

*Américanité and Québécoisité: The Converging Form of Québec Identity as Illustrated in
Une histoire américaine and Le déclin de l'empire américain*

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Abstract

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(Under the direction of Dr. Dominique Fisher)

This paper explores the presentations of identity as they relate to the post-referendum Québec society of the 1980s. Specifically, it uses Jacques Godbout's novel *Une histoire américaine* and Denys Arcand's film, *Le déclin de l'empire américain*, to underscore the relationship of Québec to North America, and the cultural and geographical influences of the province and the United States in particular. Using *américanité* as a filter, the two works provide images of *québécois* society that reflect the province-wide sentiment following the failed nationalist agenda. This paper efforts to relate the competing notions of *américanité* and *québécoité* through the social constructions of marriage, family, love and relationships as well as the crisis of identity of individual characters, all of which inform the overall presentations of what it meant to be a citizen of Québec in the post-referendum society.

To the wanderlust and soul searchers everywhere.

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The question of identity in the context of *québécois* literary and cultural productions is widespread and encompasses many areas of life from the personal to the political, making a clean definition difficult to produce. In his book, *La société des identités*, Jacques Beauchemin explores the relationship between contemporary societies and identity. He argues that contemporary societies, like the one in Québec, are challenged by the notion of collectivity — the presentation of group identity¹ — because a society cannot be equally representative of each individual member. Beauchemin presents identity as a fluid notion that is always in transition to the extent that specific or individual identities are often in conflict with one another, which has given rise to the desire to establish group identities. The creation of a group identity makes it easier — albeit sometimes oversimplified — to classify and define different groups. That this generalization is not always positive increases the complication of the exploration of identity. In fact, for Louis Dupont, the truest representation of a group identity is virtually impossible to pin down, as it is tied to the ever-changing demographic of the group itself. The identity of a group — in this instance the *Québécois* — is even more complex because not only is it a reflection of a set of common values that are founded on common beliefs and thought processes, but it is also closely linked to geographical location and political makeup, in this case, most specifically to the continent

1 Use of the term “group identity” in this paper refers to the identity of an assembly of people who all share a common thread. This is to be distinguished from cultural identity, in which identity is related to a specific shared culture as well as from national identity, which speaks to an identity based on shared nationality. The *Québécois*, can be conceived as having a national identity as French-speaking Canadians, a cultural identity that relates to their province, as well as to Canada and the United States (a notion which is expressed by a different term: *américanité*), but also a group identity, which is referential only to the Québec society.

of North America as well as Canada and the United States. In effect, as Dupont argues, the definition of a group's identity is infinitely relational and thereby best understood in juxtaposition with other concepts.

The fluid nature of the concept of identity forces the examination of whether a specified context can actually exist to classify the people of this province, that is, whether they have a true group identity. In Québec — therefore, for the *Québécois* — the conception of identity is linked to the ideas of the society, political movements and change, and in particular the relationship with the United States and North America in general. It is this relationship in particular, known as *américanité*, which informs much of *québécois* culture. In this way, the search for a *Québécois* identity has become intrinsically ensnared in the population of the province of Québec due to their geographical situation within Canada and north of the United States. The proximity of Québec to the United States, as well as its status as a Canadian province, creates parallels, influences, conflicts and crossover between the cultures, which has a direct impact on the literature of Québec and the presentation of its people's identity. In addition to the geographic influences, Québec's identity question was accelerated by the cultural upheaval of the *Révolution Tranquille* in the 1960s. Dupont describes this time period as one of reclassification and liberation that was coupled with the economic growth and industrialization of the province and dislodged the traditional system of values and beliefs rooted in the Catholic Church, calling into question the influences of both Canadian and American society. The diversity of cultures present in Québec today is rooted in this revolutionary progress.² This revolution can be credited with stimulating the push for

2 This shift from a “French-Canadian” identity to a “*québécois*” identity is exhibited through the Québec nationalist movement, increased European immigration, the recognition of aboriginals (Amérindiens), and the rise of feminism and the gay/lesbian/transgender movements. See George Melnyk, Introduction. *One*

a homogeneous society with united goals, a common language and a spirit of change, which would become the precursor to the rise of the nationalist debate and the subsequent referendums for Québec independence. These cultural and political movements helped to generate the questions that encapsulate the 20th century *québécois* experience: Are they considered North Americans, French Canadians, or *Québécois*? Though it is not necessarily always at the forefront of each individual's mind, life in the context *québécois* is a fusion of questions about origin, nationality, society, relation to other peoples and nations and individuality, but the answers are not always clear.

Focusing the question: Arcand and Godbout

Along with the continual search for a way to conceptualize and modernize the identity of Québec, writers who were aiming to portray an aspect of *québécois* society in their fictional works found themselves increasingly dealing with the concept of identity. In looking at specific works of author Jacques Godbout and film *auteur* Denys Arcand that were written or produced during the mid-1980s,³ following the first failed attempt at a referendum that would have granted Québec its independence, it will be possible to determine several responses to the questions that arise out of the conception of what it is to be *Québécois*.⁴ The effect of the failed 1980 referendum on the literary work of Québec is evident in its diversity of style and form. The close 60% - 40% vote that ultimately resulted in Québec's continued

Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema. By Melnyk. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004. 4.

3 Filmmakers are considered to be *auteurs* if they write, direct, produce and sometimes act in their films, which is the case with Arcand. See Melnyk, "Auteur," 125.

4 With the election of the Parti Québécois in 1976, the nationalist agenda was center stage in the province. The Referendum for 1980 was a call for independence from Canada, without severing economic ties. The ensuing political uproar both in and outside of Québec culminated in the official vote on May 20, 1980, which resulted in the polarization of the province when the 60-40 vote was not in favor of independence. The subsequent province-wide depression spanned the rest of the decade. See Pérusse, "Gender relations," 87.

status as a Canadian province instead of its own nation, is represented by characters in novels of the 1980s through political apathy, hopelessness, depression, dissatisfaction, loss of self-confidence and a general feeling of not belonging. Through the lens of Godbout's 1986 novel *Une histoire américaine* and Arcand's film, *Le déclin de l'empire américain*, which was released the same year, the relationship that exists between the emerging *Québécois* identity and the ever-increasing influence of the United States is brought to light and called into question.⁵ Adrian Van Den Hoven sees a thematic link between Arcand's film and *québécois* literature, specifically citing Godbout's *Une histoire américaine*, and noting that the two works share a “tendentious” quality and relatable subject matter (151). Van Den Hoven sees Gregory Francœur's escapist journey from post-referendum Québec to California as emblematic of the alienation exhibited by Arcand's group of directionless academics; neither set of characters is sure of their future or of their status as *québécois*.⁶ Thus, though the works are of different media, both Arcand and Godbout provide an image of *québécois* society from different perspectives and even different geographical locations. To that end, there is much about the content of each of these works that speaks very clearly to the question of identity, and in particular how the surroundings and experiences of a character can affect both the search for identity as well as the results of that search simultaneously.

The importance of *Une histoire américaine* and *Le déclin de l'empire américain* in exposing the varied presentation of identity is due, in part, to the two authors who wrote

5 Looking at a film and a novel from the same year expands the scope of the presentation of identity beyond a single artistic expression to provide a more nuanced understanding of its multiplicity, in particular in regard to the relationship between Québec and the United States, which is of particular emphasis in these two works.

6 Melnyk refers to a thematic overlap between films and novels of the 1980s. See Melnyk, “Auteur,” 142. Thériault makes this reference by referring to both Jacques Godbout and Denys Arcand in his book on *américanité*, 36-37.

these characters into consciousness: Jacques Godbout and Denys Arcand.⁷ Though Godbout is both a poet and a filmmaker, he is best-known for his nine novels, including *Une histoire américaine*. His novels have received significant crossover appeal: three of his earlier works have been translated into English, and as a whole, his novels have garnered success both in and out of Québec. In fact, according to biographer Richard Hodgson's article on Godbout in the Dictionary of Literary Biography, Godbout's recognition outside Québec is at least equal to his recognition within the province. In another of his articles, Hodgson says Godbout's novels strive to define “québécoisité”⁸ and that his writing efforts to express the Québec experience in a North American context (*Etudes* 35). These classifications both enlighten and strengthen the application of Godbout's works to the presentation of *Québécois* identity.

