

Line Grenier

Governing “National” Memories through Popular Music in Québec¹

La Musée de la Civilisation in Québec City played the role of instigator and host to the first national exhibition devoted to Québécois popular music. Entitled *Je vous entendis chanter (I Hear You Singing)*, the exhibition was inaugurated just a few weeks before the Québec sovereignty referendum in the fall of 1995. It was closed a year later, but due to its unprecedented success with the public as well as the critics, the exhibition was reopened in March 1997, this time in the Just For Laughs Museum in Montréal, where it also attracted large crowds for more than a year.²

Imagine yourself, armed with an infrared headset, entering a dimly lit room. Female voices greet you with a familiar folk song: “*A la claire fontaine / m’en allant promener / j’ai trouvé l’eau si belle / que je m’y suis baignée / Il y a longtemps que je t’aime / jamais je ne t’oublierai.*”³ While the singing fades into silence, a narrator welcomes you to the exhibition: “What I am about to tell you,” he says,

is a love story, about the 400-year-old love affair between French-speaking Québec and its music. It is the story of a people and a music that flourished against all odds, adrift in a sea of English culture and tossed about by foreign trends. This music has been with the Québécois from the very start, faithfully reflecting their aspirations, dreams and identity. After absorbing various outside influences, copying some and assimilating others, Québec music has finally come into its own. (Musée de la Civilisation 1995:7)

Considering the exhibition *Je vous entendis chanter* as a key moment in an ever-expanding public discourse on local popular music, this article proposes a diagnostics of the relations of power/knowledge which presided over the enthronement of

Québécois *chanson* into the temple of contemporary national museology in Québec. More precisely, it examines the distinct forms of memory which contribute, in this conjuncture, to positing the domain of popular music as the necessary partner of nationality and citizenship and thus making the history of this music inextricably that of the “Québécois people.”

This analysis is part of a broader research program which aims to better understand the ways in which the changing boundaries of francophone popular music in Québec are established (Grenier and Morrison 1995), as well as the conditions which permit this domain of activity, above all others, to become *the* emblem of modern Québécois culture, deemed a national popular culture (Grenier 1996). I don't think that this status bears on some presumably intrinsic properties, generic or ontological, of the music; I view it rather as the result of the particular *dispositif* through which popular music is produced in Québec. Drawing on Michel Foucault's work, I use *dispositif* to refer to the historically contingent linkages of discourses and institutions which support and are supported by particular systems of musical action and knowledge, and which act to orient, guide, or affect the conduct of the self and others (Foucault, 1994:240–243). I am interested in *Je vous entend chanter*, the artefacts and documents that compose it, and the media texts and official declarations that contribute to its inscription in the public discourse as an integral part of this *dispositif*. The exhibition constitutes a particular articulation of the system of power/knowledge across which a “regime of truth” (Foucault 1980) operates to regularize the production of statements on francophone popular music in Québec as “everybody's business,” as a politically important phenomenon, and as the terrain of a unique battle which unites the destiny of a nation to that of its individual and institutional cultural agents. I argue that in mobilizing this regime, which it also helps to produce, the exhibition defines the “place” of Québécois music. That is, not the geographical space it occupies, but rather, as Doreen Massey suggests, the constellation of “particular interactions and mutual articulations of social relations, social processes, experiences and understandings, in a situation of co-presence” (Massey 1993:68) which, by regulating this place, defines it.

My critical intervention aims at showing how the definition of this place of Québécois music is informed by the complex play of memories produced and summoned by the exhibition. This play of memories permits the linking of various orders of cultural materials to what I call, inspired by Martin Allor (1997), the “present pasts” of individual experiences and collective trajectories. It also enables the articulation of the subjects of the exhibition—visitors or participants—as cultural citizens, that is, at one and the same time as sovereign subjects of a nation and cultural producers or consumers (Allor and Gagnon 1996; Miller 1993). My main argument is that *Je vous entend chanter* contributes to a government of memories at a distance from the state. It regulates the possible fields of action of subjects (Foucault 1982)—in this case, cultural citizens—in their relationship to specific objects, statements, and practices that are displayed as material embodiments of popular music, as a presence to the plurality of times (“*présence à la pluralité des temps*”), to use de Certeau's definition of memory (de Certeau 1990:320, note 7). The continuities established through this practice of

governance, I contend, mediate the forms of allegiance and belonging to Québec as an imagined national community (Anderson 1991) rendered accessible by the exhibition.

