

Accepted for publication in *Yale French Studies* by Yale University Press.

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Imagining the First French Empire: *Bande Dessinée* and the Atlantic

A page nearly half-way through Patrick Prugne's 2011 album, *Frenchman*, forms one starting point for this discussion. Alban Labiche is the eponymous young Frenchman who, through the manipulation of his aristocratic neighbour in Normandy, has been drafted into Bonaparte's armed forces and sent to New Orleans on the eve of the handover of Louisiana to the United States in 1803. Having rescued a slave from arbitrary execution by his master, Labiche now finds himself a deserter and accompanying the gruff old French-Canadian fur trader Toussaint Charbonneau northwards towards St Louis, where the latter is to join the Lewis and Clark expedition (which will of course open up the Pacific North-West for American exploration and settlement). The page (Prugne 2011, p. 35) asymmetrically and elliptically combines several procedures which contribute to the classic, linear journey narrative but which have wider, even much wider, metonymic implications.

The *mise en page* consists of three strips, the first of which is a single panel which frames the two men and their mule in silhouette on the right, in an image dominated by the verdure of a forest landscape and stream, and punctuated by Alban's *récitatif* in three separate diagonal boxes. This and the two right-hand panels below are understood as being in the imperfect tense in terms of both the narration and the representative, repeated action they illustrate across different moments and sites: hunting deer, the encounter(s) with Amerindians (which thus is not a suspenseful prelude to conflict on the next page, but rather, through tense, links temporally to Alban's voiceover ['and my Normandy became even further away...']), and therefore to the past, and the arrival on the next page of Alban's friend Louis in New Orleans, marking the distance in

space and time that separates them). The smaller panels of the second and third strips recount, in perfect tense, not only the narrative events of Toussaint revealing why he rescued Alban (his dislike for Americans), and killing a deadly snake, but the developing mental state of Alban himself.

Established modes of analysis of *bande dessinée* take the reader a certain way: the motif of the men in long shot or at the side of the panel, to be understood as dwarfed by the immensity of the American landscape, forms one of the basic aspects of the *tressage* of the text, and is much repeated, as is that of the frequently dominant place of a wild animal – bear, bison, eagle, squirrel, vulture – in a panel. In addition, the narrative structure of the tale could not be simpler, in its combination of equilibrium disrupted, journey quest, separation and reunion, heroes and helpers. The genre is clear, that of the *BD historique* which now forms such an important part of the industry, in terms of production, marketing and institutions (Ory, 2013; the *Prix Château de Cheverny de la bande dessinée historique* inaugurated in 2004 at the Rendez-vous de l'histoire de Blois; the role that *bande dessinée* has taken in pedagogy).

And yet, the metonymic force of this page of *Frenchman* inevitably takes the reader or scholar further into realms of cultural history and intertextuality. The first encounter with Amerindians speaks to a history of representations which this text must navigate and within which it positions itself. At this point in the narrative, and within the *mise en page*, the Amerindians are as one with landscape, two framed from behind and two silhouetted in the distance against the forest, as their position in the final panel echoes those of the three figures in the first, who were merging with the natural scene, and with the hunted deer in the third. Although not focalized from Alban's point of view, they here form part of the imperfect tense of his narration, and of the start of his composition with this new landscape and its cultures.

Frenchman cannot help, then, to be located in a whole history of French cultural and literary encounters with the Americas and their indigenous inhabitants. Here it is a question of course not of the ‘truth’ of indigeneity, but of the uses to which the indigenous, from his/her appearance in fifteenth and sixteenth-century texts that first harness the questioning cultural relativism the figure provides, is put for an artistic or intellectual project, and in the myths of popular culture. Roughly contemporaneous with the period in which *Frenchman* is set, Chateaubriand, drawing on his American voyage of 1791 in *Atala* (1801), *Les Natchez* (1826), and *Voyages en Amérique* (1827), weaves his way through pre-conceived pseudo-Rousseauist conceptions of *le bon sauvage* and of America as ‘nature’ to emerge with a Christianized, ‘universalized’ and fundamentally ethnocentric view of the merits of ‘natural’ and ‘civilized’ life. Tzvetan Todorov’s often stinging analysis of Chateaubriand’s procedure links this with an egocentrism that characterizes not only this author’s hyperbolic Romantic subjectivity but, along with nationalism and the scientism he finds elsewhere, the emerging nineteenth century as a whole: ‘Is it not a form of violence – reserved exclusively to creator-artists – to be able to shape at will and as needed the identity of persons one has encountered?’ (Todorov 1993, p. 298).