Denys Arcand's ability to present the fluctuating nature of Québec society is also an element of his successful filmmaking career and fueled the power of his crossover appeal. George Melnyk bills Arcand as an “interpreter of Quebec who was embraced by all of Canada and beyond” (“Auteur” 126). Arcand was political-minded and driven by the politics of his province since he began making films, opting for documentaries early in his career.⁹ The production of films like *On est au coton* in 1970, a documentary which looked at the textile industry, and *Le confort et l'indifférence*, a 1982 documentary commissioned by the Parti Québécois that followed the campaign for the 1980 referendum, inform the motivations and direction of his later works. In particular, the pessimism and *ennui* that characterize *Le déclin de l'empire américain* are reflective of the mood of the nation at the time, as well as Arcand's personal sentiment. Pierre Véronneau observes that the melancholy that Arcand was

7 Considering Arcand an author here is based on the fact that he wrote the screenplay for the film that he also directed.

8 This term loosely translates to “Québecness” and describes belonging as it relates to the Québec context.

9 See Véronneau, “Moralist,” 69.

party to in making documentaries about the political situation of his province in the post-referendum context allowed him to “synthesize all the experience he had as a filmmaker and take stock of his insights” (73). It is these insights that lend a palpable relevance to this fictional film in 1986.

The titles of both works speak volumes about the presentation of identity, emphasizing with the word “américain(e)” that the geographical situation to the continent of North America and/or to the United States plays a role in that presentation. The title of Godbout's novel can be understood many ways via literal translation from French to English as either “An American story” or “An American history,” and I would contend that both versions are true to the production put forth by Godbout. The word “une” can also be understood to mean both “one” and “an,” which is significant in that the story of Gregory Francœur is a singular example of literature that focuses on one man's journey, but it is also evocative of a larger, shared experience, *a* history. The title evokes a connection with America — in the case of Godbout and his main character Gregory Francœur, it is a connection specific to the United States — that is just as much a story about life in America as it is a story about the history of Québec. Godbout's character is redefining his own *Québécois* history in an American context. Even the summary of the novel found on the first page reflects the all-encompassing position of Francœur, referring to him as “un Américain rejeté par l'*histoire américaine* telle qu'elle joue sur le campus de Berkeley comme dans les rues de Los Angeles” (Godbout 3).

The title of Arcand's film has been a subject of discussion in many articles,¹⁰ as well as for Arcand himself. In an interview with André Loiselle, Arcand explains that the title of

10 See Pérusse, “Gender relations,” 72; Testa, “Decline of frivolity,” 184; and Pallister, “Mirror of society,” 258.

the film, which was originally intended to be “Conversations scabreuses” (indecent conversations), is a simple reference to the thesis of the book *Variances de l'idée de bonheur*, which is authored in the film by one of his characters, Dominique Saint-Arnaud (151). The thesis of Dominique's book is well summarized by Janis Pallister, who says that the book and the corresponding interview with its author that opens the film align the current state of the American empire with that of historical empires, like Rome. In the film Dominique is arguing that the proliferation of hedonism and the pursuit of personal happiness over the needs of the collective society are bringing about the decline of the American empire, just as it did in Rome. The film itself, then, is a visual representation of that decline, most significantly reflected in the conversations of the characters who are all party to and witnesses of this decline. The evidence of this decline is seen in the interaction and discussion of the characters, making this “talky” film,¹¹ like Godbout's novel, an example of the effect of American influence on *Québécois* society as well as how that influence translates to presentation(s) of identity.

Une histoire américaine is the story of Gregory Francœur's search for his identity, happiness, and meaning after leaving his entire life in Montréal to accept a teaching position in California at UC Berkeley in the wake of the failed nationalist movement. Falsely accused of rape and arson, Francœur is thrown in jail and must write a detailed account of his *séjour* in the Sunshine State that will be translated into English for his defense. The actual reason for Francœur's imprisonment is not revealed until the conclusion of the novel, when he learns that his transport of illegal Mexican immigrants across the state was discovered by United States immigration officials. Francœur's story unfolds in reverse through a mish-mash of

¹¹ See Pallister 259.

literary genres via the pages of the journal and the interspersed omniscient narrator's recounting of events in present tense.¹² Through Francœur's experiences — his reflections on the past and his inclusion in a political struggle between Ethiopia and the United States — the questions “Who am I?” and “Where do I belong?” permeate Francœur's consciousness. As Mary Jean Green explains, Godbout utilizes the American Dream,¹³ the pursuit of a new life, and the myth that everyone can start over in America against the backdrop of California to highlight the struggle that the people of Québec face in their attempt to regain consciousness of who they are and where they belong, both in the world and in their own province (925).

Denys Arcand's *Le déclin de l'empire américain* is a film that takes a long, hard look at upper-middle class society in Québec by following the lives of four women and five men for a weekend in the 1980s.¹⁴ The film is a montage of parallel experiences built of truth and lies, fidelity and infidelity, experience and naïveté, sex and love. It is a glimpse of the values of *Québécois* who are treading water, fighting the ripe tide of a society in a downward spiral, as Pierre Véronneau explains: “This confrontation between the disintegration of a world and its hopes and approaching death generated a profound melancholy, the strongest seen in

12 Pierre Hébert's analysis of prevalent themes in Québec literature after 1975 is reflective of the combination of genres that Godbout's novel encompasses. The expression of refused idealism, mythical realism, and the autobiographical use of the journal are all present in *Une histoire américaine*, and his analysis of the “dissociation” between the “narrateur” and the “narrataire” is equally present in the juxtaposition of Godbout's narrator who is different from the voice of Francœur in his journal. See Hébert, “Le roman québécois,” 900-902.

13 The use of “American Dream” is intended colloquially, and encompasses the ideals of equality, democracy and material wealth and prosperity that have long been associated with residence in the United States.

14 Arcand's film has been often analyzed in comparison with Lawrence Kasdan's 1983 film *The Big Chill*. This filmic comparison, while informative, does little to advance the theories at work in this paper. For an analysis of the *Le déclin* and *The Big Chill*, see Pallister, Van Den Hoven, and Testa. See also André Loiselle. “The Death of Québec History.” *Denys Arcand's Le déclin de l'empire américain and Les invasions barbares*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2008. 59-72.

Québec cinema...” (73). The lives of these nine individuals expose the social and interpersonal problems that plague the post-referendum society of Québec. Arcand chooses to focus his film on the individuals, which highlights the fact that the previously strong focus on the collective *québécois* society has disintegrated. As Denise Pérouse observes, this film is a representation of the decline of society — a reference both to the book written by Arcand's character Dominique, and the presentation of *québécois* society — in which the individual pursuit for happiness and the right to pursue pleasure supersedes the concerns of the collective, which was the primary concern of the society in trying to realize their independence. She argues further that the characters in the film push the limit of individual satisfaction bringing about unhappiness and stagnation instead of gratification. Janis Pallister draws a similar image of Québec society from this film. In her analysis, this is a film that captures the parallels between Québec, Canada, and the United States, and it works to create an image of decline that reaches beyond Québec's borders, in fact originating elsewhere in the continent, but that is being exemplified by the characters who belong to the intellectual elite. We can draw this conclusion even closer to the political ramifications that reverberated through the province after the referendum of the 1980s: this stagnation is the result of the lost spirit of nationalism, and the loss reverberates in the actions of the individuals left to pick up the pieces.

