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# 360 degrees of separation: Notes on facts and fictions of self and nation in the recurring Quebec referendum

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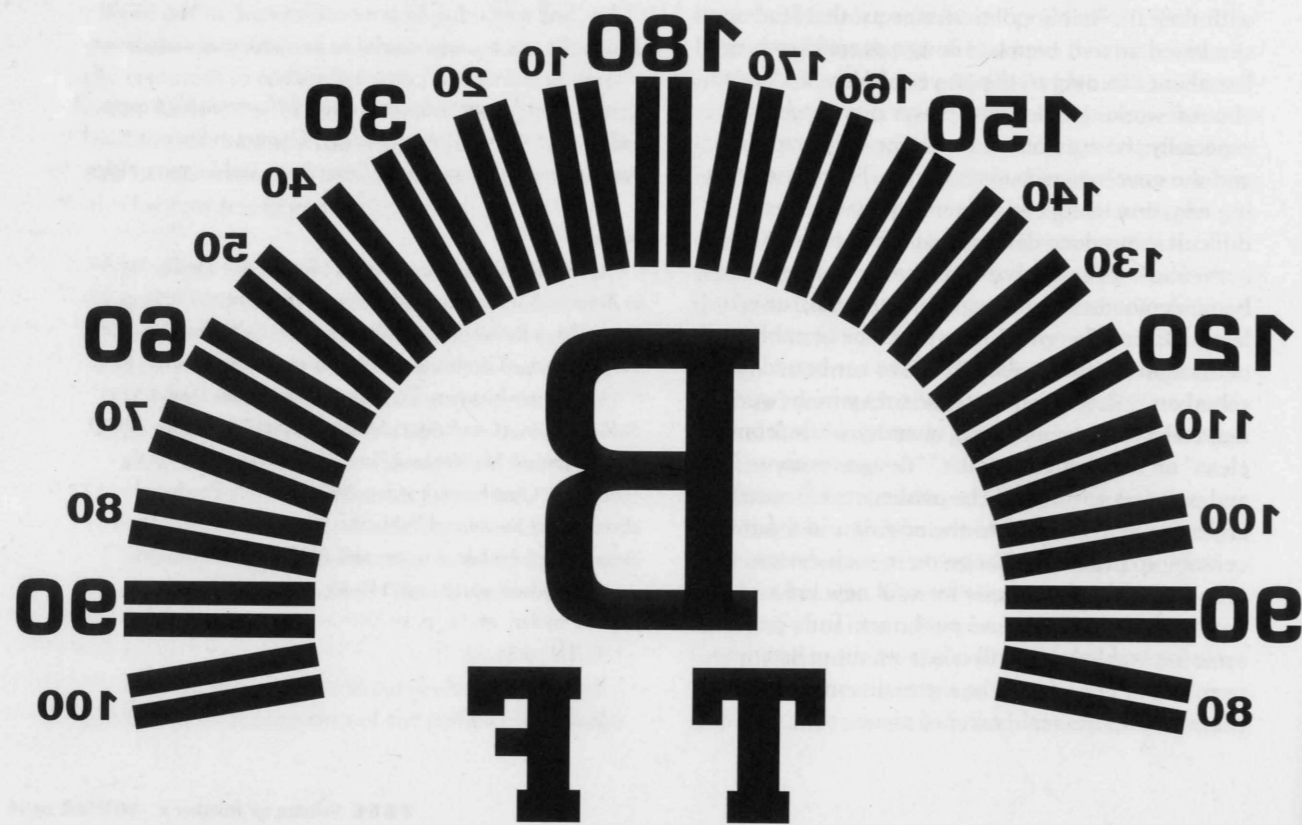
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# 360 DEGREES OF SEPARATION

There is a price to pay for victory or defeat.  
—Pierre Falardeau<sup>1</sup>

On October 30, 1995, the people of Québec went to the polls in unprecedented numbers to perform the nearly impossible task of distilling the chaos and conflict of the referendum campaign's many passions and promises, threats and dreams, heroes and villains into an unequivocal "yes" or "no." In the days leading up to the vote, the complexity of this decision-making process was compounded by a series of partisan manipulations of the implication of each option, whereby the respective meanings of "yes" and "no" votes were shifted and emptied; "yes" was contorted to mean "maybe" and nobody really knew what "no" meant. In Montreal the pre-vote atmosphere was electric and elusive, with individual sentiments ranging from elation and hope to fear and confusion. The city itself took on a curious carnivalesque appearance. With the vote scheduled for the day preceding Hallowe'en, lurid images of witches, ghosts and pumpkins sprung up randomly among the partisan displays of "Oui" and "Non" campaign signs.



