Or some huge Lizard. Also starlings," and in need of fumigation. "Dream title: *I am not responsible*" (SCOTT, G., 1999: 128; Scott's italics). The dream is sandwiched between descriptions of a homeless woman, and a demonstration of students, "Many Arab French. Chanting *Une deux trois générations. On s'en fout. Nous sommes chez nous, First second third generation. Who cares. We're from here*" (SCOTT, G., 1999: 128; Scott's italics). Captivated by the Parisian past as described by her literary guides, enamoured with the elegance and self-containment of middle-class Parisians, the narrator also sides with the contemporary Paris smelling of mint tea, full of Arab music, its life lived in the dark margins and passages.

The split loyalties of the author/narrator, the layered and complex social structure of contemporary Paris, as well as the interfaces between the past and the present are repeatedly rendered in the text through contrasting images of surface and depth, light and darkness. The surface bathed in light is constituted by the streets and cafés of Paris, in particular the elegant Faubourg; the dark depth by the bowels of the *Métro*, hinting at "ancient vaults, the limestone quarries, the grottoes and catacombs" (BENJAMIN, W., 2002: 85); and the hidden recesses of streets and cafés. While in the former space the narrator becomes both an observer and a participant, the latter remains closed, often threatening and obscure, only vaguely glimpsed:

Sitting in **Luxembourg Gardens**. [...] Air green. Magnificent. Sun shining through dappled leaves. On terrace by little round chalet with lots of windows. Painted green. Little girls with sailor hats and striped dresses. [...] Two leather-clad junkies. Disappearing down cement stairs of pissoir. Girl with blue bow sitting on chair. Feet high above ground. Sipping from straw. Reading book called *Célia*. Already perfect lady. [...] Down little set of stairs—junkies closing in on round lady washroom attendant. Fingering her saucer of tips. To charm requiring anecdotes. I lolling above. In ambience of impressionist painting. Juxtaposed on something darker. Under.

SCOTT, G., 1999: 23

Repeatedly, following Benjamin, Scott associates the subterranean dimension of Paris with the "19th-century unconscious" (SCOTT, G., 1999: 25), but also the repressed and suppressed aspects of contemporaneity, which uncannily — though meant to remain hidden — come to light. The marginalised groups seem to inhabit primarily the dark depths and recesses, scurrying through the text like the rats the narrator associates the places they frequent with, "shuddering at the imagination required. To survive. For SDFs. Or any minor culture" (SCOTT, G., 1999: 122). The darkness, murkiness, indefiniteness in which the marginalised

figures seem to be cloaked in the text, which underline their otherness, divergence from the white middle-class standard, are coupled with their ubiquity in the city space, which suggests that these are the figures that form the texture of contemporary Paris. As the writer/narrator moves through the city streets and through her apartment, she does so often to the accompaniment of "the Arab music," surrounded by the scent of mint tea, which signal that her milieu is now "the new France." The fact that France is irrevocably changed by the influx of (post)colonial cultures is also indicated by the modification of architectural spaces of Paris, such as, for example, the presence of the building of l'Institut du Monde Arabe: "contemporaneous Arabia's glass-and-steel architectural statement. Dialoguing with Notre-Dame Gothic. On opposite side of Seine" (SCOTT, G., 1999: 70). The "new France," hybrid and varied, is nevertheless paranoid with fears that date back to the colonial era. The formerly-colonised remains marginal and only vaguely grasped, existing still only as a reflection of the colonizers gaze. Even the exhibition in l'Institut du Monde Arabe that the writer/narrator visits does not reflect on contemporary Arab cultures, but rather shows 19th-century European photographs of Egypt, which, in a classic Orientalist gesture, reveal more about the Europeans taking the photos than their objects (SCOTT, G., 1999: 70).