***Américanité*: Contextualizing geographical and cultural influences**

Outside the interpersonal context that is so strongly represented in both Godbout's novel and Arcand's film, the element of *américanité* is a prevalent aspect of the stories that further highlight the plight of the people of Québec to define themselves. To understand the role of *américanité* in these works, it is first necessary to solidify what is meant by this term.

In its simplest form, *américanité* can be understood as a geographical referent, indicating a connection between a given location — in this case, Québec — and North America and/or the United States (America) specifically. This relational construction is of particular significance for Québec because it is a province nestled within a giant Anglophone country (Canada) that also borders on an English-speaking superpower (United States), a relationship that Hilligje Van't Land explains by saying that the situation of a nation-state in relation to its border nation-states to determine its place and relevance, applies to Québec and the multiple ways that its people try to explore their identity. Similarly, C. D. Rolfe presents the idea that the *Québécois* have long experienced a certain “duality” in their cultural heritage, as former colonies of both France and Great Britain, which he argues makes them a society that is “heir to two traditions” (139). This society, then, is one that has always been in the midst of a geographically-centered struggle for definition, and the desire to incorporate or purge the society of the influences of Anglophone Canada, the United States and/or France has been a historical and/or fictional reality, not just a contemporary phenomenon. The evolution of the concept of *américanité* is one reason that its definition has become so nuanced and complex; it meant something different at different points in time.¹⁵ For Dupont, situating Québec within the parameters of *américanité* refers to the cultural pulse of the province in the 1980s that was “attuned as a whole or in parts, negatively or positively, to objects, signs, symbols, interpretations, and discourses of *l'américanité*; that is, things related to *l'Amérique* and/or *les États-Unis*” (27). He argues further that this consciousness of both North America and the United States became the dominant concept by which the *Québécois* evaluated their

15 Because the scope of this paper is primarily concerned with the post-referendum era of Québec's history, the prior conceptions of *américanité* do not specifically apply. However, the evolution of Québec's circular attraction and revulsion to America is interesting and worth consulting. See Dupont 29-40 for a detailed analysis spanning from 1837 French Canada through the Quiet Revolution and the 1970s, and Rolfe 142-144 for a general overview concerned primarily with the 20th Century.

individual and collective identity in the 1980s. At a time when Québec was trying to declare itself a nation in its own right, its people were forced to look at how they relate to the rest of the nations on their continent. This idea is strengthened by Dupont's situation of Québec as a province that is distinct from the others in Canada, by virtue of language (French) and the cultural influences present in the society, thus *américanité* in the contemporary understanding is a tool of distinction to place Québec in a category apart from the rest of Canada as well as from the United States. Using Dupont's rationale, this construction allows for the permeation of American culture and ideals to be reflected in *québécois* society, literature, and other forms of artistic expression, like Godbout's novel and Arcand's film. Both works have explicit references to America in their titles, and both concern the comparison of Québec with the United States either by implication (*Le déclin...*) or actual presence in the country (*Histoire*). *Américanité* is then a valid gauge to evaluate the construct of identity in each case.

Rolfe and Dupont also acknowledge that even contemporarily the concept of *américanité* encompasses the parallel notion of *américanisation*,¹⁶ which is distinct from the parent notion of *américanité* in that this term refers specifically to U. S. (American)¹⁷ influence — in short the pervasive encroachment of American culture via trade, media and politics among other influences. And unlike its parent concept whose connotation is often in flux, *américanisation* is generally understood to have a negative connotation, incorporating common stereotypes like materialism, consumerism, egoism, and superficial obsession with

16 Rolfe uses the terms “Americanness,” the English equivalent of “*américanité*” and also “Americanization” instead of “*américanisation*.” In this paper I will use Dupont's terms: *américanité* and *américanisation*.

17 Unless otherwise noted, the use of the word “American” will be understood to refer to the people, culture, or nation of the United States.

the self, which Joseph Thériault equates to the categorical adoption of American values, in particular by the youth of Québec. Within the context of *Une histoire américaine* and *Le déclin de l'empire américain*, the concept of *américanité* can be considered as it relates both to the continent of North America as well as to the United States, producing another dimension of its use and understanding.¹⁸ How then are all of these influences present in *Une histoire américaine* and *Le déclin de l'empire américain*?

The relevance of North America and the United States in Godbout's novel and Arcand's film is explicitly evident — even apart from their titles where we find the word *américain(e)* — though perhaps the connection to the United States is stronger in Godbout's novel, where the action takes place in California, making the juxtaposition impossible to miss. The inclusion of non-*québécois* elements, specifically in novels, that treat or redefine Québec society lends the work itself to the creation of a more complete group identity, in effect rounding out the relational aspects to provide a more complete image of society at the time. In the case of *Une histoire américaine*, it is necessary to consider the specific location of California, which René Labonté classifies as a place of (mis)adventures that are classically associated with the disillusion of American life and society that Godbout's novel clearly expresses. More specifically: “Ce roman [*Une histoire américaine*] exprime également la grande désillusion provoquée par le constat d'un certain contexte social américain: faillite du

18 It is worth noting here that Mary Jean Green espouses the use of the term “*étatsunien*” to refer to the cultural “interpenetration” that occurs between the United States and Québec and that is presented in literary works of the time period (925). This term is also used by Edouard Glissant in *Introduction à une poétique du divers* 111-113. Rolfe and Dupont do not make this linguistic distinction. Additionally, Jean-Pierre Lapointe's definition of the same term is more specific and contradictory to Green's. His use of “*étatsunien*,” like that of Glissant, indicates a political or geographical reference, and he uses “American” to indicate references to culture and nationality (75). In this, I follow Lapointe's usage. Thus for the duration of the paper, I will make use of the following terms: *américanité* as it relates to the overall continental interpretation, “American” to refer to the cultural overlap stemming from the U. S. and *américanisation* to discuss the negative expressions of the American influence. I will confine the use of “*étatsunien*” to specific geographical or political contexts.

rêve d'une société à saveur sociétale et présence d'un vide idéologique qui favorise l'hégémonie des pouvoirs politique et policier” (812).¹⁹ The setting of this novel places Francœur in a unique position as an observer of American culture, and indeed the first several pages of the novel are a kind of saturation in the Californian culture, employing English words and phrases and focusing on material and media images in his initial arrival. Jean-Pierre Lapointe conceives of Francœur's observations as the confirmation and depiction of the myth of American preoccupation with the superficial as well as the exposure of the flip-side of that myth, a darker, more realistic (albeit exaggerated) image of California : the police and the FBI, crime and imprisonment, and underground immigration operations. Lapointe argues that this attraction and repulsion to California experienced by Francœur is a symptom of his coming to terms with the reality and the disintegration of the myth that drew him to California in the first place.

Francœur's imprisonment, coupled with many of the experiences that preceded his arrest, is neither idyllic nor enviable, and this harsh realism places the glitzy allure California in a context that eventually allows Francœur to appreciate Québec in a new way. According to Labonté, it is through these observations and the unraveling of the Californian utopia — which encompass the presentation of *américanisation* — that Francœur is effectively engaged in two realms of Californian life that rarely intersect in one individual. I see this as evident in the varied scope of his experience that is rare to find in one person: He is a simultaneous participant in and representative of the academic elite at Berkeley as well as a violator of U. S. immigration law in transporting illegals across the state. He is falsely

19 Prior to the 1980s, California is also associated with the idea of the frontier and the American Dream, specifically related to the gold rush, which Labonté treats in great detail in this same article. See Labonté 803-806 for his analysis of the presentation of California in the early 1900s and its linkage to the pursuit of material wealth and status via the Gold Rush. See also Thériault, 138-139 for further exploration of the “mythe fondateur” as it relates to the United States and Québec.

accused of rape and arson, but he knowingly assumes a false identity to get involved in an undercover operation to defraud Immigration Naturalization Services into admitting Ethiopian immigrants into the United States. He is both the victim of assault by a car salesman and then later imprisoned for violent crimes he did not commit. The centrality of the multiple faces of California can be found in Labonté's assertion that California and Québec represent opposite poles of attraction in North America. This explains the strong pull Francœur feels to escape to California, as well as his discovery that the connection doesn't last, that what drew him to the state is not enough to keep him there. By situating the two locations as opposites with Francœur in motion between them, his final rejection of California and embrace of Québec is a valorization of homogeneity and nationality as elemental to self-understanding and belonging. In this same context, Francœur's journey from one pole to the other and back again indicates his own sense of indirection and confusion, as Mésavage illustrates, saying that Francœur represents the rest of his society, blindly grasping for the path they need.