## NOTES ON FACTS AND FICTIONS OF SELF AND NATION IN THE RECURRING QUEBEC REFERENDUM

by David McIntosh

In this context of widespread instability and disorientation, a series of political spectacles were staged to enact fundamental mythologies in order to re-assert authority, order and power. By far the most significant of these spectacles was the October 27 Crusade for Canada demonstration in Place du Canada, the centre of Montreal's financial district formerly known as Dominion Square. Place du Canada is ruled by Québec's Conrad Black, Paul Desmarais, a rabid federalist press baron and president of the aptly named Power Corporation. For weeks the "no" forces and English media had been stirring up "I love Québec" sentiment among "ordinary" Canadians, especially in the West. A low point in this effort was reached when CBC National News aired the views of a hairdresser from Saskatchewan who urged Québec to stay in the country because Canada is like a potato, which rots when a piece is cut off. On the day of the Crusade for Canada rally, Western Canadian phone companies offered free phone lines for calls to Québec; many Montrealers, seemingly picked out of phone books by utter strangers for having French-looking last names, received the political equivalent of obscene phone calls pleading with them to feel the "love" and vote "no."

The Crusade for Canada, capitalizing on this sincere but misguided and artificially induced sentiment, summoned the faithful to Montreal on free or reduced rate planes, trains and buses. Two days before the referendum vote, an invasionary army of pilgrims anywhere from 35,000 to 150,000 strong trekked across the country to evoke the power of the most potent Canadian victor/victim mythology—the heroic image of Terry Fox binding Canada from sea to shining sea. The Canadian collective subconscious seems ruled by an almost mediaeval drive to mortify the flesh by walking, crawling, running, cycling or slithering across the vast landscape in order to dominate and claim it as "nation." The spectacle of the ecstatic pilgrims also provided temporary release and distraction from an infinitely more noxious competing myth—that of government debt and deficit, which manifests itself in the reduction and withdrawal of the state from every form of collective action. This destruction myth is propagated by an unholy alliance between right wing political ideology and corporate financial interests, the very same

forces which underwrote the Crusade for Canada. For these forces, the prospect of a self-determining nation being built by Québecers interferes with the interests of their own emerging "nation" of transnational wealth, ruled by a corporate oligarchy dedicated to the sole principle of profit and unallied to any identity, language, culture, history or memory. And so we are left with the ludicrous sight of tens of thousands of naive voices chanting in the streets of Montreal for the survival of the Canadian nation while the nation is being dismantled.

Another deluded power myth of the Canadian nation that was put into high relief in the days leading up to the referendum is that of "two founding nations," the official creation myth that erroneously re-orders several hundred years of history to insist that Canada is a collaborative construction of French and English nations. The Eeyouch (Cree) and the Inuit nations, which together lay claim to two-thirds of Québec territory (the Mohawk nation lays claim to the other third), held their own referenda to decide on their relationship to a sovereign Québec. Both First Nations overwhelmingly rejected participation in any form of Québec independence. Eeyouch Grand Chief Matthew Coon Come, Inuit Chief Zeebeedee Nungak and Mohawk Chief Billy Two Rivers asserted their peoples' right to self-determination and territorial integrity. The "two founding nations" myth crumbled in the face of this aboriginal challenge. The government of Québec rejected First Nations claims for self-determination and territorial sovereignty, even though it was engaged in its

own version of the same project. The government of Canada insisted on the primacy and indivisibility of its sovereign authority by rejecting the legitimacy of both Quebec and First Nations aspirations. The Eeyouch and Inuit referenda emptied "two nations" of power and relevance, insisting on a new topography of territories that sets the notion of "one nation" in dynamic opposition to the emergence of "many nations."