Patrick Prugne’s treatment of Amerindians is even-handed, however: their violence is provoked and justified by Louis’s companions’ cruel murder of a squaw; Louis himself becomes fully and definitely assimilated into the Pawnee tribe; one of a group of women has a point of view shot when she perceives the threatening silhouettes of four white men at the water’s edge, a scene that opens the sequel, *Pawnee* (2013). This points to perhaps a more important intertext. James Fenimore Cooper’s ‘Leatherstocking’ sequence of novels, including *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), was immensely popular in France in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, influencing canonical writers such as Balzac (*Les Chouans*, 1829). Fenimore Cooper lived in

Europe, including Paris, where he published several of his novels, between 1826 and 1833, with *The Last of the Mohicans* immediately translated by the prolific Auguste-Jean-Baptiste Defauconpret. Whatever the racial politics of the novel in an American context (white superiority, Amerindian destiny as metaphor), Fenimore Cooper's legacy (long studied, see Murray Gibb, 1927; Bosset, 1928) is that of contributing to the French fantasy-myth, elaborated through the nineteenth century, of 'America', 'le <<Far-West>>'. This myth continues through popular fiction (Gabriel Ferry; Gustave Aimard), and culminates in the phenomenon of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show which toured Europe from 1886. Crucially, while the influence of Leatherstocking/Hawkeye is palpable in Ferry's *Le Coureur de bois* (1850), here the author, like Aimard in *Les Trappeurs de l'Arkansas* of 1858, typically takes an individual who is French or of French descent and uses him as a *porteur* between cultures. (The first official contacts between France and Quebec since the Conquest of 1759 did not take place until 1855, which led to more sustained cultural 'rediscoveries' of the descendants of that first French overseas empire.)¹ Here is the ambiguity which tinges the exoticism of this cultural production: if Todorov defines the exotic as a (selectively) valorized Other, not a stable entity but 'a country and a culture defined exclusively by their relation to the observer' (Todorov 1993, p. 264), then the question is raised of what becomes of the refracted exoticism which takes a 'French America' not just as mediator but as its actual object of contemplation. In *Frenchman and Pawnee*, this adjacency, and indeed entanglement of Self/Other, strange/familiar, France/America, European/Indigenous, is embodied not only by the cross-cultural Louis but of course by Toussaint Charbonneau himself, a real historical figure (1767-1843) one of whose Shoshone wives, Sacagawea (who accompanied him on the Lewis and Clark expedition), makes an appearance. (Patrice Edde plays another fictionalized Toussaint in Alejandro G. Iñárritu's *The*

Revenant of 2015, a prolongation of the figure of the ‘Frenchie’ in Hollywood cinema who has punctuated that sub-genre of the western, the northern forests movie, since the early twentieth century.)

If Prugne is careful in interviews to argue for the effort of documentation that underpins his work,² the cultural circulations that inform it are also evident in his visual style. While the role of illustrations in the numerous editions of Fenimore Cooper’s novels have an important history (for example the Belgian *bédéiste* René Follet’s contributions to a 1962 version)³, Patrick Prugne’s eschewal of digital techniques in favour of a direct use of watercolour places him in a distinct lineage. Arguably more in vogue in Britain and the United States in the nineteenth century than in continental Europe, watercolour enables Prugne to establish ambiance through the depiction of changes in natural light according to time of day, shadow and background, and to indulge in painterly, set-piece one-page or double-page panels (two in *Frenchman* and *Pawnee*, respectively), or, more commonly, half-pages or panels without text. It is sufficient to look at his depiction of foliage to see the resemblances with work by America’s premier nineteenth-century watercolourist, Winslow Homer (see for example, *On The Trail* [1892], or *Sunlight and Shadow* [c.1872]) to understand that both artists are part of an Atlantic circulation of influences and of visibility (Homer, like many American artists, spent a year in Paris, in 1867, where he exhibited at the Exposition universelle).

