

# The Fatality of Origins in Quebec Cinema

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Gilda Boffa explores how cinematic depictions of immigrants in Quebec cinema often perpetuate the oppressive dominant discourses of identity, and how recurring tropes of death and disappearance affect a problematic image of the immigrant experience in modern day Quebec. Boffa references Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics and Erin Manning's exploration of the meaning of sovereignty, in relation to filmmakers such as Paul Tana and Denis Chouinard, in order to examine how political structures, such as the Quebec identity, ultimately work to suppress difference.

in depth analysis of two of them: *La Sarrasine* (Paul Tana, 1992) and *L'ange De Goudron* (Denis Chouinard, 2001). This essay will look at both the successes and failures of these films when it comes to subverting dominant hegemonic discourses. To support my analysis I will use ideas from thinkers, namely Michel Foucault and Erin Manning, who have written about racism and hegemony as being intrinsic to the nation-state as a political entity. In Quebec, there is the added tension from a portion of the population's desire to create a sovereign state. Sovereignty is described as follows by Erin Manning in her book *Ephemeral Territories*:

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*Note: This is the second edition of this article. It was first published in 2006 and then edited in 2016.*

Despite all the recent media commotion about cultural communities, immigrants, reasonable accommodations and Canada's stance on its supposed peaceful multicultural reality, images of immigrants are still lacking in Quebec media. In the specific case of feature length narrative cinema, a large number of the few films that feature immigrant characters as the main protagonists have underlying themes of death and sacrifice. This essay will examine how these representations of immigrants, despite the fact that they aim to engage critically with the political implications of this lack of visibility, often serve to feed and repeat the dominant discourses about identity, borders, belonging, territory and nation-building that perpetuate the very oppression they are denouncing by reinforcing dichotomous ideas about these concepts. I will start by an overview of several films that support this thesis, and continue with a more

**“Sovereignty, whether in the name of a Western understanding of territory and identity or in the name of a deflection from these terms of engagement, is, it seems, about expressing a relationship to power that involves the imposition of binary structures and totalizing logics on social subjectivities, repressing their difference.” (Manning 4)**

It is thus not surprising that director Denis Chouinard laments the fact that: “In general, Quebecers are not very curious about others.”<sup>1</sup> (Soulié A16) and that “I’ve always been shocked to observe how the multiethnic nature of Montreal is absent from our cinema, our television and our literature.”<sup>2</sup> (Lussier C1). To analyze this situation it is useful to refer once more to Manning's ideas. What she writes about Canadian films can be applied to how nationalism and identity is articulated in Quebec (though arguably Quebec's national identity is seen as less elusive than Canada's because of its efforts to be seen as a distinct society):

National narratives in Canada are written to support the elusive notion of “Canadian identity”. (...) The idea of a culture that belongs to ‘us’ remains rooted in an essentialism about who ‘we’ are, underscoring a desire to remain rooted even as we speak of transnational and global phenomena, of boundary-crossings and social movements. Within such a frame, any discussion of culture is inextricably bound by the limits of identity politics. (Manning 61)

Because we are trapped in this model for delineating identity, or in even thinking that it is possible or necessary to finitely define identity, immigrant communities have also often defined their culture and identities in an “us versus them” way. The conflicts that arise from this are apparent throughout the structure of the films that will be discussed in this essay. The binaries inevitably cause oppositions and often result in the death of one or several characters. Ideas of sacrifice (akin to those a military formation has to go through to ensure a sense of security and stability for a nation) and of belonging are thus omnipresent in the films that will be examined.

A brief plot summary of some films that follow this premise is in order. *Clandestins* (Denis Chouinard and Nicolas Wadimof, 1997) is about six people from various countries that hide in a container on a ship sailing to Northern Europe to make their way to Canada. The ship’s engine breaks down severely endangering their lives as food and water supplies become scarce. Many of them do not make it alive to Canada.

In *La Déroute* (Paul Tana, 1998) Joe, an Italian immigrant, is the wealthy owner of a cement factory in Montreal. He is angry at his daughter for refusing to work in the family business and for dating Diego, an illegal Salvadorian immigrant. Tana has mentioned that though his character claims to be fully Canadian he has not let go of some of the archaic ideas from his peasant Sicilian past (Gural-Migdal and Salvatore 179). Furthermore, though he fully embraced the right for Italians to immigrate to Canada, he refuses to give Diego this same opportunity and is extremely racist towards him. He is deliriously possessive with his daughter which causes her to move in with Diego, who she will eventually marry. To seek revenge, Joe kidnaps Diego and drives him to the United States. The film ends with a double death: Diego is killed by Joe who then commits suicide. This film is a valid commentary on racism between cultural communities despite its commercial failure and sometimes awkward screenplay. It should be noted that both Chouinard and Tana have also directed shorts with immigrant characters that had

to deal with death. For Chouinard it was *Le Soleil Et Ses Traces* (1990, co-directed with Louis Bélanger) and *Deux Contes De La Rue Berri : Les Gens Heureux N’ont Pas D’histoire* (1976) for Tana.