In an attenuated atmosphere of crisis and against a convoluted field of intentions and meanings, Quebecers chose between "yes" and "no" on October 30. After the polls closed in Montreal, the streets were uncharacteristically quiet, as people gathered around television sets in their homes or in bars to watch the returns. The "yes" campaign's early lead prompted speculation about a repeat of the 1970 October Crisis and "Trudeau's Tantrum" should the *sovereignists* win. Would Chrétien follow suit and send in the army again? Such justifiable fears were not born out. The final indecisive 50/50 split between "yes" and "no" signified neither victory or defeat, but rather a frustrating perpetuation of tenacious duality. The fault lines in the collective conscious and subconscious revealed during the referendum campaign cracked wide open after the vote, and a schizophrenic frenzy of acrimonious self-mutilation ensued. The love professed just days earlier turned quickly into hate as inept politicians clawed viciously at each other for any shred of authority and advantage. The patrician media response to the stalemate was suitably oblique; *Globe and Mail* neo-con ideologues mouthed flatulent editorial platitudes about Canada's nationalism as "modern, liberal, decent, tolerant and colour-blind."<sup>2</sup> The overwrought patriot games of the preceding weeks degenerated into the cruelest of tautologies. To paraphrase Pierre Falardeau, there is a price to pay for a stalemate.

My idea of self was everything but simple.  
I realized I was two in the same body.  
I started to say "we" to talk about "me."  
*C'était un cauchemar.* Fuck off! It was a dream  
come true.

—Earl Tremblay/Robert Morin<sup>3</sup>

## History, Imagination and Action: Video Artists for Independence

[The nation] is an imagined political community.... Communities are distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.<sup>4</sup>

The richly woven cultural and social fabric of Quebec's self-determination movement is immune to the impoverished imagination and dysfunctional mythologies of Canada's official nationalism, official in that it is "conscious, self-protective ... emanating from the state and serving the interests of the state first and foremost."<sup>5</sup> Quebec nationalism is deep, dynamic and persistent. It is rooted in a fertile interaction of history, memory, imagination and imagery, or, in the terms elaborated by anthropologist Michael Taussig, it is an "intricately construed, long-standing, unconscious cultural formations of meaning—modes of feeling—whose social network of tacit conventions and imagery lies in a symbolic world."<sup>6</sup> It is this powerful construction of Quebec's collective consciousness that has consistently been resisted, ignored or denied by Canada's official nationalism, but that houses the implicit knowledge and imagery required to reconceive and move beyond the "yes/no," "we/me," "50/50" impasse.

One of the most innovative and inspiring socio-cultural traditions in Quebec is that of the moving image. From its first flowering as direct cinema in the early 1950's to contemporary video by artists, the moving image has been one of the primary carriers of national identity, action and imagination. A recent instance of this tradition's dynamic intimacy with the struggle for a self-determining nation is the collective video project *1837 secondes pour l'indépendance* (*1837 Seconds for Independence*). Coordinated by the Montreal artists' centre Coop Vidéo, this tape brings together sixty-eight self-financed artists' promotional videos, most around sixty seconds in length, all supporting the "yes" option in the referendum. Some of the pieces are by established film and video artists, such as Pierre Falardeau, Jeanne Crepeau, Denis Chouinard, Bernard Emond and Robert Morin, while most are by developing and first-time artists. Every submission was included in the final compilation.

The breadth of participation in the project ensures that every film and television style and genre, from horror and romance to evening news and video games, is appropriated, reworked and deployed in support of independence. The organizing imagery of these works is equally diverse, including divorce, birth, bodily functions, family relations, sex, hockey and wrestling, while the sentiments expressed range from humour to anger. Some pieces evoke separation with elegant parody, such as Roch Lapierre's simple coverage of a man combing a centre part in his hair. Others are more analytically constructed, for example Denis Chouinard's burning mini-history of anti-Quebec actions by the KKK, the Heritage Front and the RCMP. This boisterous participatory project is engaging and provocative, demonstrating a broad-based commitment to self-determination that is so deeply intertwined with the framework of production of cultural and media artifacts as to be

inseparable. This compilation tape was also distributed in an unconventional manner established by Pierre Falardeau for the circulation of his 1993 short film *Le Temps des bouffons*, a searing indictment of the colonialist behaviours of Quebec federalists. Falardeau released his film on tape directly into the public domain, renouncing his copyright and explicitly encouraging viewers to copy and disseminate the tape as widely as possible. The same underground distribution strategy was applied to *1837 secondes pour l'indépendance*. While it may not be possible to quantify its impact, its contents have been subversively circulated through public consciousness.