This article presents fragments of an analysis which examines how the place of Québécois popular music is simultaneously said (enunciated), told (narrated), and named in this precise locale (Grenier 1997). These fragments deal specifically with naming, since the material traces of this strategic operation cut across the whole exhibition, from the organizing principle underlying its overall design to the layout of the artefacts it comprises. I view naming as a performative process which participates in the attribution of difference in and by discourse. As Elspeth Probyn argues, the terrain of difference is inscribed deeply by the material constraints and historical limits imposed by “being-called” (Probyn 1996:25) and this is the case, I would add, whether the “things” being called or named are individuals, events, texts, or practices. By examining how the groupings of objects and subjects intended to expose Québécois popular music are being-named, I hope to shed light on the constraints and contingent limits which are imposed on this field and which, in so doing, establish the conditions of possibility for allegiance, belonging, and remembering.

Je vous entends chanter combines more than 550 objects, 655 songs, 300 artists, and more than thirty hours of audio and video recordings grouped into what project coordinators call zones, the limits of which are defined both visually and aurally. Each zone contains an identification panel, video screens, and photographs of artists associated with a period or domain of popular music, as well as a wide variety of objects and personal effects on loan for the occasion from the artists to whom they belong. Objects range from the certificate of street designation presented by the city of Thetford Mines to pop artist Michel Louvain to the wedding gown of superstar Céline Dion. By approaching the material components of the zones, the visitor activates one of three soundtracks: (a) a contextualization of the period or musical domain presented by the narrator, (b) video clips or outdoor concert film or television performance excerpts, or (c) interviews with artists deemed representative of the zone. As distance is put between the material objects and the browser, what is heard is a pot-pourri designed to present some of the most popular or significant songs of that zone.⁴

The names given to the central zones of the exhibition are “*chanson* pop,” “*chanson* rock,” and “*chanson* country.” While these terms are commonly used in the local music milieu, the notoriety of the museum as a key cultural institution, combined with the prestige of Québec City’s Musée de la Civilisation as the most dynamic and advanced national museum, further officializes their use and legitimizes the classifications and orderings which they bring forth. By using the adjectives “pop,” “rock,” and “country,” which invoke a widely accepted system of classification that makes genre the key classificatory device in popular music, these namings can be said to have a twofold effect. They permit visitors to distinguish the practices and products constitutive of the exhibition from those usually called “classical,” while at the same time including them in a key domain of contemporary culture and entertainment whose boundaries greatly surpass those of Québec. By using the word “*chanson*,” the terms

underline the resolutely francophone character of the named-being,⁵ which thus sees itself related to musical traditions which originated in France but which, in the wake of colonization, were also developed, most notably elsewhere in Europe, North America, and the Antilles (Baillargeon and Côté 1991; Rioux 1992). But perhaps more important, by systematically joining genre adjectives to the noun *chanson*, the chosen names suggest especially, in my opinion, that the exhibition is not simply about popular francophone music but indeed about Québécois music with its own history and traditions.