*Littoral* (Wajdi Mouawad, 2004) is about Wahab, a blasé young man of Lebanese origins who was born in Montreal. He was brought up by his aunts and uncles because his mother died giving birth to him, and her family forbade his father, who had refused to encourage his wife to terminate a dangerous pregnancy, from ever coming into contact with him. Shortly after Wahab’s twenty-fifth birthday, his father comes to Montreal to see him, but he dies on a park bench, amidst a mythical/typical Canadian snowstorm, before he has the chance to do so. Wahab then finds out that his father had not abandoned him, but was forced by his family to stay away from him. He decides to bury him in Lebanon, making the trip for the first time. This post-mortem reconciliation with both his father and Lebanon is hardly easy, however, as Wahab will encounter several obstacles to finding an appropriate burial site in the post-civil war climate. Finally, with the help of a few locals, he decides to release his father’s corpse to the sea. *Littoral* is problematic in terms of its representation because none of its actors are Lebanese, though they play Lebanese characters.<sup>3</sup> While discussing the issues that arise with these representations is beyond the scope of this essay, it is, however, one of my intentions to denounce archaic ideas of ethnic purity. I do not wish to imply that it is impossible for a Quebecer actor to play a Lebanese character, yet the uncomfortable association to the use of blackface in early cinema can be made. Power dynamics are reinforced, as minorities are not allowed to represent themselves.

A more recent example of a film about immigrants in Quebec is *De Ma Fenêtre, Sans Maison...* (Maryanne Zéhil, 2006). Sana (again, played by Louise Portal, a Quebecer actress) is forced to leave Lebanon, leaving her four year old daughter Dounia behind. Seventeen years later, when Dounia’s father dies, Sana invites her to Montreal. Dounia is extremely resentful towards her mother, and several conflicts arise between the two women. We discover that Sana left because she could not deal with the repression imposed upon women in her country, and her husband forced her to leave her daughter in Lebanon. During her stay in Montreal, Dounia is confronted with the cold winter climate of Quebec, in addition to views about sexuality, family and ethnic identity that challenge her own. When Sana’s mother dies shortly after Dounia’s return to Lebanon, Sana decides to accompany her daughter to the funeral,

marking the end of her self-imposed exile. Conflict ensues when Sana and her brother wish to sell the family home that Dounia is still emotionally attached to. The film ends with Sana remaining in Lebanon, and Dounia returning to Montreal.

What is disconcerting with this recurrent theme of death for immigrant characters is the possibility of reading these narratives as a metaphor for self-sacrifice because there is no place for them anywhere (not in their “host” country; nor in their country of “origin”). The sacrifice is often for the sake of other members of their community and family, with the intention of making room for them in some way. This is akin to the blood that is shed in the process of creating nation-states, or going to war for one’s people. The dichotomies of “us versus them” are maintained. Through the homogenous and potentially suffocating concept of the community, symbolic borders are created anew with regard to who belongs and who doesn’t. This is the same logic that has led immigrants to live in ghettos. In thinking about what these films are saying about death, we will consider Michel Foucault’s ideas on biopolitics as they relate to state racism. This idea of having to “kill” or suppress a dimension of one’s identity to belong to the host society can be linked to biopolitics, as immigrants, seen as subordinates, have internalized this mechanism of oppression.

### **LA SARRASINE**

Paul Tana frequently uses the metaphor of roots when talking about the Italian community in Quebec and Canada. He explains how the fig tree, a typically Mediterranean tree, is for him a symbol of Italian immigrants because they have succeeded in making it grow in their gardens, despite the colder climate, by digging it up and covering it during the winter months. He uses the metaphor in talking about what he and Bruno Ramirez, scriptwriter, did for Quebec cinema with their film *La Sarrasine*: “We tried to etch in the Canadian and Quebecer imagination characters that so far have been almost completely invisible. Our gesture is both similar and different from that of our parents.”<sup>4</sup> (Gural-Migdal and Salvatore 131). He goes on to say that he sees this as an act of enracinement (rooting): “. . .it’s rooting, but it’s also a transformation. Rooting in the sense that there is the image of the tree. But it’s also a transformation because the tree has to adapt to survive.”<sup>5</sup> (Gural-Migdal and Salvatore 131). In *La Déroute*, Joe’s dream of a dead fig tree acts as a premonition for his own death.