It is also important that the significance of the title of this project not be overlooked. The number "1837" may reflect the length of the tape in seconds but, more importantly, it refers to the Rebellion of 1837, when nationalist and democrat Joseph Papineau lead his "patriote" forces in the first armed revolt against British colonial rule by Quebecers. Papineau was defeated but he is still remembered in Quebec as the first hero of self-determination. In referring to Papineau's Rebellion, *1837 secondes pour l'indépendance* stands as a clearly articulated point of intersection between history, memory and contemporary imagination. History is not simply an objectively ordered unfolding of events over time in Quebec, but rather a subjectively produced experience of the nation's past. A skeletal overview of some of the fundamental historical events of nation and identity which resonate through and inform contemporary cultural practices and social relations includes: André Laurendeau's electoral success with the nationalist Bloc Populaire (precursor of the Bloc Québécois) in federal Parliament in the 1940s; the formation of the Parti Québécois in 1968; the FLQ kidnappings and the retaliatory suspension of civil liberties and army occupation ordered by Pierre Trudeau under the War Measures Act in 1970; the election victory of René Lévesque and the Parti Québécois in 1978; and the first sovereignty referendum in 1980 where the independence option gathered forty percent of the vote. It is no coincidence that Quebec's national motto is "*Je me souviens*."

## The Politics of Fact and Fiction:

### The Films of Gilles Groulx

Experiential appropriation of the past...incorporates historical and social fantasy sensitive to the underground existence of forbidden images. In turning to such images, people are reflecting on their symbolic potential to fulfill hopes for release from suffering.<sup>7</sup>

The "1837" project is firmly rooted in Quebec's rich tradition of imagination and imagery that stretches back to the visionary, liberationist work of one of the pioneers of cinema in Quebec, Gilles Groulx. A prolific master of spectacle, an inspired formal experimenter and a committed Marxist and Quebec nationalist, Groulx effected enormous shifts in the symbolic order that reigned in Quebec with such vital works as *Les Raquetteurs* (1958) and *Le chat dans le sac* (1964). Since his death in 1994, many of his fourteen films left

linguishing in archives have begun to be screened again; the majority of Groulx's films have never been released in an English version, and so have remained largely inaccessible outside of Quebec. Two of these works bear special significance to representations of experiential subjectivities of self and nation in Quebec.

Shot in the winter of 1971, hard on the heels of the War Measures Act army siege of Quebec, *24 heures ou plus (24 Hours or More)* is an encyclopedic two-hour document of the lives of fifty-six different subjects, including farm workers, union leaders, newspaper editors, elected officials, housewives, hippies, garment workers, music students, bank robbers, food coop organizers, police attack dog trainers, zoo keepers, Cree land claims activists, a man who murdered his boss and his supportive wife who claims "we all do what he did every day, just with words and thoughts". For Groulx, as he states in direct address from a location inside his own film and alongside his subjects, reality is not a product of chance but of clear political rules in which structures and patterns of oppression emerge over the course of filming daily life and editing the stories together. A dangerously inclusive project that was repressed for over five years by the National Film Board, *24 heures ou plus* shook the foundations of consciousness of self and nation by daring to imagine and conjure the insidious rhythms of power which order the experience of everyday life.

Ten years later Groulx undertook a diametrically opposed project, at least in aesthetic terms, zeroing in on the psychic and moral bankruptcy of Quebec's recently emerged francophone bourgeoisie through the fictional construct of a cut-throat industrial overlord and financier named Zom. A grandiosely recited and sung opera staged in the real sites of economic power (stock market floors, stately mansions, sleek penthouse board rooms), *Au pays de Zom (In the Land of Zom, 1982)* is an impeccably visualized space, reminiscent of the cinematic architectures of Jacques Tati. Monsieur Zom is a tragic figure of Bill Gates proportions who talks to no one but himself, even though he considers himself a citizen of the

world. Experiencing an ersatz crisis of conscience because he has no conscience, he sees himself as facing the future alone since only he can perceive and control the true order of things. The empire he has created can give him nothing more than what he programmed it for—subservience. Zom dies a pompously baroque costumed death on a theatre stage leaving his audience unmoved. Groulx's unique contribution to the national symbology of Quebec lies in his engaged imagination's capacity for contradiction; he excavated the truth of power through the illusionary fable of *Au pays de Zom* at the same time as he built a healing mythology from the experiential reality of *24 heures ou plus*.