Whereas Godbout's novel encapsulates both the *américanisation* and the American as two sides of the same character or location, Thériault argues that Arcand's film is a less overtly pessimistic vision of American influence, tending to represent the negative influence of American culture, *américanisation*, almost exclusively. Adrian Van Den Hoven observes that the similarities between the characters presented in the film are virtually indistinguishable from Americans in their pursuit of individual gratification and their material wealth. He sees the setting of the film — country houses in the suburbs of Montréal, a sports complex and the University of Montréal — as the images of a society that has “arrived” (148-149). Similarly, he traces the material influences of American culture

throughout the film: Rémy seeks out sleeping pills to avoid talking with his wife about his infidelity, and Pierre's girlfriend uses the birth control pill.

On a deeper level, the thesis of this film presents the destruction of Québécois society that is adhering to American values that are detailed by Dominique as the beginning of the film displays in the interview about her book, *Variance de l'idée du bonheur*. Dominique's arguments create the framework for the presentation of *américanisation* in this film, and the interactions and conversations that compose the majority of the film are an illustration of her points. She enumerates the “signs of the decline” that relate specifically to the elite — the class to which she and her fellow professors all belong — late in the film, and these signs emphasize that the decline is taking place in Québec :

Les signes du déclin de l'empire sont partout. La population qui méprise ses propres institutions. La baisse de taux de natalité. Le refus des hommes de servir dans l'armée. La dette nationale devenue incontrôlable. La diminution constante des heures du travail. L'envahissement des fonctionnaires. La dégénérescence des élites ... Ce que nous vivons, c'est un processus général d'effritement de toute l'existence. (*Déclin* 143)

Dominique's presentation of the decline at this point in the film is a voiceover paired with a series of still scenes of nature, which provides a visual image of the erasure of society that she describes by detaching the viewer from the people who have been demonstrating this decline up until this point. Her description illustrates the overarching *américanité* that gives Québec a close-up shot of the declining empire of the United States, while simultaneously implicating her own society as participants and victims of the self-same decline, due to their inextricable incorporation of American culture. Bart Testa argues that the elite class of Québec is exemplified by this group of historians who exhibit a loss of purposeful connection to society; the collective *québécois* consciousness is missing, and so their interactions have degenerated into pursuit of sex, lies, and individual gratification. Their behavior is an

outright rejection of the circumstances which afford them their elite status as well as their obligations as members of the elite to do something to correct it, which is another way that the decline that Dominique discusses provides evidence of *américanisation*: the negative connotation of the relationship to and emulation of United States. As Pallister keenly observes, this is a group of intellectuals — emblematic of the larger academic elite within the province — who are ignoring their “proper” jobs: to provide societal structure through guidance and leadership. In the absence of their action, the rich, the wealth-obsessed, and the politicians are running the show; thus with nothing of value left to contribute, Pallister asserts: “The intellectual must play games” (261). The implications and presentations of *américanité* are not isolated in their application. In looking at other identity constructs that exist in Jacques Godbout's novel and Denys Arcand's film, *américanité* and its varying associated elements will be brought to light and addressed in kind.

The crippling *crise*: The emergence of self consciousness

One of the most significant aspects of both the film and the novel is the powerful element of crisis that several characters experience, which points to a total loss of identity and loss of self, making the characters themselves a metaphor for the crisis of *Québécois* identity. In Godbout's novel, Francœur's *crise* is evident from the first few pages because his journey to California in and of itself is a response to his inability to feel like he belonged in Québec. Losing faith in Québec, he turned to the mythic land that is synonymous with the production and proliferation of happiness: California. Lapointe argues that this idyllic conception of American society reflects the dreams and fears of Francœur, who is emblematic of the rest of Québec's society. Francœur, like so many, had given himself up to the cause of the referendum; his entire sense of self and worth were tied to the attempt to

provide independence to the province of Québec:

J'avais embrassé la cause du peuple comme s'il était agi d'une vaste campagne de promotion publicitaire. Les clients ne répondaient plus. Pendant ces mois la terre entière s'était passionnée pour l'idée d'indépendance ... Il n'y avait une seule sujet de discussion. Mais on ne peut pas passer sa vie en érection nationaliste, vivre des promesses, de futurs qui n'arrivent jamais. (Godbout 17)

The loss of the referendum, the knowledge that everything they were working toward would never be realized was crushing. This passage provides a critique of *québécoisité* — that is, of what it means to be a member of Québec society — that is tinged with irony in its specific reference to the impact of the referendum. Francœur tries to equate the vast political movement that was engineered and brought into the collective societal consciousness over several decades with a public relations campaign, which is emblematic of American influence via the power of the media in shaping public opinion/policy. His beloved nationalist movement is then swiftly reduced to a physical response to sexual stimulation, casting the movement as involuntary, a mere reaction to stimulus: the erection of an aroused male. In lamenting the seduction of his province by the stimulating notion of independence, Francœur reduces their significance by characterizing them in a superficial way that is indicative of his frustration at the result and of the subsequent depression he feels because he trivializes what he put so much effort into.

These sentiments are further embodied by his actions in the aftermath of the vote: Francœur wandered through his life, ambling from job to job, drinking away his meager earnings, slipping farther from meaningful existence. Francœur had to move, had to leave Québec, to escape from the weight of the failure and depression. Bound for California, Francœur left in search of happiness and fulfillment away from the depressing state of a people without a nation, as Ruth Mésavage explains: “Comme Dante, dans son aventure

intellectuelle et spirituelle; Francœur représente l'humanité perdue au milieu du chemin de la vie, au milieu de la forêt, tiraillée entre le public et le privé, entre le collectif et le personnel” (52). Godbout elicits a sensation of irony later on in the novel as it becomes clear that the emptiness of his life has followed him to California, that his attempt to start over and concentrate on finding happiness was meaningless because he never dealt with his past or his history. Francœur had to travel across a continent to discover that the avoidance of his past is the source of his powerlessness; in effect, California draws attention to his failures more than Québec ever did. In the place most celebrated for the realization of dreams and the renewal of possibility, where he is saturated with the *étatsunien*, he comes to grips with the value of his own “nationality,” which is tempered by his inability to access his dream of *bonheur* and belonging outside Québec. This conclusion works in concert with Labonté’s observation that Francœur cannot escape the disenchantment he feels, nor can he rid himself of the internal void that is tied to his past political experiences, which is how he eventually determines the worth of Québec. In effect, Francœur's personal *crise* is emblematic of the overall *crise* that Québec was suffering in the post-referendum climate. By displacing a *Québécois* who is unable to cope with the societal decline of the failed nationalist movement, to California where he is similarly disenchanted, the personal and *québécois* identity converge. Francœur's disillusion in California is the only way (fueled by the requirement of U. S. immigration officials) that he can realize his true identity on a personal and “national” level: as a *Québécois*.