*La Sarrasine* is set in 1904 Montreal and is inspired by a true story. Giuseppe Moschella and his wife Ninetta are Italian immigrants who run a hostel for recent Italian immigrants. Giuseppe is also a respected tailor. The couple seems well “integrated”. Giuseppe speaks French fluently and his closest friend, Alphonse L’Amoureux, is a French-Canadian. Giuseppe makes him a suit for his wedding and as a gift, he sends one of his boarders, Pasquale, to play music from a music box at the door of the church. However, in his excitement, Pasquale plays it before the end of the ceremony, causing the outrage of Théo Lemieux, L’Amoureux’s son in law. The conflict results in Pasquale taking out his pocket knife and cutting Lemieux’s hand. Later, in a drunken state, Théo and his friends decide to take revenge on Pasquale by stealing and breaking his music box, and taunting him in front of his home. Giuseppe unsuccessfully attempts to calm them down peacefully through an invocation of his friendship with L’Amoureux. The incident ends with Giuseppe accidentally shooting Théo dead. He is then sentenced to the death penalty, and though his wife succeeds in reducing his sentence to life in prison, he eventually commits suicide. Despite Giuseppe’s wish, and the mobilization of his brother from Italy to take her back, Ninetta refuses to return to Italy and stays in Montreal after his death. The film ends with Ninetta, dressed in black, walking across a vast white snowy landscape.

Throughout the film, Tana alludes to the limiting narratives of the nation-state. Its very title can be seen as an indication of this. Saracens is the orientalist term that was used to designate the Muslim enemies of Christians during the Crusades. The film opens with a traditional Sicilian puppet show in Giuseppe’s living room. Ninetta explains to Alphonse that this re-enacted episode of Jerusalem Delivered is about Tancredi, a Christian warrior, who unknowingly kills the Muslim warrior Clorinda, the Saracen that he is in love with. Muslim populations settled in large numbers in southern Italy, particularly in Sicily, where the Moschella couple is from. This introduction alludes to the fact that the ethnic origin of the Italian immigrants is in itself a hybrid, and the population that they had historically considered enemies left significant traces on their cultural legacy. Ninetta plays the symbolic role of a Saracen, as she is seen as an intruder in Montreal. When she hides from Giuseppe’s brother in the empty Lemieux family home, Félicité, Théo’s widow, is horrified to find her there. In a scene where Ninetta prays over Théo’s grave while engaging in a traditional ritual to ask that he not seek revenge on Giuseppe, Félicité finds her and yells: “Go back to where you came from, damn foreigners.”<sup>6</sup> This

theme of invasiveness is present once again in the stark contrast of the final shots of Ninetta, dressed in black walking over the white snowy landscape. However, these allusions to the unstable nature of ethnic identity contradict other elements in the film. For one thing, Giuseppe Garibaldi, the patriot and soldier responsible for the unification of Italy into a modern state in the 19th century, is mentioned twice and held in high regard. This is not surprising, as when asked what he thought about nationalism, Tana replied:

I feel rather torn on the subject. I believe that the Quebec of tomorrow will be transcultural and mixed. (...) Having said that, the feeling of origins, of rooting, risks becoming lost in such a society. So I also understand why nationalism is necessary. It's a way to leave a trace, to know who we are, where we come from. And humans cannot live without identity. Evidently, with nationalism, there is always the danger of being intolerant with the Other, of cultivating a vengeful spirit and an ideology of resentment. So according to me, people should not be scared of mixing with others, of opening up to different cultures while remaining themselves and not forgetting their origins. <sup>7</sup> (Gural-Migdal and Salvatore 26)

This perspective again proposes that “origins” is an invariable category that will and must always be and mean the same thing to all who share it. Giuseppe also calls Pasquale a “zingaro” when he scorns him for cutting Théo’s hand. Though this is translated as “vaurien” (good-for-nothing) in the French subtitles, the Italian word actually means “gypsy” and it is a common insult. It is interesting to note how the gypsies, a nomadic group, have come to symbolize a threat to those who wish to maintain the cohesiveness of the nation.