### An Autobiographical Fable of Self and Nation: Robert Morin's *Yes Sir! Madame...*

I woke up to face my responsibilities but I faced us, and there were a lot of them. *On s'est fait peur*. On one side all the peapousses, *puis tous les têtes carrés de l'autre bord*. The fight would have been a massacre. *La bataille aurait été mortelle*. The only reasonable thing to do was split. *Ça fait qu'on a décidé de se séparer*. For good. *Pour de bon*. Good luck. *Bonne chance*. *Yes Sir! Madame...*  
—Earl Tremblay/Robert Morin<sup>8</sup>

One of the most revealing and original recent works to be produced in Quebec is Robert Morin's *Yes Sir! Madame...*, a feature length piece shot on film and distributed on video, which recombines inherited traditions of history, memory and imagination with contemporary constructions of autobiography, language, translation and performance. *Yes Sir! Madame...* reformulates the 50/50 national stalemate as an expression of the fundamental duality of the individual bilingual psyche, weaving a tale of explicitly subjective experience in the form of an autobiographical fable. A project almost twenty years in the making, *Yes Sir! Madame...* is constructed from footage filmed by Morin from the time he received his first Bolex



Still from *24 heures ou plus*, Gilles Groulx, 1973, 16mm, 113 min.  
Courtesy the National Film Board of Canada.

camera as a teenager. The footage is all shot from Morin's point of view and in a style approximating natural eye movement, operating as documentary and subjective expression simultaneously. Morin has shaped and transformed this material collected over the years into a narrative bed where his mirrored self and projected alter-ego named Earl Tremblay sees through Morin's eyes and speaks with Morin's voice. In addition to speaking the entire voice-over narration for this idiosyncratic diary of personal history, overlaying his current collaborative construction of identity on visual documents from the past, Tremblay/Morin performs a ludicrous non-verbal mimicking of sound track elements—sputtering lips for a motorboat effect, nasal throat rumbling for a snowmobile, humming a stripper's dance music, changing pitch to lip synch other characters' voices. The most significant feature of Morin's home-made soundtrack, however, is the doubling of language; every phrase Tremblay utters is spoken in both French and English. For viewers who speak both, the interleaving of languages establishes a comforting rhythm which renders concrete the duality of existence in two symbolic systems and the attendant processes of equivalency and translation. Tremblay's meticulous verbal translation between parallel subjectivities positions language as the primary site of conflict for this multiply identified self, and as the embodying medium of history and memory. For viewers who speak only one of the two languages, there is a sense of frustration and mistrust regarding what is being said in the language not understood.

Morin's power to orchestrate this nested series of dualities and dialogic relationships—English/French, self/other, me/we, experience/imagination, autobiography/fable—is dependent on maintaining the elasticity of the boundaries between them. However, this equilibrium degenerates

progressively into schizophrenic oppositions as it is run through the narrative mill of Tremblay's fabricated history. Born in a small lobster fishing village on the Lower St. Lawrence, Tremblay was raised speaking both French and English. After the untimely death of his mother due to clam poisoning, Earl inherited her Bolex camera and nineteen rolls of film, a legacy which his mother hoped would help him find himself. The first image he shot was his mother's grave and he was hooked; he became "the kid with the camera glued to his forehead", filming everything, experimenting with every function of the camera—slow motion, pixillation, superimpositions. Eventually he escapes to Montreal with just his camera to seek his fortune. His bilingualism gets him a job as a night watchman at a used car lot and a home in the hut on the lot. After losing his job to a German shepherd, Earl moves into an abandoned warehouse, surviving by panhandling and eating in soup kitchens. Pushed to the limit by this crisis of alienation and poverty, his personality begins to disintegrate, and the relationship of exact equivalence between his English and French selves begins to shift. Multiple identity becomes multiple personalities and the two Earls begin fighting with each other. He distracts his two selves first with gambling, then as personal home movie-maker to Montreal's king of the cement industry, then as an aspiring Member of Parliament in Mulroney's "big blue machine." On reaching Ottawa and the bureaucratic stagnation of government and party politics, the level of animosity grows to such proportions that his two selves decide to go their separate ways. English Earl wanders the endless halls of government buildings aimlessly, tormented by a ghost speaking to him through the hum of the air conditioning. The ghost is none other than French Earl, taunting him and making him say things he doesn't want to say. His two selves might have separated but they can't let each other go. Finally English Earl succumbs to the impossibility of either living with or without his other self and rises in the House of Commons to announce "I can't go on any longer pretending to be myself. I'm an impostor. Today I have to show you the monster." English Earl collapses into a dementia of incessant swearing, roaming Ottawa's museums in search of a diorama to call home. Meanwhile French Earl has embarked on his own journey of self-destruction, frequenting down-and-out bars and grim day work employment offices with a bunch of people sitting around waiting—just like Parliament—and experimenting with kinky sex and heroin. French Earl cannot escape his English self either, and their schizophrenic animosity escalates into an out-and-out war of violent self-mutilation; they burn their hands on red hot electric stoves, shove fingers into wall sockets and drive staple after staple into themselves.