As Mésavage argues, Francœur is only able to come to terms with this newfound self-awareness and re-appropriation of his birthplace in the seclusion of prison, when he is forced to reflect and write about his Californian adventure. It is only in recollecting the past that he

is able to fully understand and appreciate his present and future. More specifically, the creation of his written defense brings to light the *crise* that is intensified in his solitude. His crisis of identity is profound enough to create an imagined, future conversation with his estranged wife in which she is responsible for opening his eyes to the reality of his situation. He imagines she says: “Le monde, la culture, l'économie évoluent. Toi, tu ne changes pas. Tu es toujours le même boy-scout à la recherche d'une cause, d'un sens historique, d'un chef clairvoyant, d'une générosité planétaire!” (Godbout 140-141). Even hundreds of miles away, Francœur is still tied to his country, still tied to the need for a cause (though often in a mythic way), and still tied to everything he thought he needed to escape from in his life. Van't Land observes that it is only through the process of writing that Francœur is able to realize that his true identity is continentally American, but it is only relevant via Québec: the ultimate expression of *américanité*.

Similarly, several of the women in Arcand's film suffer a *crise* that results in total re-evaluation of self-worth and belonging, though Arcand's characters are not overtly engaged in the politics of the referendum like Francœur, making their crises symbolic of *québécoisité* as opposed to outspoken references. The character of Louise suffers the greatest blow when communicating her non-academic opinion in response to Dominique's assertion that the decline of the elites — their society — is inevitable by saying:

Bien moi, je suis pas d'accord. Puis je suis sûre qu'il y a des savants qui pourraient prouver exactement le contraire ... Le mieux qu'on peut faire, c'est d'essayer d'être heureux. ... Et puis ceux qui y arrivaient pas inventaient des histoires pour justifier leurs malheurs. Tu l'as dit toi-même tantôt. Non. Moi je pense que, si toi tu vis toute seule, que t'as sacrifié ta vie à ta carrière, c'est pas une raison pour dire que si on est lucides, il faut être déprimés. (Arcand 145)

Fueled by the commentary, Dominique waspishly reveals the infidelity of Rémy, Louise's

husband, specifically that he has slept with her.²⁰ Bart Testa rightly categorizes this blow to Louise as “satisfying” because she represents the opposition to — and subsequent mistrust and misunderstanding of — the academic elite which comprise almost all the rest of the characters (186). And indeed, Louise is the embodiment of everything that Dominique is fighting against as a female professor trying to make a name for herself and be taken seriously. Throughout the film we learn that Louise's whole self-concept is tied to her marriage and her role as a housewife and mother. Pérusse describes her as “faithful, naïve, and romantic,” surrounded by a world of academia, a world to which she doesn't belong or understand (75).

Louise finds pride and accomplishment in her 15-year marriage, blissfully unaware that Rémy does not hold it in the same reverent esteem as she does. This intensifies the irony of the fact that she and Rémy were the only two of the eight friends to have a lasting marital relationship, though Pérusse would argue that this only due to a mutual misunderstanding of each other that lends the image of stability, which is quickly undermined by Rémy's habitual and unapologetic infidelity. Louise thinks she understands the world better than the academics because she is not party to their pessimism. When in fact, her naiveté and her willful misinterpretation of her own marriage renders her unable to understand what Dominique's book is trying to express. Louise is inhibited by her prudish adherence to the fantasy of the life she lives, and the discovery that Rémy has slept with many women over the course of their marriage, including his colleagues, Diane and Dominique, invalidates everything that she thought was of value in her life.

20 The scope of Rémy's infidelity is not entirely revealed at this point in the film, but Louise's *crise* is deepened further later on with the unintended discovery that Rémy has slept with all the women in the history department, including Diane, another of the friends at the country house that weekend, as well as Louise's own sister. See Arcand 157-158 for full conversation.

The collapse of the only traditional family presented in the film is not unexpected, thanks to the editing of the film that incorporates revealing flashbacks into the present-tense dialogue to expand on the information being provided by the speaker. According to Testa, these flashbacks serve to illustrate the dialogue and show the viewer what many of the characters know only for themselves and would prefer that the others not know, thereby exposing the characters and often contradicting the veracity of what they say. This technique is used with particular success in revealing Rémy's trysts. It is through these flashbacks that the viewer is able to determine early on just how wholly selfish Rémy is and how vastly wrong Louise is about their marriage. Testa expands on this idea, saying : “In each instance of flashback and instance of montage, the ironization of the character signifies that we know what is spoken by the narration, above and beyond what anyone inside the narrative knows except for those whose past it is” (197). This is further exploited by Pérusse in looking at Louise's story about the “swinger” party she and Rémy attended with a group of other married professionals, where couples exchanged partners and engaged in sexual acts. Louise says she only had sex with another man at the party to fortify her marriage and later reveals her meaningless infatuation with her tennis coach, in comparison to Rémy's boasts that his dishonesty is the foundation of his martial bliss.²¹ This *crise* is not politically motivated, but it evokes the overall decline of *québécois* society by illustrating the demise of the family and the solidarity of marriage. It is situations like this that contribute to the signs that Dominique

21 It should be noted that Testa and Pérusse are at odds in their analysis of the centrality of Rémy and Louise's relationship to the film. Pérusse's analysis focuses on Rémy and Louise, saying that the revelation of Rémy's infidelity destroys the concept of the couple entirely, while Testa's analysis rejects this notion as overly dramatic. In this, I defer to Testa, whose hypothesis about the future of the two I find enlightening and faithful to the image created by Arcand : “It is much more probable that after an interval of acting the hurt wife as suggested by her descent down the stairs to breakfast at the end, Louise will forgive Rémy, who will, just as probably, continue his sexual adventures after resolving to keep them outside the university history department” (196).

enumerates just before Louise's crisis takes place: hedonism is replacing family values, and it is the people who have the power to engage in the system (the elite) who are responsible for this reality yet are doing nothing about it.

Arcand also shows the viewer another kind of *crise* that usurps the identity of the sufferer, in the character of Diane; her *crise* is one of stagnation. In the scene in which all eight are eating dinner around the table, talk shifts to university and accomplishments. Diane expresses frustration at the state of her professional life; she is defined by her station as a lecturer, without hope of becoming a professor. She's stuck in a rut and must work additional jobs to send her children to school. In her effort to express herself she becomes almost hysterical, and it is clear that she is desperate to find solace and satisfaction. Diane has no concrete identity because she is not satisfied with where her life is going — the impossibility of improving her situation leaves her hopeless and without confidence. According to Pérouse, this hopelessness is akin to the situation of many college graduates in Québec. Despite her intelligence and drive, she has no power in the university system, and she looks at Pierre and Rémy with longing and jealousy for what they have — and what they don't have to do:

Mais rappelle-toi quand on était étudiants, moi j'étais aussi intelligente que tous vous autres ... Sauf qu'après ma licence je suis tombée en amour, comme une vraie femme. Alors, pendant que toi t'étais à Berkeley et Pierre à Princeton ... moi, je suis allée me renfermer à la campagne parce que Roger, mon beau Roger, vivait son retour à la terre. ... Alors résultat: aujourd'hui je peux pas être autre chose que chargée de cours au cinquième de votre salaire, sans sécurité d'emploi. (Arcand 113-114)

Unable to find a stronghold in her career, Diane turns to sex to fill the void, to try to feel as though she has some power left in her life. Pérouse observes that she fulfills the prototype for a female masochist, who derives pleasure from being victimized. Diane is aware of this facet of herself and has become addicted to exploiting it, as she explains her sadomasochistic

tendencies to Dominique: “Tu vois, c'est moi qui veux toujours aller de plus en plus loin. C'est moi qui contrôle. J'ai jamais eu autant de pouvoir. Le pouvoir de la victime, tu peux pas savoir ce que c'est; c'est effrayant” (Arcand 32). Her submission in sex reflects the lack of control she exhibits in the rest of her life; she needs a form of humiliation that she can regulate. In her attempt to deal with her resentment and frustration, she escapes through sex and turns her perpetually victimized existence into something powerful.