It is useful to examine how the critical reviews of these films made use of a conventional vocabulary of ethnic identity. It should be noted that according to Gural-Migdal and Salvatore,

*Anglophone critics read La Sarrasine differently and quite opposite to the way that Francophone critics read it. For them, it's Ninetta and the rooting that counts while Anglophones stress the historical context of intolerance and the exemplary value of Giuseppe's death.* <sup>8</sup> (Gural-Migdal and Salvatore 175)

This is not to imply that the Anglophone critics are

flawless in their analysis, as the authors also point out that Italian stereotypes were consistently perpetuated by critics of both languages. Furthermore, the implications of the word “tolerance” are far from suggesting the desire for a perfect communion between communities. In one critic’s words, we can see how the desire for uniformity in identity is still the norm. Carlo Mandolini wrote about the image of Ninetta dressed in black over a white background representing: “...the uniformity of Western cultures confronted with black stains, of people from other places.” <sup>9</sup> (Gural-Migdal and Salvatore 162), reinforcing the false belief that Western cultures were ever truly uniform. The desire to create a new homogeneous identity of the “Italo- Québécois” is expressed in the following comments by Tana:

Unlike Italian Americans represented by Coppola or Scorsese, young Italian Quebecers speak a language that mixes English, French and Italian. There is thus a language to be created to install the immigrant story in this country. It is how Quebecer culture with other roots will emerge. <sup>10</sup> (Gural-Migdal and Salvatore 163)

This expresses the belief that a culture must speak one unified language. Several critics and Tana himself have insisted on the fact that: “...Giuseppe’s trial and death aren’t really a failure because they lead to Ninetta’s emancipation.” <sup>11</sup> (Gural-Migdal and Salvatore 172), implying that patriarchal values can be eradicated only through contact with the “civilized” West. This is reminiscent of the declarations of quite a few journalists and politicians in the debate about “reasonable accommodations”, and more recently the Quebec Charter of Values [edit, 2016] to the effect that we should make it clear to immigrants that here, equality between men and women is not negotiable. An easily debatable declaration to position the “host nation” as superior by refusing to acknowledge all the inequalities that still exist in Quebec.

On the question of Quebec sovereignty, Tana has said the following, which relates to biopolitics and state racism: “The referendum question seems extremely superficial as long as we don’t ask the real question: “Am I ready to die to obtain a country?” If we don’t ask about death, we can’t create a country, and we can’t make art, either.” <sup>12</sup> (Gural-Migdal and Salvatore 35-6). He goes on to talk about how this corresponds to the sentiment of urgency in political change and in art making.

In their introduction of *Le cinéma de Paul Tana*, Gural-Migdal and Salvatore write:

**The director has often examined the presence of Italians in Quebec, the third largest community in the province. This is another reason to take interest in his work when we know that the presence of Italians on the territory of Quebec goes back to the era of New France. It is therefore a well established community that has not yet received the historical attention it deserves.** <sup>13</sup> (Gural-Migdal and Salvatore 10)

Tana is himself an immigrant, having moved to Quebec at the age of 11 (Perrault). For him, *La Sarrasine* is about the “desire to be rooted in a new country and this duality that must be faced by a foreigner” <sup>14</sup> (Perrault).

Gural-Migdal and Salvatore, as well as several other critics, have said that Tana has done for the Italian community what Claude Jutra did for Quebecers with *Mon Oncle Antoine* (85). He is relegated to the role of identity builder, where what he represents must then by definition become representative of the whole “Italian community” in Quebec, with a monolithic voice. It is also unsettling to see how freely the term “Italian colony” is used in Gural-Migdal and Salvatore’s book to designate the Italian community in Quebec. Citing Rancière, Manning makes an important point about the limits of community:

Through a focus on heterology of the political, the encounter with “the political community” becomes an encounter not with the community as self, but with the impossibility of community as a homogeneous political entity. The question then becomes not simply “How are we to face a political problem?” but “How are we to reinvent politics?” (Manning xviii)

In reviewing this film, several critics have implied that it exposes a reality from the past and that racism towards the Italian community is no longer an issue in Quebec (Gural-Migdal and Salvatore 171). However, anti-Italian stereotypes are alive and well in the media. For example, a recent issue of *The Montreal Gazette* published a derogatory article about the Italian parliament titled “The Pizza Parliament”. Reactions from the Italian community to this and other questionable articles were largely ignored and dismissed (Sabetti 18). This is reminiscent of the negative press about Italians that we witness in *La Sarrasine*. The first example of this is when a barman reading an article about a mafia leader hiding out in Montreal asks Giuseppe jokingly if the man is hiding in his house. Giuseppe’s response to this

is to throw the money on the bar to pay for his drink and leave angrily, mumbling his disdain for the man in Italian; “Ignorante de merda...” The use of the Italian language here is an example of how racist prejudice can move even the most well intentioned individual back into the confines of his native language.

Another example of this is the article that gets published after Giuseppe’s arrest. In the aptly titled *Le Patriote* newspaper, Carmelo reads the following: “The situation in which you find yourself is due to your habit, and that of many of your compatriots, to always keep weapons in your home. This practice is contrary to Canadian law and has involved foreigners such as yourself in offences that lead to long prison sentences... this condemnation shall serve as an example to all those...” <sup>15</sup>.