Different things are concurrently being named *chanson* in contemporary Québec. For instance, any piece of music with lyrics is called *chanson*: one speaks of the creation or interpretation of a *chanson*, whatever its genre or style. Any musical movement within which lyrics that obey the rules of fixed form poetry occupy a primary place is named the same way: one speaks then of the French *chanson*, or more generally, of lyrical *chanson* (*chanson à texte*). A strong political connotation has been attached to what has been called the Québécois *chanson*, as the term has long served to designate exclusively the repertoires and practices of the *chansonniers* of the 1960s, that is, singer-songwriters whose creations bear witness to their support of the political left and their socio-political involvement in Québec's nationalist, if not separatist, movement. From this perspective, Québécois *chanson* is conceived not merely as an influential movement but indeed as the only authentically Québécois genre and henceforth the bearer of the only music which can claim to be culturally significant and representative of the "Québécois people." Since the early 1990s, *chanson* has also become a common name attributed to all French-language popular musics created or produced in Québec—a discursive strategy which foregrounds the close ties between *chanson* and Québécois culture while downplaying its narrower links with nationalist politics. One speaks of Québécois *chanson*, then, to refer to one or the other of the various musical practices which coexist within Québec or to signify Québec as a plural yet consolidated musical space.

The nomenclature used to identify the principal zones of the exhibition seems to be coherent with the latter naming strategy. It does indeed permit the use of a large inventory of musical products and practices, all the while accenting their equal contribution to the formation and maintenance of a uniquely Québécois musical culture. Despite the fact that the exhibition borrows its title from "*Les gens de mon pays*," a celebrated song by Gilles Vigneault (one of the key poets and singer-songwriter defenders of Québec-in-music), and thus invokes the *chansonnier* movement (the key referent of the traditional view of Québécois *chanson*), the being-named of the exhibition as a whole is not defined so narrowly. In fact, it combines internal differentiation by underlining genre and style distinctions, and inclusion, and by insisting on their common participation in the popular music domain in Québec.

Indeed the exhibition puts forth no judgement about authenticity or the degree of Québécois-ness of that musical genre or that musical piece. But in keeping with the more resolutely politicized being-named *chanson*, singer-songwriters are privileged to the detriment of interpreters, and "message"-oriented songs with presumably meaningful lyrics take precedence over entertainment-oriented ones that are merely

“good to dance to.”⁶ Moreover, although the relationship with separatist nationalism is muted, the Québécois *chanson* as named by the museum remains first and foremost a medium for the celebration of national pride, “the privileged place from which to understand Québécois identity” (Musée de la Civilisation 1995:2). The identity quest for Québécois francophones through Québécois *chanson*, in fact, constitutes the explicit thematic guideline of the exhibition, as the opening statement of the narrator quoted at the beginning of this article clearly indicates. To recognize *chanson* in all of its diversity means to recognize the multiple pathways and voices through which this quest, supposedly common to all of the styles and genres, has taken form in lyrics and musics.

Within the frame of the exhibition, then, the singer-songwriters (*chansonniers*) do not constitute the only incarnation of Québécois artists with the destiny of Québec in their hearts. Artists associated with the different musical genres represented at the museum are also constructed as engaged citizens, albeit in a different way. Their preoccupations as citizens are invoked by the specific decors aimed at re-creating the atmosphere, if not the physical environment, judged to be characteristic of the genre with which the artist is associated and where their objects, photographs, and recordings are situated. In this way, the zone dedicated to the poet-singer-songwriters re-creates the atmosphere typical of the *boîtes à chansons*, the small intimate cafés which flourished in the 1960s where artists interpreted compositions which celebrated the nation to be built or tackled a particular social issue before a relatively young audience that presumably shared their aspirations for cultural and socio-political change. Singer-songwriters are also at the heart of a zone dedicated to the public celebrations of the 1970s. In this case, film excerpts from large outdoor concerts, particularly those celebrating the province’s national holiday, which assembled on one stage the “big names” of the day in front of audiences in the tens of thousands, are presented.