Decaying matrimonial relevance and the flourishing egoist

In addition to the *crise* of the individual that is apparent in both of these works, both Godbout and Arcand deliver a vision of marriage that is less than perfect and accurately reflects the pain and uncertainty of post-referendum society. The marriages that Godbout and Arcand present in these works are falling apart; the husbands and wives are strangers held together only by the institution, much like the connection to the province felt by *québécois* society when the dream of nationalism died : They were bound to Québec by living there, but no longer felt like they belonged. This vision of marriage is also indicative of societal changes as a result of the *Révolution Tranquille* where many people opted not to get married as a mark of protest against tradition, specifically the Catholic Church. The rejection of the institution of marriage is also tied to the difficulties of divorce, and the unequal status of women compared to men in a legally dissolved marriage. Instead of a union that betters the two individuals, marriage in the context of *Une histoire américaine* and *Le déclin de l'empire américain* is a struggle and a hardship, and in both cases it is not prized above other circumstances — such as the desire to feel good or to forget.

In *Une histoire américaine*, Gregory Francœur's wife Suzanne was his guide, his support. She supported him and provided him with strength and peace of mind. But the

results of the referendum and Francœur's subsequent depressive and self-deprecating personality shift were too much for her: “Mais elle ne pouvait plus lui mentir: depuis sa démission politique, Gregory n'avait rien entreprise de valable. Dépressif, il était contagieux. L'air qu'il expirait était chargé de poussières toxiques. Sa salive devenait acide” (Godbout 28). This excerpt paints a painful metaphor, likening the post-referendum depression that Francœur suffered to a contagious disease — he spread his dissatisfaction and malaise by simply breathing, poisoning the air and the world around him. Francœur is not unaware of the impact of the referendum on his marriage, reflecting in his journal that it was the demise of many marriages, not just his own: “Il devient évident que nous ne mettrions jamais l'indépendance au propre. ... Mais je n'étais pas une exception : de nombreux couples, après ce referendum, se sont aussi séparés parce qu'ils n'avaient plus rien à faire ensemble” (18). The stress of the disintegration of nationalist hopes manifested itself as the subsequent disintegration of the marriage. He writes in his journal that his own marriage died from the weight of the boredom that resided in the wake of the quest for progression, that monogamy has its limitations in a time and place where everyone is forced to hope for what will never be.

This brutally honest self-examination illustrates the way in which Francœur's identity is tied to the fate of Québec, which, like Francœur now, is without direction and consequently resigned to turmoil. Francœur's whole life was tied up in the effort to realize the nationalist agenda, as Mésavage observes: “Il fuit son pays pour le mythe californien, se sépare de sa femme, car il n'arrive pas à franchir la frontière entre le rêve et la réalité, entre l'adolescence et la maturité” (51). I would add that he was also unable to separate his personal life from nationalist politics, and Francœur admits to the same, saying, “La frontière

entre notre aventure collective et ma vie personnelle a toujours été aussi floue qu'un jour de brume” (Godbout 17). It is this unbreakable fusion even in the face of defeat that ultimately resulted in the dissolution of his marriage.

Yet at the same time, even with that admission, he has no idea that he is as lost as he is, which becomes evident when he tries to call Suzanne shortly after his arrival only to discover that she has changed her phone number. His sense of betrayal is palpable; it is clear that he cannot figure out why this happened: “Ce geste après vingt-cinq ans de vie commune, lui apparut inacceptable. Cruel. Comme si on lui arrachait soudain la corde ombilicale. ... 'Mais je suis son mari!’” (Godbout 55). With one small action, Suzanne has severed ties with Francœur, effectively banishing him from connection to Québec and plunging him into unparalleled alienation — which is later trumped only by his imprisonment. This is the first instance where Francœur feels truly without an identity, hysterically screaming to the operator to express his justification for calling. Here it is clear that Suzanne, too, is searching for a way to retrieve her own proper identity by trying to distance herself from Gregory who had been dragging her down with his inability to direct his own life. Perhaps rightly so, as Gregory asserts only a paragraph later that none of the difficulties that befell him in California would have taken place if she had been there: “Ce n'est pas seulement une évidence physique; sans elle, je n'ai jamais pu y clair voir” (55).

Like Francœur, Arcand's Louise is engulfed in her marriage, and their situations are in fact very parallel, though she is a wife and he is a husband. Just as Francœur needs Suzanne more than she needs him, Louise needs Rémy more than he needs her. This is evidenced by the fact that Rémy has been sleeping with other women for the duration of their marriage. Louise's loss of herself stems directly from the dissolution of her marriage, thus it is clear

that her self-destruction comes from an inability to conceive of herself without Rémy. She had thought they were happy — talked about the success of their marriage to Diane and Dominique, even noting that there was a sense of solidarity in the routine of their time together, of their sex together. But she also confided in them that she only ever experienced an orgasm with Rémy. What’s more, her ability to achieve orgasm was how she provided pleasure to her husband, not to herself: “Mais non [she did not orgasm with another man]. C'est un homme qui me connaissait pas. Et puis je suis pas comme toi, moi, Diane, je faisais ça surtout pour faire plaisir à Rémy” (Arcand 53). Louise’s identity is so entirely consumed by her position as a wife that even sexual pleasure cannot exist uniquely for her. Her personal orgasm is tied to the pleasure of her husband, not herself. She is the sole example of the group who is not actively engaged in the pursuit of personal pleasure. Her gratification is reserved for her marriage, which puts her at odds with everyone else in the film, Rémy most significantly.

Clearly, Rémy has different opinions about fidelity. He spends the afternoon with his friends reminiscing about all of his conquests: “Moi, j'ai remarqué une chose: je baise toujours mieux ma femme après l'avoir trompée. ... C'est physique. C'est la comparaison qui m'excite” (Arcand 107). His sense of self is wrapped up in extramarital encounters, and so his identity is tied not to one woman, but to as many women as he can get:

Moi, il me semble que, pour être heureux, il me faudrait quatre femmes. ... Je suis parfaitement heureux avec Louise, mais je prendrais en plus un écrivain genre Susan Sontag, une sauteuse en hauteur de l'équipe olympique, et une super cochonne pour faire l'animation de groupe. Avec ça, je serais probablement fidèle! (Arcand 107-108).²²

22 The significance of Rémy's ideal women only reinforces his sexual psychosis. Susan Sontag was a college-educated, American writer (still alive in 1986 when his reference would have been made) whose work was the basis for *Bull Durham*, a book about sexual know-how. She was also known to be bisexual. The inclusion of Susan Sontag among his fantasy women speaks to his desire for as many women as possible, but also to his desire for sexual domination by an experienced woman who can also provide intellectual

Sex is his escape from the *ennui* that has encompassed his life; and he, like all the characters except for his wife, can only find sexual satisfaction extramaritally. (Though for the other characters, it is not an embrace of adultery, it is about experiencing sex outside the confines of marriage entirely.) Pérusse expands this idea, saying, “The pursuit of sexual gratification becomes a challenge to any form of affectionate engagement ... The different characters live under a new régime of conviviality, where commitment meets with reproof” (86).

Subsequently, Rémy, like fellow historian Pierre, no longer feels it is necessary to strive for professional greatness or gratification — and he doesn't have to. He has tenure, lots of money, a wife, kids, a chalet on a lake that he visits on the weekend. There is nothing left to strive for, and he fills that void with sex.

Testa argues that it is in this *ennui* that Rémy and the other characters in Arcand's film embody the collective Québec society as the benefactors of the *Révolution Tranquille*, the veritable ruling class, but their preoccupation with sex depletes their status. Their shift toward the personal and away from the collective — in this case the more serious problems facing their province — is emblematic of the widespread dissociation from politics and national issues following the failed referendum and is another indication of a society in decline. Interestingly, the film's introductory commentary provides the framework for the subsequent elements of the film dealing with Rémy and his conception of marriage. Pallister observes that in her interview with Diane, Dominique makes the assertion that marriage is insignificant in the personal happiness and satisfaction of the married individuals²³ — which

stimulation. Additionally, his desire for an Olympic high jumper and a heavy woman who can keep the conversation amusing exemplify misogynistic stereotypes, and reincorporate Rémy's need to find fulfillment through sex.