Analysis of a second BD page enables further exploration of this Atlantic dimension. Patrice Pellerin’s *L’Epervier* series is set in the 1740s, its eponymous hero is a privateer in the employ of the King of France, Yann de Kermeur, who captains a ship, ‘la Méduse’. The first six-volume cycle of his adventures (1994-2005) has been followed by a second, of which three volumes have thus far (2016) been produced (2009-2015). A six-episode television adaptation

was broadcast in 2011. This example is taken from the 2015 volume, number nine of the whole series (*Coulez la Méduse!*, Pellerin 2015, p. 44).

Two large panels construct a symmetrical positioning of ‘la Méduse’: at top left, on the open sea and viewed towards the prow, its headsail obscuring the female figurehead; at bottom right, viewed towards the stern as it enters the harbour of Louisbourg in Canada, dwarfing the town’s rooftops. With Yann’s *récitatif* present in each, the right half of the top panel is taken up by three superimposed panels which provide a montage of him gazing (with desire – ‘the riches of this New World. All the riches...’) at the mysterious Amerindian princess he has been ordered to transport. The last of the three superimposed panels has him in close-up ruminating about forgetting what he has left behind. This segues into the incrustation found in the second large panel, two superimposed panels, the second narrower and in close-up, of another love interest, Yann’s cousin Agnès, trapped in a dungeon in Brittany by the evil Marquis de Beaucourt who has trapped her into marriage, and who utters Yann’s name in the single speech bubble of the page. This chimes with a favoured device of Pellerin, the contrastive play of light and shadow, openness (the ocean) and confinement, wide angle and close-up: ‘the fact of including a close-up or a narrow-angle shot in a wide-angle shot [...], of placing one in the other, will render the close-up closer and the wide-angle shot wider’ (Chapelin and Martine 2014, pp. 302-3).

The visual style and *mise en page* differ significantly from Prugne, in the more conventional use of (predominantly even) light and colour, in the emphasis given to narrative, identification and suspense by the use of incrustation to evoke distance and motivation, in the emphasis of sea over land. *L’Epervier* is a series about the ocean, in which sea battles and voyages structure the narrative, dominate the visuals and iconography, and in turn determine the meaning of what occurs – court intrigues, romantic betrayals, frame-ups of the lead protagonist –

on land. Unlike *Frenchman* and *Pawnee*, which contain a double page of the conscripted Alban on board ship and a few panels of his and Louis's arrival in New Orleans harbour, four of Alban's sister Angèle disembarking off the east coast of the USA, *L'Epervier* is less about 'America' than the 'Atlantic', with that ocean forming the series' crucible of meaning in terms both of its narrative peripeties and its wider mythology, and memory.

On the one hand, then, *L'Epervier* partakes of the French tradition of the *roman maritime*. Analysing the history but also characteristics of the genre such as the use of stock characters (captains, surgeons, cabin boys), alternations of action on land and sea, the ship as dramatic *huis clos*, Odile Gannier notes the confluence of determinants at its origins which propelled its success, which can be traced - for authors writing in French - from Eugène Sue through Gustave Aimard (once more), Jules Verne, Pierre MacOrlan - to, arguably, the contemporary BD medium:

The maritime novel flowers fully at a time when Romanticism is favoring a sentimental and metaphysical relationship with wide-open spaces whose forces surpass humanity, when Realism allows it a base of credibility, and when the vogue for the historical novel endows a certain type of maritime adventure with legitimacy and abundant subject-matter (Gannier 2014, p.14).

On the other hand, in Pellerin, legitimacy is also partly sought through a process of documentation which manifests itself stylistically. On this page from *Coulez la Méduse!* the ship, especially in the closer view provided on the bottom right of the second panel, is portrayed in meticulous detail, as it is throughout the series, a level of detail which includes the varying deployment of the sails. Pellerin's source is the abundant work of the naval architect Jean Boudriot, who, working closely with the Musée de la marine, published the four-volume *Le*

Vaisseau de 74 canons (1973-77). Pellerin's procedure thus contributes to the ongoing assertion of (cultural) legitimacy of the BD as art form, to the 'credibility' of the text in relation to its narrative extremes, and thus to an 'effect of the real', in Barthes's terms, in which the signified of the signifying detail connotes 'reality' as much as if not more than its designated object (Barthes 1982).