When it comes to the decor of the zone dedicated to what is named *chanson* country, rather than perpetuating the caricatures associated with the genre (horses, rodeos, and large open spaces), the modern city constitutes the chosen setting. So-called country artists are presented as “new cowboys” who, thanks to the sincerity and simplicity of songs that are “from the heart, for the heart” (Musée de la Civilisation 1995:133) and speak of unhappy love, separation, solitude, and family problems, make what are deemed traditional rural values an integral part of contemporary urban life. The area whose decor replicates the stage of famous concert venues is the zone devoted to *chanson* rock, described as that “primal and sensual music” which, combined with lyrics “of a depth which we do not find in Anglophone rock,” attracts rebellion and repels the more conservative elements of Québécois society (165). Finally, electronic media constructs the place of the being-named *chanson* pop. So-called pop artists are positioned on the set of television programs which, by allowing them to participate in the daily life of so many Québécois homes of different social milieux, contributed to making them “stars.”

That which the exhibition names *chanson* thus finds itself defined at the junction of cafés, indoor and outdoor concert venues, of the city and the country, of home and the media. I argue that by invoking distinct forms of civic and cultural subjectivity, and

some of the most prominent spaces of their articulation, these different decors constitute the principal “sites of memory” of Québécois music constructed by the museum. I use this expression, coined by historian Pierre Nora, to designate sites of material, functional, and symbolic character, whose reason for being is “to block the work of forgetfulness ... to materialize the immaterial in order to ... encapsulate the maximum of meaning within a minimum of signs” (Nora 1984:xxxv). For instance, the key feature of the zone dedicated to the being-named *chanson* pop is the famous and extremely popular television show of the 1960s entitled *Jeunesse d’aujourd’hui*. This show can be considered a material space whose properties are relative to the technological conditions of production characteristic of the early days of private television in Québec; a space whose functions, among others, are to assure the diffusion and promotion of a series of artists and products which, despite their huge commercial success, had yet to gain access to nation-wide media exposure. The space also particularly symbolizes what it meant for the younger generation to grow up in times which, while being marked by the important social changes which accompanied the emergence of Québec into modernity, also vibrated to the rhythms of American popular culture and music.

Enclosed within their own singularity, but open to the vast array of meanings with which they are invested, sites of memory such as this one allow for the designation of fragments of a lived past which bring in their wake a panoply of images, sounds, and familiar situations that are in solidarity with the memories they awaken. Like many other visitors, I danced and sang along while watching excerpts from *Jeunesse d’aujourd’hui*, and I too could relate to the particular modes of speech, hairstyles, and dress codes of the star performers of the sixties. Watching these video images and listening to their soundtracks triggered memories of, among other things, musics that, at college in the early seventies, I was taught to look down upon by many authority figures such as teachers, who came of age in the mid- to late fifties and saw only the works of singer-songwriters as fit to embody Québécois music. The exhibition also reminded me of episodes from my own childhood which were marked by pop stars whose musics, being among my older sisters’ favourites, also became mine and whose interpretations my friends and I spent numerous hours imitating as we lip-synched to the muffled sounds of our old stereo.

As Nora stresses, contrary to other mnemonic signs, sites of memory are the products of an interaction where “memory” and “history” determine each other. That is, they result from the ongoing interplay of the perpetually actual lived experience of remembrance entwined in the intimacy of a collective experience on the one hand, and the abstract, always problematic and incomplete reconstruction of what is no longer, that belongs to everyone and no one, on the other (xix). The sites constructed by *Je vous entends chanter* designate fragments of a collective history, and reconstitute it by articulating musical experiences with episodes of the cultural, linguistic, political, and economic past of Québec and its “people.” In this way, as the narrator’s contextualization indicates, *Jeunesse d’aujourd’hui* invokes a critical step in Québec’s cultural history when, thanks to the emergence and development of television, some Québécois youth rekindled the romance with francophone music interpreted by local stars who were still copying hits songs made in the United States, and when the local recording

industry began to establish itself as a force. Screenings of the program in the museum are thus likely to remind visitors of the importance of the emergence of the French language as a pillar of a specifically Québécois identity and the importance of control over the local economy by francophone Québécois interests—two mainstays of 1960s' national politics. The invitation, the obligation, Nora would say (xxxi), is extended to each subject, visitor, or participant to remember, but in such a way that their own personal memory allows for the recollection of their belonging to the Québécois collectivity, seen as a principle of identification.