The writer/narrator is characteristically torn between her attraction to the margin, and her desire to belong, to merge with the standard, with both the avant-garde and middle-class context of Paris, which verges on the "(post)colonial cringe." The desire to conform is visualised, among others, through the special attention she pays to fashion. In Paris, she is always overly conscious of her image so that it does not reveal to everyone that she is not "from here," but fails. The writer/narrator's nebulous sense of identity, her sliding over the comma of translation, is then also expressed by her desire to refashion her body ("one day noticing 'one' standing automatically straighter. The way Parisians do" (SCOTT, G., 1999: 14)) and dress it in a way that would facilitate if not internal than at least external sense of being "someone": a "natural" and well-defined part of the ever changing social context. Towards the end of her stay she manages to internalise the dress code and successfully employ it, only to find herself overdressed on her return to Quebec. Such "internal clashing of the relatively superficial dress codes from two distinct cultures," Scott comments in her essay, "is only one sign of the internal confusion that can arise from a sense of 'difference'" (SCOTT, G., 1989: 46).

I and **I**

The constitution of the subject is linked in the text to the question of the national narrative as a shaping influence, and literary form as its expression. The italicised *I*, the subject “with foreign queen on dollars,” split by and constituted through an interplay of differences and similarities, is, like the ideal narrator posed by the text, “‘someone.’ Yet also porous (unbounded). I.e. neither excluding. Nor caricaturally ‘absorbing’” (SCOTT, G., 1999: 147). On the level of form and syntax, the ability to sustain differences is matched by rich intertextuality and reliance on sentence fragments hinging on gerund “Or back-and-forth-gesture. Possibly befitting subject. With foreign queen on dollars” (SCOTT, G., 1999: 83).

As Scott says in an interview, the back and forth movement implies staying in place (FROST, C., 2000: n. pag.). The Canadian “subject with foreign queen on dollars” is accordingly posed in the book as vacillating, torn between the past and the future, with only a tenuous hold on the present. She is nostalgic for the 19th-century project of the stable subject, expressed through the realist novel and the idea of the nation-state, but also conscious of the fact that it is a mirage, a construct, and that it is not attainable. There exists no national narrative to refer to that would be unequivocally hers, no unitary history, no unruptured, uncomplicated continuity; only gliding to and fro over the comma of difference. So at the same time she is looking towards a partial dispersal of the porous subject, as expressed through narrative experiment and implying an emerging, changed concept of the nation. Paris functions as a catalyst to the narrator’s attempts at “porousness.” It defies her expectations created on the basis of its literary images, forcing her to reconsider the reality of the postcolonial transnational metropolis.

The italicised *I* set against the **I** in bold indicates the narrator’s opposition to the unitary concept of the subject, related to the notion of the republic. She is, however, characteristically torn between the need to “stay out of categories” (SCOTT, G., 1999: 107) and the republican desire. The narrator watches, with occasional envy, the French and American republicans, who seem to have more substance than she does, seem to take up space completely. They are “self-assertive citizen[s]. Fostered in well-militarized republics” (SCOTT, G., 1999: 101). Likewise the “authentic,” francophone Québécois are described as “vaguely republican” (SCOTT, G., 1999: 101), attached to the ideal of unitary, well-defined national identity.

As she reads Parisian space for traces of her literary guides, she also wonders about the insouciance of the early 20th-century American expatriates, their republican presumption, and their observant distancing from everyday French life. Even the title of Scott’s text seems to exist in a dialogic relationship with