Frenchman, Pawnee, and the *L'Épervier* series are examples of the much larger field of the *BD historique*, as we have seen, but within that the number of albums and series that deal with the French North American empire and/or the Atlantic is abundant and significant. (Already, Patrick Prugne, in collaboration with the scénariste Tiburge Oger, had produced in 2009 *Canoë Bay*, an Atlantic and North American treasure hunt narrative whose cabin boy protagonist is a survivor of the Acadian deportations.) There are antecedents: *L'Épervier* grew directly out of the work Pellerin did on the *Barbe-Rouge* pirate series that began in 1959 (various authors, starting with Jean-Michel Charlier and Victor Hubinon), although the classification as 'historical' would here be elusive. The breakthrough text was François Bourgeon's *Les Passagers du vent* (five volumes, 1980-84, with a sequel, *La Petite Fille Bois-Caïman*, in two volumes, 2009-10), which we shall examine momentarily. Indeed, its success led the Glénat publishing house to inaugurate its magazine and collection *Vécu* devoted to the *BD historique*. But there is also for example the massive series *Les Pionniers du nouveau monde* (Jean-Marie Charles, Ersel, Maryse Charles, twenty volumes, 1982-2015) which depicts its French and French-Canadian characters suffering the upheavals wrought by the Franco-British conflicts of the mid-eighteenth century (Acadian deportation, French and Indian War).

Writing of *Les Passagers du vent*, Matthew Screech attributes the vogue for the *BD historique* from the 1970s/1980s onwards as evidence of a French identity crisis: 'The boom in

historical *bandes dessinées* is very much in keeping with the popular desire to rediscover identity by re-connecting with a common past' (Screech 2005, p. 194). If we see these series in terms of *national* culture, we might proceed to analyse them as we might any historical fiction, such as a costume drama or heritage film. As Homi Bhabha has argued, the relationship between the origins ('common past', in Screech's terms) and present of any 'national people' is problematic. There is a – temporal – split between that pedagogy of origins and the need to elaborate, repeat and reproduce the nation, in all senses: 'In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performance' ('DissemiNation', Bhabha 1990, p. 297).

The people of the origins, in the *énoncé* of the fictional past, are also both 'us' and not 'us', they are the same *and* different. In 'national' romances set in the past, for example, the heterosexual couple may not be able to achieve stable form (beyond the obstacles inherent to the romance genre) because of the past's pastness: *Un Long Dimanche de fiançailles* (Jeunet, 2004) is one example (for most of the film at least, until its ambiguous ending: the life-long love between the protagonists is prevented by World War I); *Titanic* (Cameron, 1997), may, on a 'world' or, literally, Atlantic level, be another, the couple destroyed not just because of the sinking but because of the class rigidities of 1912. Or else, in *Ridicule* (Leconte, 1996), the main protagonist's goals (for social justice, technical progress), are prevented by the injustices of the eighteenth-century *ancien régime*. In these cases, audiences look at the past via an intervening event (post-1945 peace and security in Europe, 1960s sexual revolution or counter-culture, 1970s feminism and after, the French Revolution) which evaluates the texts' protagonists as 'lacking' in the gains that came after.

This argument works up to a point with *Frenchman* and *L'Epervier*. Alban's life is disrupted by the injustice of Napoleonic conscription, persistent feudal hierarchy, and the institution of slavery; the Angèle-Louis couple is consequently prevented from forming. Yann de Kermeur suffers in turn from court intrigue, the *ancien régime* class system, the penal institution of the galleys. However, the argument around the 'lack' bound up with the national narrative could cut both ways: the 'lack' is in the present, in the form of a lost empire (although this would be to neglect the contemporary reality of French in the Americas represented by, among other spaces, Quebec and Guyane).

Many of these *BD* protagonists are 'modern' *avant la lettre*, or so it would seem. In the case of Yann L'Epervier, any temporal split, lack or difference is overcome via hyper-masculinity. Pellerin argues he is ahead of his time, but still of his time: his experience in the galleys can explain, or at least contribute to, his desire to defend slaves and the weak (Chapelin and Martine 2014, p. 312). But what if the perspective were here de-centered from the national to the transnational, to the Atlantic space as a crucible of the modern, and also as a variation - or variations - on 'Frenchness' which are not about a lost empire but a lost sense of plural, mobile, diasporic identities within French culture, of crossings and *métissages*? Yann – Breton, growing up in Guyane adjacent to indigenous peoples including his friend Chac-ta who accompanies him on his voyages - would epitomize this, as well as Louis, with his 'becoming-Amerindian'. The problematic becomes then not one of *re-membering* in which a national plenitude is sewn together, but a dispersal of memory/memories which emphasizes transformative lines of flight across the Atlantic and through the Americas.