Such an articulation of the concurrent beings-named *chanson*, then, proceeds from a series of sites of memory which are shaped by and already linked to private experiences and collective trajectories, in brief, to pre-existing pasts which the exhibition re-actualizes, makes present. The artists, musical products, and personal objects brought together under these sites act, each in their own way, as mediators between the “present pasts” of particular individuals or groups which participate in lyrical *chanson*, rock, pop, and country, and the “present pasts” of Québec as a national community. While contrasting figures of the presents and pasts of musical life in Québec are brought forth, the paramount sites of memory tend to subsume under one unique “national” history the singular paths of individuals and groups whose respective practices made the emergence and consolidation of a Québécois music possible. As one critic writes:

The history of chanson told by the museum, is the history of all of Québec's songs.... It is also the history of a people which has supported and loved these songs for all kinds of reasons—to thank God for giving us a sky so blue, to say you're sorry to all of the girlfriends in the world, but also to affirm a collective identity. (Lepage 1995:D9)

As this conjunctural analysis shows, *Je vous entendis chanter* constitutes one particular articulation of the *dispositif* which makes popular music, the place of which is defined within the limits imposed on its being-named *chanson*, something that matters—that is, something that matters to all people in Québec, be they long-standing fans or newcomers to this cultural domain. The exhibition contributes to a government of memories whereby the singular sites, through which Québécois music is discursively produced, establish bridges between the “present pasts” of distinct communities of consumer/producer subjects as citizens and a unique collective history which is that of the “Québécois people.” What subjects remember and how they remember in this particular conjuncture may well determine where their allegiances lie and whether or not they belong.

Notes

1. The author wishes to thank the organizers of the 1997 joint conference of the American branch of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music (IASPM-USA) and the Society for Ethnomusicology (SEM) where a preliminary version of this paper has been presented. She extends her thanks to Dominique Bilodeau and Marie-Josée Des Rivières of the Musée de la Civilisation de Québec for their generous collaboration as well as the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its financial support.

2. This analysis focuses on the exhibition as it was originally presented in Québec City. While no significant changes were made, the particular site and institutional setting of the exhibition as it was presented in Montreal (a recently opened museum devoted to humour and comedy rather than culture and civilization), as well as the specificities of the targeted audiences (given the multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic nature of the city's population, for instance), would have called for a separate analysis.
3. "By the light of a fountain / While going for a stroll / The water was so sparkling / That I bathed therein." Chorus: "I have loved you so long / Never shall I forget you." All English translations of exhibition documents, media coverage, and academic literature and by the author.
4. My analysis focuses only on the main part of the exhibition. It leaves out a part entitled "Les immortelles" ("The Immortals"), which is devoted solely to the listening of any one of the 450 songs selected by the members of the exhibition team to represent the various trends within the Québécois popular music repertoire, as well as some of its most successful or meaningful songs.
5. It is interesting to note that in the Guidebook provided to English-speaking visitors, the zones are called "popular music," "rock music," and "country music." This translation tends to evacuate the complex cultural and political connotations which accompany the usage of the word *chanson* in Québec, and hence, to minimize the importance given to the local, or even national, anchoring of the musical practices and products comprised by the exhibition by the original French namings.
6. One of the consultants who helped in the organization of the exhibition has publicly acknowledged this bias. In a radio interview, he explained that:

There is a notable interest in singer-songwriters.... So on this basis, we made choices. We also need to recognize that there was a desire to avoid—how could I explain. There are funny things, there are tacky things, but beyond a certain point there are things that are not interesting and that have sometime been liked anyway during periods of, let's say, cultural emptiness. So we have left things out. I think that we have not fully illustrated the era of the *chanson* disco in Québec, which, beside, was characterized by numerous anglicisms. (Bolduc qtd. in Caisse and Chartier 1995, author's translation)

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