Gertrude Stein's *Paris France* (1940). In spite of the autobiographical nature of her text, Stein's title both suggests the detachment of the author/narrator from her subject and immediately locates the author as writing from an American perspective adopted as central and defining for the experience, impressions and reflections recorded, while at the same time — at least from the European perspective — marking the author as proudly provincial. Paris is refused uniqueness and grandeur, though not the magnetic force, with which it is usually endowed in Europe. Similarly, even though Stein accords to France the role of "the background of the twentieth century," she also comments that "naturally it was foreigners who did it there in France because all these things being French it made it be their tradition and it being a tradition it was not the twentieth century" (STEIN, G., 1940: 13). Opinions about Paris and France are given with finality and conviction and are meant to be defining of the state of existence that "Frenchness" indicates for the author. The title of *My Paris*, in contrast, underlines the private and affectionate attitude of the author/narrator to the city, and the fact that the text refers as much to the location as to the author/narrator herself. It suggests that the Paris constructed in the text arises from idiosyncratic experiences. These can hardly be treated as defining, which is underlined by the style in which the text is written. Additionally, the text actively contests any unitary notion of "Frenchness," including the one constructed by Stein. Instead, "Frenchness" becomes an internally conflicted concept tugged by centrifugal pressures.

Even though Scott's author/narrator is incessantly in search of the mythological literary Paris, and at times catches glimpses of it, she is also critical of the modernist America-centric and essentialising view of the city. Likewise, she counters the modernist view of homelessness/exile as a transcendental condition with real-life images of the homeless and her reflection on their condition. Additionally, she gives exile concrete reference, reflecting on the racial other in Paris, as in the following fragment:

[...] green-clad worker from 'south.' Vacuuming up dog shit. [...] Against backdrop of that fine men's store opposite. Windows of exquisitely stitched collars. Reflecting meridian strip. Where Gertrude Stein's poodle Basket used to shit. With other rich expatriate puppies. Thinking Paris belonging to them. Turn on some Arab music. Low.

SCOTT, G., 1999: 22

The republican **I**, as Scott's text makes clear, gaps through the fissures of Gertrude Stein's experimental writing, in particular her use of predicates and the abolishment of commas. The multiplying predicates, according to the narrator of *My Paris*, make the subject and Stein's narrator "Into huge transparent shadow," which dominates the text completely; or, on the contrary, into a "ghost,

Or refraction” (SCOTT, G., 1999: 36) — the two opposites she is trying to avoid. Stein’s dislike of commas, whose “servile nature” she commented upon, is related in Scott’s text to the republican project of sameness: Stein’s self-proclaimed ability to encapsulate portraits of a roomful of people in a few words suggesting a disregard for difference that the comma symbolises. While Stein perceived the comma as an obstacle to “living your life as actively as you should lead it” (STEIN, G., 1957: 220), Scott’s narrator sees it as an energising presence preserving, even activating, the play of differences.

At the same time, she realises that maintaining the posture of the porous subject who refuses categorisation is a dangerous act. On the one hand, it requires fending off the danger of complete ghostlike dissipation of the narrator idealised by Barthes’s concept of *écriture blanche*, but discarded by Scott’s protagonist. On the other, it necessitates detachment complicitous with the impermeable republican I, that the narrator, after Benjamin, sees as a typically 20th-century posture, in contrast to the remorse-ridden 19th century (SCOTT, G., 1999: 100). Western European political activism, sometimes contrasted with the business-like attitude of North Americans, while evoking vague admiration in the narrator, is simultaneously exposed as a facile option, a posture that seems to deny some kind of never defined “real” involvement, possibly that born of the experience of discrimination, violence and marginalisation. This is what emerges, for example, from the following sardonic description: “Also on pavement. Some Parisian feminists. Fasting to protest rape as weapon. In ex-Yugoslavia. Sitting on very clean blankets. Plastic water bottles. Young Bosnian. With huge bandage. Over disappeared nose. Standing beside” (SCOTT, G., 1999: 71). The narrator, while rejecting this kind of involvement, seemingly simply floating and absorbing experience to avoid categories, is, however, clearly guilt-ridden, as indicated by her obsession with the marginalised groups, and the fact that she follows closely the weather in war-torn Bosnia. Her guilt is also the vague Canadian postcolonial guilt of the settler-subject recognising in the filmed images from America the frames that in the same gesture exoticise and normalise the Native, glossing over the drama of residential schools while constructing a vaguely familiar 1950s image of family cosiness in an Inuit igloo. Nevertheless, in the same gesture in which she both discards and admits responsibility for the contemporary dramas, she refuses and accepts also the feeling of responsibility for the drama of colonisation: “Turning off Sarajevo. Rwanda. Bosnia. Not to mention documentary from chez nous. Re: uranium. In reservation rivers” (SCOTT, G., 1999: 100).