Les Passagers du vent offers further insights into these arguments, as it is so bound up with memory, especially but not only the *contested* memory of the slave trade. It is worth

situating 1980, the year of the first volume, in relation to that memory, and the way in which Bourgeon's *oeuvre* contributed to creating a new momentum, which helped bring the trade more centre-stage in public memory and the public sphere. Bourgeon builds on renewed work by historians, such as Serge Daget, who edited Jean Mettas's repertoire of French slave-trading expeditions that appeared in 1978, and Pierre Pluchon, whose *La Route des esclaves* was published in 1980. The vast majority of historical works written on the French Atlantic slave trade have been published since that date, and this production has accompanied, and been accompanied by, a politics of memory and commemoration. The main slave trading port, Nantes, has experienced a journey from a refusal by the municipal council to support a conference on the Code Noir in 1985, through a new policy of recognition and re-branding which saw a major exhibition on the trade in 1992, the erection of a commemorative sculpture (torn down by vandals) in 1998, and the inauguration of a memorial garden and walkway – the Mémorial de l'abolition de l'esclavage - in 2012. In 2001, a law was adopted that recognized the slave trade as a crime against humanity, and since 2006 the 10th of May has been the official national day of commemorating the trade and its abolition. None of this is to establish a causal link with *Les Passagers du vent*: rather, it is to position Bourgeon's texts within the ongoing re-negotiation in France of relations to the colonial and slave-trading past.

Les Passagers du vent achieves its evocation of that past, still rare in popular cultural forms of the time, in two potentially contradictory ways. The first is, as in Pellerin, a work of documentation, and indeed a proclamation of documentation, as in the peritexts of volume 3, *Le Comptoir de Juda* (1981). Here are to be found: the 1776 plan of the Saint-Louis fort in 'Juda' (present-day Ouidah in Benin, where the protagonists spend most of volumes 3 and 4) which Bourgeon found in the Archives nationales and which he then reproduces in a three-quarters size

panel (Bourgeon 2009 volume 3, p. 21); and cross-sections of the imagined slaver ship, the ‘Marie-Caroline’, based on the ‘Marie-Séraphine’, found in Mettas’s repertoire and the subject of further advice from Jean Boudriot. In addition, the dialogue at times reveals itself to be a product of research on eighteenth-century debates, along with their ambiguities and contradictions: a page dominated by discussion – and by small panels of faces and speech bubbles save for the larger top panel that groups the men and one woman as brandy is served - between the ships’s officers and the emancipationist Isabeau (Bourgeon 2009 volume 3, p. 14); the ship’s surgeon who regards the trade as barbaric but inevitable, but who nonetheless is making notes, helped by Isabeau, that are ultimately destined for Jacques Pierre Brissot, one of the founders in 1788 of the Société des amis des Noirs (Bourgeon 2009 volume 2, pp. 47-48).

Secondly, the saga is as reliant on the tropes of maritime adventure fiction, and its contradictions, as *L’Epervier*. (This is where it decisively differs from the more straightforwardly didactic project of BD artist Serge Diantantu, whose *Mémoire de l’esclavage* series was published between 2010 and 2015.) Here however a strong female teenage protagonist, Isabeau, leads the reader through a narrative in the years 1781-2 of identity switches, loss of social status, loves lost with both women and men (her rather weak *compagnon* is obliged to leave definitively in volume 5) but with female rather than male nudity to the fore, exile in England, a voyage in the triangular Atlantic slave trade that ends in Saint-Domingue, voodoo, wild animals, slave mutiny. The latter, unlike in Mérimée’s 1829 short story. *Tamango*, which ends with the victorious slaves unable to navigate a now drifting ship, ends in defeat for the revolt but nonetheless shows the slaves to possess agency and strategic skills, is even partly focalized by them (for example, panels in Bourgeon 2009 volume 4, p. 15) and is led by two women.