The fact that the court condemned Giuseppe to the death penalty can be related to Foucault’s ideas on the biopolitical. The attempt to use their power to “let live” in changing the penalty to life in prison is another example of this. Giuseppe had to serve as an example for all other Italian immigrants, thus he was victimized by a sentence that was overly severe. However, this narrative twist proves that: “Once the mechanism of biopower was called upon to make it possible to execute or isolate criminals, criminality was conceptualized in racist terms” (Foucault 258). The inherent violence of territorial borders and its exclusionary practices are evoked by Sherry Simon in her essay about the film:

Through Moschella and his wife’s behaviour, we grasp the fragility and the insecurity of the immigrant, to whom we communicate – by constantly repeated gestures – his subordinate status. <sup>16</sup> (Simon 633)

And about the scenes of violence she says:

**...these scenes of violence are all built around relationships of authority and territoriality.** <sup>17</sup> (Simon 633)

It is also highly symbolic that Giuseppe and Ninetta cannot have children because he is impotent. According to Michel Foucault, one of the targets that biopolitical forces seek to control is the fertility of a population (Foucault 243). Gural-Migdal and Salvatore have an ironic way of describing the character of Giuseppe in *La Sarrasine*:

Today we would call him a model neo-Quebecer; honest, hard-working, who knows his place, but who sadly ends up becoming an outlaw because of an

unfortunate altercation with Théo Lemieux. With this act, he turns back into the foreigner who the law must punish in an exemplary way.<sup>18</sup> (188)

In the film, Théo says about Italians (or “Macaroni” as he likes to call them): “They’ll learn to stay in their place!”<sup>19</sup> The idea being illustrated here is that there is a restricted “place” (literal or symbolic) where these supposed subordinates must remain in isolation, not causing trouble and being as invisible as possible.

Though Ninetta’s refusal to go back to Italy suggests that identity is always evolving, this film still fails to completely subvert all the hegemonic narratives about the state by implying that Ninetta wants to become “rooted” in Canada, thus bringing the evolution of her identity to a standstill. Giuseppe’s brother Salvatore comes to Montreal from Italy to force Ninetta’s return to their native country, but because Ninetta has decided that she now belongs in Canada, he will not succeed. Having been betrayed by his host country, Giuseppe wants her to leave, saying that this country is not for her, not for them. Tana’s insistence on the drama of immigration is apparent in the following comments about the film:

The double structure of *La Sarrasine* aims to reflect the double drama of immigration. The murder is really just a metaphor for the violence of uprooting (...) Because immigration is always this double experience: the death of something and the birth of another. (...) For me, nothing is more dramatic than seeing people leave for a destination and reach another, sometimes with no future and always as a one-way trip.<sup>20</sup> (Privet 13)

Gural-Migdal and Salvatore point out several instances where in the press and with financing institutions Tana has been relegated to the category of “ethnic filmmaker”, one that he hates. This has once again created the opposite effect of what he desired, as it perpetuates stereotypes about Italian immigrants because their ethnic origin cannot be transcended (but we should remember here that he himself does not wish for it to be fully transcended). When their book was published, Tana was still writing the screenplay for *La Déroute*, and Gural-Migdal and Salvatore point out how this film will be about “the fatality of origins” (179). This is because the main character cannot let go of his peasant Sicilian identity, and thus he cannot belong to Canada, and so he inevitably must die (Gural-Migdal and Salvatore 179). However, I would argue that it is not primarily Joe’s “Sicilian temper” that makes him unfit to live in Canada, but it is rather the frightening

spectre of difference he represents that must be annihilated. The constraints imposed by “the culture of a country” have been termed “inevitable” by Gural-Migdal and Salvatore (193). Are we not voluntarily locking ourselves in a fatalist discourse if we perpetuate this perception? In this line of thought, anyone who does not conform to the homogenous and restrictive construct of what has become the cultural norm of a country risks marginalization.

### L’ANGE DE GOUDRON

*L’ange De Goudron* is about a family of Algerian immigrants living in Montreal who are awaiting their citizenship documents. This is jeopardized, however, by their son Hafid’s involvement with a radical activist group that is trying to stop the deportation of illegal immigrants. When he is caught on camera stealing documents from the Immigration Canada office, Hafid goes into hiding. His girlfriend (Huguette) and his father (Ahmed) then embark on a road trip across the snowy landscapes of Quebec to find him. Though they do manage to find Hafid, they are unable to stop him from destroying the immigrants’ papers, an act which will prevent their deportation. As a result, Hafid is then beaten to death by angry police officers. Denis Chouinard has said that his films about immigrants carry the desire to build bridges between them and Quebecers (Chouinard backcover). He says to always have been fascinated by their lives which he saw as parallel universes to his own (Chouinard 7). Though they are the relevant reflection of a pressing reality about racism and violence, his films do not subvert the vocabulary of the state because they adhere to the fatalism that I am describing in this essay. His characters are consistently forced to experience profound loss, mainly through death, in order to come anywhere close to achieving a sense of belonging.