23 See Arcand 13.

is clearly represented by Rémy as well as his wife Louise.

Retreat and isolation: The new conception of family and relationships

Godbout's novel does not focus on sex as a source of identity, as does Arcand's film. In the presentation of relationships, Godbout instead focuses on expectations and even stereotypes to illustrate the inner isolation and loss of self that Francœur is feeling, in particular between Francœur and Terounech — the Ethiopian princess whose immigration was provided by Allen Hunger and the humanitarian aid group that entrapped Francœur. In their first meeting at the airport, the conversation begins with assumptions about origin and nationality based on names: Terounech's assumption that he must not be American with the last name Francœur.²⁴ When he tells her he is from Montréal, her response is to ask if he is Canadian, to which he replies: “Si vous voulez” (Godbout 130). It is at this point that the strong link between nationality and identity is solidified. Where it is hinted at in other places of the novel, here it is unmistakable. Terounech is equating living in a Canadian province to Canadian nationality, which outside of Québec is a convenient and valid leap to make. However, Québec is a province which failed in trying to proclaim its independence, and so automatically associating Québec with Canadian nationality is an unwelcome reality, in particular for Francœur who lost so much in the failure of the referendum.²⁵ For Francœur,

24 Here I offer my personal interpretation of the significance of the name Godbout chose for his main character. The name is effectively bilingual: Gregory Francœur. The first name clearly an English name, and the surname blatantly French. His name, then, is literally English-French, a perfect symbol of his French-Canadian heritage. Francœur does not identify with the Anglophone part of him, and indeed throughout the novel he is referred to by his French surname and not his Anglophone first name. This contributes symbolically to his feeling of misplacement and confusion while reinforcing his constant link with Québec, the representative of his French name. Additionally, I would add that the combination of words that are found in his last name “franc” and “coeur” are illustrative of his personality and character: his sentimentality, raw emotion, and naïveté.

25 It is interesting to consider Louis Dupont's writing on contemporary *américanité* in this context. It is his position that the evolution of American influence in the 1980s brought about a closer association with the

his ties to the English-speaking Canadians is marked with bitterness and disdain, as is clear in his recollection of his first political encounter as a child, when the English became his enemies:

Ils étaient *nos* ennemis parce qu'ils parlaient la langue du maître. Une vieille histoire de conquête. Ce midi-là, un gang d'adolescents m'a attrapé et traîné dans une ruelle pour me faire un mauvais sort. J'ai eu très peur et je me suis mis à crier dans leur langue qu'ils se trompaient de victime. J'avais un accent impeccable. Ils m'ont relâché. ... Je ne leur ai jamais pardonné de me forcer à mentir pour sauver ma peau. C'était comme si je trahissais les miens. (Godbout 158)

This recollection comes late in the novel, and it is the first time we see Francœur openly admit that his sense of pride and worth are connected to his birthplace, to Québec. He remembers with an outpouring of anger, still fresh decades later, that to save himself from being beaten he had to disavow his heritage: crying out to his attackers that they'd picked the wrong victim, that he wasn't French-Canadian. This isolated event communicates the impact of that denial — perhaps explaining his selfless dedication to the nationalist cause as an attempt to erase the shame of denying Québec as a child. Francœur cannot bear to be associated with Anglophone Canada in the face of that shame, and so his identity can only be considered *québécois*, and is subsequently linked to the past.

Terounech is haunted by her ties to Ethiopia as well; her very presence in the United States is the result of her desire to escape her homeland. She hopes to be able to shift her focus from despair, civil war, and misery, to starting fresh in the United States; she wants desperately to restart her life, to find something new she can cling to, her own American Dream. And though Francœur has been to her country and knows much about the culture and the way of life, he has not lived life there as she has. Francœur maintains an exotic image of

United States and a shift away from Anglophone Canada because the country had failed to fully incorporate a separate Québec identity without marginalizing the people in the process. See 42-43.

Africa; his memories are the result of a trip he took with his wife. They were happy then, and his sense of nostalgia tinged with sweetness is the frame in which he perceives the Africa that Terounech calls home. Francœur assumes that his transient, touristic experience of many years ago can be paralleled with the current war-torn experience in Ethiopia. Terounech is quick to adjust his perspective: “Vous ne saurez *jamais* vous glisser dans ma peau. Vous avez vos cartes postales, j’ai mes cauchemars” (Godbout 134). She feels keenly that the Africa of his “cartes postales” does not exist, and that *her* Africa is a much more difficult and painful memory to retain. She cannot look back and remember her country without the stain of war and violence. And so the two of them are united, but lost. Both Terounech and Francœur have left their homeland to try to start over and find happiness in the United States, a physical rejection of their birth cultures and nations to embrace American ones, reflecting a very literal adherence to *américanité*. This relocation is an attempt to re-appropriate national belonging by leaving their homelands to begin anew in California, which Mésavage describes as “expatrier en Californie” (53).

As Testa puts it, *Le déclin de l'empire américain* is a film that emphasizes the difference in the upper middle class male and female perception of life and their reaction to it. Personal happiness has replaced any political, cultural, or societal awareness or concern for these characters. Testa expands on this idea saying that the resulting *ennui* of these characters is symptomatic of their lack of interest in the collective society; Arcand communicates his pessimism through his characters, blaming their actions on their “hedonistic escape,” in essence punishing them for their repeated bad behavior through downward spiral of depression and boredom (194).²⁶ But amid the sexual perversion and

26 The pessimistic tone of the film is reflective of Arcand's personal pessimism regarding the direction of

multitude of relationships, the element of love in relationships is treated with disdain and an unmistakable lack of importance, which is indicative of societal trends in the 1980s even outside of Québec. In fact, the concept of love is completely divorced from that of sex, and becomes obsolete as sex is the source of pleasure, and love is a weight that only bogs down and complicates the situation. This is most evident in the character of Pierre and his relationship with the *enfantine* Danielle, who is a history student. Following his divorce, he has chosen to embrace a hedonistic lifestyle and is committed entirely to no one, changing relationships every two years or so: “Après deux ans, les compromis commencent” (Arcand 36). Danielle, on the other hand, says she loves him, but he cannot even repeat the words to her on the phone. Danielle even wants him to father a child with her, but Pierre is uninterested in fatherhood, convinced he would not be suited for that role.²⁷ Pierre sums up his existence quite simply: “Tout ce qui me reste c'est le sexe, ou l'amour. On fait jamais vraiment la différence. Au fond, je sais pas ce qui me reste. C'est pour ça que le vice vient avec l'âge” (62). His supreme indifference and recognition of his personal stagnation and loss of purpose is palpable, providing the perfect personification of *ennui*.

Love takes on various contexts depending on the character in Arcand's film. Love has no value to Dominique. In fact, she is unable to experience love because she is blinded by her condition: her anger and unhappiness, both of which are linked to the fact that her entire existence is contained in university life, including her sense of self-worth. Peter Harcourt argues that Dominique's thesis about the valorization of instant gratification is reflective of

Québec politics. In his interview with André Loiselle, he indicates that his understanding of the political history of Québec has been stagnant since Laurier was the first Prime Minister in 1896, saying, “I do not foresee any major evolution for the next 25 years.” See Arcand, “I only know where I come from, not where I am going,” 153.