"My Women of the Left Bank"

The Paris perceived and constructed by this laboriously conjured and maintained porous *I* is, however, accessible to the writer/narrator only temporarily, when all her daily life revolves around the explorations of the intimate, textual and actual city space. In the coda, when she returns to Paris with her lover, the comma of difference and the porosity of the subject disappear from the text. The act of gliding over the comma of difference, the in-between space, vanish when the situation necessitates that the narrator adopts a posture that defines her: that of a (lesbian) lover. The two women rush through Paris in a caricature of the tourist act, and the city emerges now for the narrator through a binocular vision, which is experienced both as a loss and a gain, as indicated by sentences such as: "----- What *orgasms* desire to be alone" (SCOTT, G., 1999: 156). The coda, nevertheless, underlines the aspect of the text, and of the urban landscape, that the author/narrator did not experience before, but which features prominently in her Parisian readings and wanderings: that of Paris as the city of love and desire, with lacunae of transgression against normative heterosexuality.

One of the striking features of the urban landscape drawn in *My Paris* is that while it is permeated by desire, both heterosexual and gay (in particular lesbian), non-normative desire is not exoticised. Rather, it constitutes a prominent part not only of the narrator's everyday life (her observations, readings, encounters, memories), but also of the quasi-mythological as well as contemporary fabric of the city, though much of it remains hidden and segregated, as the narrator comments (SCOTT, G., 1999: 121). Lesbian desire is explicitly related in particular to the avant-gardist aspect of the city that the narrator wants to live in. Her "Women of the Left Bank" — artists, scholars, activists — provide the milieu she is yearning for, and a degree of continuity between her own experience and the Parisian life of American expatriate modernists. Openly lesbian and activist, these women do not share, however, the class privilege and financial comfort of their predecessors.

"trying to grasp some point in future"

From Scott's narrator's vantage point, to quote James Clifford, "It is more and more difficult to ignore what has always to some extent been true — that every centre or home is someone else's periphery or diaspora" (CLIFFORD, J., 1989: n. pag.), and the comma serves as a reminder and a sign of it. As a post-colonial traveller she no longer has the comfort of simply looking for the exotic,

the different, and the romantic, even though some of her literary guides push her to do so. As she walks the city in search of “the marvellous,” she finds it changed forever. Its pollution, incessant din of traffic, sidewalks crowded with cars serve as physical equivalents of the intellectual and mental impediments of postcolonial travel that disallow the posture of disengaged observation.

Unlike the flâneur she at times imagines herself to be, she finds it “impossible to break into nice free stroll” (SCOTT, G., 1999: 35). Instead, she finds her location in travel in the haunting figure of a nomadic Saltimbanque performing, “Giving a strange feeling of running in reverse. While trying to grasp some point in the future” (SCOTT, G., 1999: n. pag.). The Saltimbanque can be related to Homi Bhabha’s image of

[t]he silent Other of gesture and failed speech [who] becomes what Freud calls that ‘haphazard member of the herd,’ the Stranger, whose languageless presence evokes an archaic anxiety and aggressivity by impeding the search for narcissistic love-objects in which the subject can rediscover himself, and upon which the group’s *amour propre* is based.

BHABHA, H., 1990: 316

Drawn to this figure to the point of identification, the narrator at the same time realises her difference from it. Paris re-cited, emerges in the end not as a stage for strolling but for performing a balancing act; as a metropolis that, in spite of its uniqueness, stands also for the postcolonial global punctuated/punctured by the comma of difference, in the process of becoming.

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