The film also criticizes how activist groups can sometimes fall prey to a type of religious secularism, and how this can perpetuate hierarchical power structures of the status quo. When Hafid gets too carried away with the activist group without thinking of the possible repercussions, Huguette tells him that he should stop thinking they are the IRA (a movement that strove for the unification of a nation-state). Roberto, the veteran activist who paradoxically acts as the authority figure in an anarchical structure, is criticized for involving Hafid in something that will jeopardize any chance he has of getting Canadian citizenship. Roberto also forces Ahmed, a Muslim, to drink alcohol or else he won’t talk to him. Through his hypocrisy and authoritarianism, we

see that Roberto refuses to engage with alterity and he ultimately recreates the very social dynamics of power imbalances that he denounces. He firmly believes in defending the right to citizenship for immigrants, but only if they agree to live as he does. The film ends on a bitter note, because though the Kasmi family do receive Canadian citizenship, their son died fighting for other immigrants that were not offered this privilege.

Released in theatres only four days before September 11, 2001, the film suffered from bad timing. Some journalists described Hamid's actions as terrorism, though Chouinard stressed the fact that there is a difference between activism and terrorism (Kelly F6). *L'ange De Goudron* has been called "...a type of UFO in the landscape of Quebec cinema, which is usually white, Francophone and de souche (pureblood)."<sup>21</sup> (Blanchard 60). A less than flattering comparison between aliens and immigrants... (Though by this I am not implying that aliens are unflattering species to be compared to, but rather referring to the fear that they evoke in certain earthlings).

It is significant that the men who die in these films fall prey to the police, as the police serve as a state run tool of control over the population and tend to target "others" more often than the dominant population. Foucault explains how such a notion functions in the modern state: As a result, the modern State can scarcely function without becoming involved with racism at some point, within certain limits and subject to certain conditions. What in fact is racism? It is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die. (Foucault 254)

Ultimately, it is really what is different about their identity that must be usurped for the current status quo to thrive. As Foucault states: When I say "killing," I obviously do not mean simply murder as such, but also every form of indirect murder: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection and so on. (Foucault 256)

The unexplained acceptance of some immigrants for citizenship versus the deportation of others can also be linked to Foucault's ideas on state racism and the aforementioned form of "killing" symbolized by expulsion and rejection. A line such as: "Ah! Mon sacrement! [Quebecer swear word/insult] I'll show you how it works here!"<sup>22</sup> from a police officer towards Hamid before beating him to death shows how state

racism creates and perpetuates inequalities.

There are numerous examples of biopolitical forces at play throughout *L'ange De Goudron*. The immigration officer's patronizing comment about Naima's pregnancy and the fact that the baby will be born after they receive citizenship is indicative of this: "...he'll be a real little Canadian in good standing."<sup>23</sup> The images of Immigration Canada and the hackers' success in deleting the files containing information about the immigrants to be deported show an interesting attempt to defy biopolitical technological disciplinary and regularizing power. This control functions at the level of the individual but also with the multiplicity: "...I would say that discipline tries to rule a multiplicity of men to the extent that their multiplicity can and must be dissolved into individual bodies that can be kept under surveillance, trained, used, and, if need be, punished" (Foucault 242). The film activates Foucault's observations, because as the hackers succeed in erasing information about the immigrants to be deported, the surveillance cameras record their actions. At the end of the film, what Ahmed says to his deceased son is very significant in light of the present analysis and shows the key moment where the film is unable to step out of the established vocabulary of the nation: "Your presence here, now eternal, definitely seals our sense of belonging to this territory for me, Naima, Djamila and the little Salim who you will never meet, but who will grow up knowing how his big brother's heart was filled with so much courage. I now walk with my head held high, Hafid. I've understood that a man's place in society, is the one he takes."<sup>24</sup>

For Ahmed, the death of his son has created the promise of belonging to this territory. New space is created in the confines of the territory for them to exist on, as Hafid sacrifices himself like a brave warrior and martyr, saving two hundred refugees from deportation, and ultimately symbolizing his family's new roots now that he is six feet underground. Once more, the tragic narrative of sacrifice creates the possibility of belonging. As in wartime logic, for "us" to be safe and truly prosper, some brave souls among us must give our lives. To speak the language of the biopolitical is to buy into the hierarchies of state formations that encourage hegemonies, borders, injustice and inequality.

Chouinard has said about his film that it is "...a very tragic story that accurately depicts the reality of immigrants today."<sup>25</sup> (Martel 42) It represents part of the reality, but is it not creating a new hegemony to insinuate that it represents the reality of all immigrants?