Both Earls regain consciousness in a lush remote woods on a beach overlooking a pristine lake, asking each other "Where are we?" and getting the response "*Je sais pas.*" Earl's two selves have both survived and they are no longer talking in parallel or in sequence, but to each other in their respective languages. A flock of naked humans swims to sun themselves on the beach, running back into the water with fright and swimming away when Earl startles them with the questions "Do you speak English? *Parlez-vous français?*" Earl realizes he has arrived in the utopian non-verbal land of the Frog People, strips naked and swims off to join them, never to be seen again. His camera is



Stills from *Yes Sir! Madame...*, Robert Morin, video, 1994, 73 min. Distributed by Vidéographe, Montreal.



Still from *Yes Sir! Madame...*, Robert Morin, video, 1994, 73 min. Distributed by Vidéographe, Montreal.

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#### Notes

1. Dialogue from *1837 secondes pour l'indépendance*, 1995, distributed by Coop Vidéo.
2. *The Globe and Mail* Editorial, 4 November 1995, p. D6.
3. Dialogue from *Yes Sir! Madame...*, Robert Morin, 1994, distributed by Vidéographe.
4. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York: Verso, 1983), p. 6.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 159.
6. Michael Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 9.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 367.
8. Dialogue from *Yes Sir! Madame...*, Robert Morin, 1994, distributed by Vidéographe.
9. Taussig, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

left running on the beach and the film ends when the roll runs out. Despite the fact that Earl Tremblay disappeared over a year ago, he turns up now and then to make his own peculiar brand of intervention, often in locations where Robert Morin has just been. Most recently, Earl was spotted in a Syrian bar on Jean-Talon the night of the referendum vote, laughing demonically and knowingly at the TV screen when the tally reached the 50/50 stalemate point.

A seductive work of dangerous humour, *Yes Sir! Madame...* accomplishes the magical feat of constructing an imaginary subject on a heroic journey of self-discovery who takes up dual residence in the realms of mythology and reality. Speaking in a sensual vernacular distilled from a potent brew of subjective experiences and symbolic structures, Morin opens fields of vision where schizophrenic and self-mutilated identities of self and nation are deconstructed and reassembled to assume new dimensions of meaning beyond prosaic and untenable notions of the indivisible purity of unity.

### The Next Referendum: Imagination and Nations

[Fabulation's] truly crucial feature lies in the way it creates an uncertain reality out of fiction, giving shape and voice to the formless form of reality in which an unstable interplay of truth and illusion becomes a phantasmic social force. All societies live by fictions taken as real.<sup>9</sup>

The complex interplay of history, memory, experience, imagination and language embodied in the work of Robert Morin, Gilles Groulx, the sixty-eight contributors to *1837 secondes pour l'indépendance* and many other cultural producers, constitutes a phantasmic force that fuels the process of self-determination in Quebec, standing in stark contrast to the duality of competing official nationalisms being played out by the political and corporate classes. This gap between self-produced and official nationalisms was indelibly staked out in the October 30 referendum and its aftermath. On one hand, Jacques Parizeau's technocratic official nationalism, based on a regressive typology of identity as francophone, anglophone, allophone, ethnic, neo-Quebecer or proto-Quebecer, exploded in his face, forcing him to resign in a state of disgrace. On the other hand, the rhetorical official nationalism of the federalists collapsed under the weight of the absurdity of their call for the preservation of the nation while they disembowel the state to appease debt mongers and ease corporate profit-taking. From this chronically dysfunctional and self-destructive stalemate of propagandized nationalisms, no sustainable nation can emerge. The prospect of another referendum in Quebec within the next year being staged on anything remotely resembling the same terms as the last one provokes gut churning horror. Radical reconceptualization and renegotiation of the territories of self, of the maps of identity and of the boundaries of nation is essential if any vestige of a self-determining collectivity is to survive the global homogenization of difference. The new unifying mythologies that will empower the diversity of peoples of the country soon to be formerly known as Canada can best be built on the experiential subjectivities of engaged cultural imagination.

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