27 Pierre: “Les intellectuels font rarement de très bons parents. Regard les enfants de Diane, ceux de Rémy, c'est un désastre. Puis je suis trop égoïste aussi” (Arcand 152).

her inability to have a lasting relationship, and that she proves her own thesis by bedding the Alain, the young graduate student. Her behavior is perpetuating the circumstances that frustrate her, and so she is emblematic of the decline she discusses in her book. Rémy, on the other hand, has blended his meager conception of love with lies, so that nearly nothing about his relationship with his wife is based on truth: “Le mensonge est la base de la vie amoureuse, comme c'est le ciment de la vie sociale” (Arcand 33). With this mindset, Rémy is always in the process of negating his own identity; it is as if lying defines his life and his identity to the extent that there is nothing true about anything he says, does, or feels. He is an extreme image of the implications of a singular focus on instant gratification, a cautionary tale that forces the viewer to question whether such selfishness is worth a gratification that is incomplete, however instantaneous. There are no consequences that change his behavior — even when Louise is finally told the scope of his infidelity, his response is to take sleeping pills so he won't have to talk to her about it. He has no remorse, nothing to apologize for. Perhaps the core of Rémy's actions is best illustrated when he says that his love for his wife exists even when he cheats on her: “Je sais très bien que c'est la personne avec qui je suis le mieux au monde” (Arcand 54).

Though much of its subject matter is rooted in sex, *Le déclin de l'empire américain* should not be viewed only as a varied response to the libido. Pallister argues that focusing only on the sex undermines the profound images of society these characters provide. This viewpoint is extended by Pérusse who goes so far as to suggest that the comportment of the characters in Arcand's film is evidence of overwhelming self-obsession:

All the characters exhibit in their own way the traits generally associated with pathological narcissism: fear of dependence on others; a feeling of inner emptiness; an incredible repressed rage; having pseudo-revelations about oneself; the calculated seduction of others; nervous jokes made at their own

expense; and irony used to dismiss uncomfortable thoughts. (84)

And indeed, there are examples to be found of the symptoms that Pérusse enumerates. Inner emptiness is best encapsulated by Dominique and Diane, who are both wholly unsatisfied in their careers and in love; Dominique turns to the inevitable loneliness of sex with married men to fill her bed since she cannot experience fulfillment any other way, and Diane pursues violent and demeaning sexual behaviors to try to achieve any feeling other than numbness. Dominique also exhibits a “repressed rage,” which we hear her discuss with Alain, admitting that lashing out at Louise was involuntary: “Ça m'a échappé. ... Je voulais la planter” (Arcand 155). Rémy provides the viewer with the most extreme example of calculated seduction, choosing to spread his seed with as many women as possible, and is unlikely to stop now that his wife is aware of his many trysts (as was hypothesized by Testa earlier in the paper). There is no reciprocation of emotion as both parties are self-consumed, and indeed this narcissism is yet another concrete representation of the decline that has befallen the society to which these characters belong.

Une histoire américaine also avoids the question of love throughout most of the novel, in the context of Suzanne and Gregory in particular. It's clear that he loves her, but the sentiment manifests itself as a need, and it seems to have more to do with missing her than with being married to her. Interestingly enough, the explicit depiction of love is between Terounech and Francœur, during their journey into the wilds of California. Terounech confesses her love for Gregory, to which his reply is cynical: “Il ne faut pas confondre l'amour et la solidarité naturelle des victimes!” (Godbout 154). Francœur is wary of the growing sentiment between them, and rushes to classify it as a symptom of their shared alienation. Despite his protestations, it is clear as the conversation continues that their

connection exists because they represent for each other what they each need the most. Terounech says she loves Francœur because he understands her past and her future; in essence, he can appreciate her need to escape as well as her need to start over because he's doing the same thing. He wants to protect her, to help her to find the happiness that he has been unable to find in California. His response indicates that his attraction to Terounech is rooted in her novelty, her lack of association with all the things he is trying to outrun — his failures, his memories, and his confusion about his identity, which he communicates with the simple phrase: “Pour moi tu es le présent...” (154). Francœur can love Terounech because she has nothing to do with his past, nothing to do with why he left Québec. Just as he attached part of his identity to Suzanne — and subsequently lost it when they were separated by his *crise* and then the distance between Québec and California — he is able to reinvent that piece of himself with Terounech. Being with her and feeling the fulfillment of the present with her, works to revive the pieces of his identity and self-worth that had been tied to Suzanne. The link between them is strong enough for Francœur to want to protect her ability to stay in the United States as the circumstances surrounding his arrest and detainment become clearer.

In the final pages of the novel, Terounech is told of Francœur's arrest and imprisonment and subsequently indicates that she is prepared to give up her valid citizenship in the United States to help prove Francœur's innocence. This offer leads, according to Mésavage, to the final realization of his attachment to and love for Québec, and to the end of the American Dream. The hoped-for reunion with Terounech will not take place in the United States, but in Québec: This manifestation of hope is implicit in the use of future tense, communicating a projection that was not possible prior to this point. Francœur acknowledges the role that “la nation la plus riche du monde” — the United States — played in bringing he

and Terounech together, but also that they never belonged there, and they can in Québec. The things he wishes to offer to Terounech are typical representations of Québec: the harsh winters, the forest, the instability of the region. The appearance of love in Francœur's life, away from the stress of politics and the problems of his past, allows him to reconnect with how Québec is a part of him, and he can embrace his affinity for and pride in his country and in himself:

Je devrai lui expliquer que nous ne ferons jamais partie, ni elle ni moi, destroupes de la nation la plus riche du monde. Cherche-t-elle une terre promise? Je lui offrirai l'hiver, le temps gris, la gêne, l'instabilité, la forêt, je lui demanderai de m'épouser, Suzanne et Marlot seront les témoins, Janvier sculptera un gâteau, nous irons en voyage de noces saluer mes parents et visiter la Provence. (Godbout 178)

Mésavage says that the reflective experience of finishing the writing of his journal²⁸ (which is also the end of the novel itself) allows Francœur to summon the motivation and energy to pursue a reconfiguration of his own identity in concert with his birthplace, instead of in opposition to it: "... Gregory Francœur retrouve non seulement des mots pour évoquer une révolution planétaire, mais aussi une nouvelle énergie vitale qui désigne son évolution personnelle" (57).

***Québécoisité*: The summation that does not equal a resolution**

Jacques Godbout's novel *Une histoire américaine* and Denys Arcand's film *Le déclin de l'empire américain* allow for a deeper and more refined look at Québec society both from inside the province and across the southern border, by examining multiple facets of the same

28 The significance of Francœur's journal within the novel is that the novel itself becomes a part of Francœur's self-discovery, in particular the discovery of where he comes from and his personal identity. The journal is working like a bildungsroman, but instead of progressing in a conventional manner, it is at the end of the novel that Francœur discovers his identity and the culture of his origins. The incorporation of his personal self-reflection within the presentation of events that make up the plot of Francœur's experience makes the writing and retelling a tool for determining identity and belonging.

question, in this case, multiple characters and scenarios that represent the same group of people — the *Québécois*. Godbout's *Francœur* brings to light the political struggle and an extreme view of escapism that extricates him from Québec entirely, but when placed in an American context and the *étatsunien* legal system, he is able to realize his personal stake in Québec outweighs the losses of the referendum. In Arcand's film, the relation between women and men allegorize the profound emptiness of society. Both works place relationships under the microscope and allow the viewer or the reader to witness the struggles and failings that couples and individuals face in this time of societal disruption. In concentrating on the shared themes between Godbout's novel and Arcand's film, Thériault's observations about *américanité* of the 1980s also become particularly relevant. Thériault echoes the pessimism and reflection of strife that are so clearly exemplified by Arcand and Godbout, arguing that the doom of the “mythe américain,” is reflective of the incorporation of American culture, specifically, *américanité* (134). The message of decline resonates throughout these works, and in focusing on the relationships that tie Québec to the rest of North America, in particular those relationships that are exposed in Godbout's novel and Arcand's film, we can begin to understand how the question of identity is all-encompassing and how it displays a conflicting relation to *américanité* for the *Québécois* of the 1980s.

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