Contributing to the discourse about the immigrant as sacrificial, Chouinard has said about his film: “I wanted (...) to show the calm strength and the abnegation of these shadow people...”<sup>26</sup> (Press release for *L’ange De Goudron*). Again, the belief in the inevitability of loss and tragedy is conveyed in these words: “I chose to build the film around contrasts to demonstrate the huge cleavage that must necessarily happen within the Kasmi family so that it can integrate into a such a different universe (Quebec) compared to their native Algeria.”<sup>27</sup> (Press release for *L’ange De Goudron*).

Chouinard also sees immigration in terms of rooting: “For Denis Chouinard it’s useless to ignore it: within a generation or two, Quebec society will be radically transformed by the rooting of all these new citizens. The displacement of populations is a major issue of the 21st century. In Quebec, it’s only just starting, especially considering the large territory we have.”<sup>28</sup> (Provencher G1). As welcoming and well intentioned as this may be, it still implies the necessity for the problematic notion of rooting in the creation of identity.

## LANDSCAPE

The use of images of landscape in these films contributes to the mythical notion of what Quebec identity is intrinsically anchored in. In four out of the six films that have been discussed, images of vast white snowy landscapes (both urban and rural) abound. The notion of the immigrant as antagonist to this terribly cold weather results from this persistent imagery. This bilateral hostility feeds into the conflicting relationship between the immigrant and the host country, though there have been instances where it is engaged with critically. As Tana has said about the image of Ninetta over a white field: “Snow represents this uniformity that can no longer be. It’s the purity of the race, of the pure laine francophone identity. It is challenged by this immigration.”<sup>29</sup> (Perrault) This frequent return to the image of the landscape to symbolize the essence of Quebec or Canadian identity, even if it is intruded upon by a new group, does not subvert the original mythology that it creates. Using the work of the Group of Seven to speak about this, Manning says:

Generations of Canadians have grown up seeing Canada through the paintings of the Group, taught the link between territory and identity as a window into “their” landscape, where “the great purpose of landscape art is to make us at home in our own country” (Hill 1995:83). The landscape, foregrounded as the “true” image of Canada, is understood as an essential

proponent in the nationalizing attempts to relegate the discourse of “Canadian identity” to notions of vastness and emptiness... (Manning 2)

We still carry this belief, occluding the presence of the First Nations before the arrival of Europeans on this land. The idea that there is a vast emptiness that immigrants can also now appropriate occludes it further. On Chouinard’s choice to put Ahmed in the “snowy desert” of Quebec as he calls it, he has said that he wished to remove the immigrant from the safe Montreal ghettos in which they are often confined to put him in “...this big white desert that also belongs to him and that his duties as a citizen lead towards “all” the territorial reality of his new country, not only to the small, tangible and “secure” ghetto that is often that of newcomers.”<sup>30</sup> (Press release for *L’ange De Goudron*).

## SPEAKING THE DOMINANT LANGUAGE VERSUS TRANSCENDING IT

Though these films are critical, they are not subversive. They do not fully challenge the discourses that have caused the very inequities that they deplore. Death can be a metaphor for transformation of course. But these narratives also imply that after the death of the sacrificial lamb, the transformation has been completed and those that are left behind are free to root themselves in this new territory. It is unfortunate that this state of transition has to be consistently punctuated with tragic deaths. Not because they are not part of the potential reality of what it means to move from one place to another, but rather because they imply that it must necessarily be tragic. The recurring image of rooting also implies a finality in the formation of identity. As we have seen, these films potentially reiterate exclusionary narratives about state sovereignty. Perpetuating these narratives where death becomes inextricably bound with the loss of one’s ethnic identity will simply result in the stagnation of ideas on belonging, nationhood, identity, origins, etc. This is not to say that we should ignore all the very real and terrible violence that the racism inherent in homogenous visions of the state has caused and keeps causing, nor stop making movies or other artworks about them. However, remaining stuck in narratives that keep reiterating this fact risks producing the opposite effect desired by the creators that are denouncing them; remaining trapped in them without the possibility of moving beyond them. Origins will remain fatal only as long as we insist that they must be stable, hence static and uniform, if we refuse to see that they are perpetually in motion. A useful concept in thinking about this is that of errant politics as suggested



by Manning:

*Errant politics subverts attachments that depend on the stability of territory and identity, rewriting the national vocabulary of belonging into a language movement. To err within politics is to initiate a dialogue that transgresses monologic state sovereignty. (xxvii)*

And also:

*Instances of errant politics can be observed in countercoherences to the nation, such as cultural texts that decry the nation's exclusivity by emphasizing counterarticulations that serve to undermine national narratives of attachment. (Manning xxix)*