These two approaches cease to seem antithetical if we reflect, beyond questions of the ‘effect of the real’ and the cultural legitimacy of the BD form, upon the workings of, and labour upon, memory. The works of both Bourgeon and Pellerin can be seen as ‘memory-images’, in the sense that ‘archives’ are raided that are both literal (the work of documentation) and cultural (the repertoire and repository of images, fictions, genres from which these authors draw). It is indicative how the fluid terms ‘repertoire’ and ‘archive’ slide so easily between history (we recall the title of Mettas’ work), memory and fiction (the ‘archives secrètes’ - presented as such, with ‘gaps’ - of Yann L’Epervier that tell his backstory: Pellerin 2006).

This explains the self-reflexiveness about memory that pervades the late sequels to *Les Passagers du vent*, *La Petite Fille Bois-Caïman* (in two volumes, 2009 and 2014). Set in war-torn Louisiana in 1862-3, they feature an equally assertive but resolutely confederacy-supporting descendant of Isabeau, ‘Zabo’, who, having lost her mother and sibling as a result of the conflict, sets off from New Orleans for the relative safety of an ancestral plantation on a remote bayou. She is accompanied by, and argues with, a French republican photo-journalist (whose presence obliges and permits an explanation of the difference between a Creole and a Cajun: ‘Not French from France, but I am *French* [in English in the text], yes! Creole in other words!’; Bourgeon 2009a, p. 23. This text is much more pluralized linguistically, with extensive use of untranslated Creole in the Saint-Domingue sequences, of Cajun French in those set in Louisiana). At the plantation, she discovers her 98-year-old great-grandmother, the original Isa/Isabeau. Via portraits, Isabeau’s written memoirs, and her own oral narration, the story is told of her life since Saint-Domingue in the 1780s: the move to Louisiana working as a naturalist’s artist, her marriage to his son, the dramatic loss of her mixed-race daughter and disfigurement due to the betrayal of a family member. The final sequences of each woman’s story are eloquent about time

and memory. A page features three top panels which progressively pull out from Isa's position as she watches the torrential downpour from the gallery of her swamp cabin, to an aerial image of the Mississippi delta illuminated by the dying sun: here the standard poetic trope linking time with flowing water, and the dark open sea - featured in a single panel on the following page - with death, is here complicated by the delta image (Bourgeon 2014, pp. 63-4), where time flows in linear fashion but also gets caught in complicated backwaters that return upon themselves, branch out, make surprising connections. The final panel of the volumes, occupying the lower two-thirds of the page, has the younger, now safe Zabo framed at a table, quill in hand, wearing the amulets given her by Isa, writing in a notebook, the reader assumes, the words we see in the dialogue box at the bottom of the panel. She is in a library or study, books encased behind mesh form the background of the image in three partial rectangles; she gazes out of frame, to bottom right, leading the reader's eye beyond the page. This narration had explicitly begun (after a completely text-free two-page hiatus when Zabo discovers the floodwater and the death of Isa, and canoes away from the cabin) three pages earlier, but implicitly the entire two volumes could be understood this way, ending with Zabo writing the narrative we have read.

Given the links made here between the individual and collective, including those shared archives and repositories of memory that are books and libraries, it is pertinent to ask in the context of these *BD* texts, whose cultural memory is present or represented? A brief excursion into a *BD historique* in Quebec, where Glénat set up a subsidiary in 2007, may shed light. Jean-Sébastien Bérubé's four-volume series, *Radisson* (2009-2012), takes as its subject the life of explorer and trapper Pierre-Esprit Radisson (c.1636-1710). The text has elements relevant to a pedagogical 'origin' of a French-Canadian people in the brief glimpses we get of seventeenth-century Montreal, Quebec City and Trois-Rivières, but *Radisson* is above all a bizarre choice as