The films I have written about do not sever themselves from these narratives of attachment. On the contrary, they crave them because of their unattainable nature. This of course does not imply the need for a perpetual physical nomadism, however it is an important plea against the stagnation of ideas and politics. Representing origins as fatal may be an important stage in the representation of groups that have been marginalized, however if we wish to contribute in removing them from this marginalization, their representations must evolve past this state. Let us not forget that as Michael Shapiro says:

*The identity stories that construct actors as one or another type of person (e.g., Jew versus Arab, native versus immigrant) and that territorialize identities (e.g., resident versus nomad, citizen versus foreigner) are the foundations for historical and contemporary forms of antagonism, violence, and interpretive contention over the meaning of actions. (Shapiro 173)*

To maintain the trend of these narratives about immigrants who inevitably go through loss in the form of death as a metaphor for loss of identity is dangerous because we risk contributing to an essentialist idea of what the immigrant experience must look like. These narratives of killing also prove the necessity for biopolitics to: "... expose its own race to the absolute and universal threat of death. Risking one's life, being exposed to total destruction, was one of the main principles inscribed in the basic duties of the obedient" (Foucault 259-260). Thus constantly reiterating that

immigrating can be a risk, even a deadly risk, might make immigrants more afraid of challenging injustices in a non-dichotomous way. Foucault also suggests that racism can exist only when there is the risk of physical death (262). Our aim should thus be to reduce these risks of death by dismantling structures of power that contribute to them instead of simply reiterating ad nauseam that they exist. Constantly creating images of death risks feeding the fear, anger and hate that cause racism instead of dissipating it. To perpetuate images of immigrants as victims divests them of their power to move beyond that state. Similarly, several pure laine Quebecers are also tired of seeing themselves as the colonized victims of Anglophones and wish to move beyond this position to think their politics and their culture differently.

To resist the stagnation of ideas and politics, the concept of the ephemeral is useful: "...the ephemeral refers to the aspects of culture that permit culture to remain incomplete, uncertain, unstable, and, ultimately, indefinable" (Manning 149). However if these films insist in creating an identity of immigrant, that though it is hybrid, becomes itself locked into the semantics of the national, it will become sterile and stop evolving. We should keep in mind the extremely relevant question posed by Manning: "How does a rearticulation of the political ensure that it doesn't simply become a rearticulation of the very politics it seeks to undermine?" (151). It is important to at least conceptualize that it could be possible to go beyond the limits of the nation because as we have seen, if the assertion of identity must be done through the origins, it is inevitable that it will be hegemonic and create divisions. It may seem utopic and impossible to transcend the current system of state formation. However, to wish for it, to consider its possibility, is the first step in moving beyond the current limiting narratives. As Shapiro states: "... ethical theories aimed at a normative inhibition of these antagonisms continue to presume this same geopolitical cartography. To resist this discursive/representational monopoly, we must challenge the geopolitical map" (175-6). When quoting Michel Foucault, Shapiro also says: "...the purpose of critical analysis is to question, not deepen, existing structures of intelligibility" (174). As Erin Manning writes: "...I want to believe that not being 'at home' in the traditional sense does not necessarily belie the possibility of being accommodated" (ix).

"Accommodations" has become a very charged term in Quebec, and holding on to this wish may seem like a provocation to those who view the recent requests for

accommodations by some immigrants as unreasonable. But perhaps this notion needs to be moved outside of the context of ethnicity, outside of a duality between dominant culture and ethnic or religious minority to truly become useful. Denis Chouinard offers an important comment on errant politics:

*We are so numbed by the current discourse that Canada is the best country in the world, that all is cool and beautiful. We can't accept to look at the shit around us. It's like we're asleep. I think that filmmakers are there to offer a lucid outlook and say that we should rectify things so society can be in a perpetual selfexamination and in perpetual evolution.*<sup>31</sup> (Porter B1).

Let's just hope then that the filmmakers we have discussed feel the responsibility to be in constant evolution and their examination of the supposed fatality of origins will only be temporary!

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## FOOTNOTES

1 Translated from French by the author.

2 Translated from French by the author.

3 They are in fact all well known Quebecer actors, some of which have been in popular films and television shows, making the suspension of disbelief very difficult. Mouawad has been widely criticized for this but he insists that viewers' imaginations can overlook these things. This might be more so the case with his primary medium of expression, theatre, but it does not work cinematically. He has defended himself against these criticisms by saying that if we accept that an actor can play an assassin, he can also play someone from a different culture/origin (Dumais 62). However, it is probably more difficult to hire a real assassin to play in a movie about an assassin than it is to hire Lebanese actors to play in a film about Lebanese people...

4 Translated from French by the author.

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