the subject of a nationalist project, notorious for his collaboration with the English and his role in the Hudson's Bay Company, and the author of unreliable memoirs. In the *BD* texts, he embodies therefore certain fundamental uncertainties of Quebec identity, particularly with regard to the Amerindians, presented here in the pluralism of their different cultural groups. Patterns and rhythms of adjacency and differentiation have characterized that relationship over the centuries, although debates in recent years have seen an assertion of the view of French-Canadians as settler colonialists rather than as colonized subjects, the prevailing argument of 1960s nationalism (Simpson, 2014). Traditionally, the difference represented by the adjacency of Amerindian and French-Canadian identity has been managed symbolically by the unifying hyper-masculinity of the *coureur de bois* figure, escaping in individualist manner the restrictions of the *ancien régime*: indeed in volume 3, Radisson remarks, 'You see, in this country, we are both masters and servants' (Bérubé 2011, p. 30). In Bérubé's series, Radisson, while heterosexually active, is marked especially by youth and mobility. As the sovereignty project in Quebec sits on the backburner, and as younger generations are marked by a plurality of cultural references or 'inter(re)ferences' which free 'English' from the colonial reference (Létourneau 2013), Radisson/*Radisson* could be seen to embody renewed elaborations of the performance of Quebec identity in terms of the mobile modernity of the *transfuge*.⁴

It is a commonplace of *BD* historiography that the relationship with American culture is a perennial reference point, be it in terms of resemblance or disengagement (Ory, 1984). At the same time, as we have seen, the history of French (popular-) cultural engagements with over the past two hundred years has frequently involved a fantasy 'America', a sometimes exoticized vessel into which could be poured Franco-French dilemmas and preoccupations. The Quebec geographer Jean Morisset, scourge of both Quebec and metropolitan French cultural nationalism,

has lambasted metropolitan French culture for this myth-making that resolutely excludes, for example, its own creolized, *canadien* offshoot: ‘real America could not exist in French in the eyes of France, precisely for fear of its dream of America turning into an indecipherable nightmare speaking *joual* or Creole’ (Morisset 2000, p. 271). The texts by Prugne, Pellerin and Bourgeon examined here permit a certain pluralization and even dissipation of the national ‘we’ across time and space, even as it is so implicated in the slave trade, and interpellated, by Isabeau in *Le Comptoir de Juda*.⁵ The oceanic crossings and that distance in time and space all contribute to a problematisation of the same/other relationship, historical memory, and French cultural identities. The texts are characterized by continuing tensions between the French Atlantic as the nostalgic space of a national pastness or a convocation to identity debates concerning (pre-republican) difference and hybridity; as accompanying the colonial enterprise or proposing nomadic *déracinement*; as proposing fixed, ‘major’ positions of mastery, or minor, even utopian takes on mobility. It could be argued that this Atlantic corpus within the *BD historique* represents one of the few French cultural ‘realms’ or ‘sites of memory’ in Pierre Nora’s terms (and we recall the very ‘hexagonal’ nature of the *lieux de mémoire* project), in which there is a memorial investment in the first French overseas empire in North America, alongside the very official Commission Franco-Québécoise des lieux de mémoire communs (<http://cfqlmc.org/>), and the enthusiasm for transatlantic genealogy. Michael Rothberg has pointed out the fallacy of the assumption in Nora and Halbwachs that ‘there are as many memories as there are groups, but that each group possesses a coherent language of remembrance’. Rather, the French Atlantic *bandes dessinées*, in their aesthetic contradictions and ambiguities, might be seen to contain, like the pattern of the Mississippi delta and its swamps on the fringes of the ocean itself, hints of ‘knots of memory’, ‘rhizomatic networks of temporality and cultural reference that exceed

attempts at territorialization (whether at the local or national level) and identitarian reduction’
(Rothberg 2010, p. 7).

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¹ For a more sustained discussion of cultural relations between France and Quebec in this period and following, see Chapter Four of my *Quebec National Cinema* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001), 75-102.

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DuDuoW8CTU8>; accessed 22 May 2016.

³ Paris: Editions des Deux Coqs d'or, 1962.

⁴ A further relevant Quebec *BD* corpus of texts is to be found in the work of François Lapierre, whose *Chroniques sauvages* (2011) and two-part *Sagah-Nah* (2002, 2004) spin magic realist tales in seventeenth-century New France from the Amerindian protagonist's point of view, mixing myth, scepticism and anticlericalism.

⁵ 'We snatch in their thousands each year men, women and children from their land and family, for them to soak with their blood and tears products which we perhaps don't even need' (Bourgeon 2009c, p. 14).