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Mononcle Ti-Jean et moi

By Abby Paige

*The following is an excerpt from a larger monologue, entitled **Les filles du quoi?**, a solo performance that tells the story of Franco-American woman living in Canada.*

Une fois, un professeur de français m'a dit que
j'ai l'aire d'une québécoise.
Et moi, j'ai dit : « Sauf quand j'ouvre la bouche. »

Je ne suis pas française, ni québécoise, ni acadienne.
Moi, je suis franco-américaine, des États.
Comme Jack Kerouac.

Mais je n'aime pas Jack Kerouac.
I call him mononcle ti-Jean.
That's what his family called him, Jean Louis,
Ti-Jean, and I call him mononcle
because I don't like him
the way you don't like someone who's family.

Jack Kerouac is what I would call
A Male Writer.
Most writers are either just writers
or female writers.
But I call Kerouac a Male Writer
because to read his work
you have to keep shoving his dick out of your face.

[AS JACK KEROUAC]

*So in America when the sun goes down
and I sit on the old broken-down river pier
watching the long, long skies over New Jersey
and sense all the raw land
that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge
over to the West Coast,
and all that road going,
all the people dreaming in the immensity of it,
and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying
in the land where they let the children cry,
and tonight the stars'll be out,
and don't you know that God is Pooh Bear?
the evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie,
which is just before the coming of complete night*

*that blesses the earth,
darkens all rivers,
cups the peaks and folds the final shore in,
and nobody,
nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody
besides the forlorn rags of growing old—ⁱ*

Every girl remembers the first time a boy
made her listen to him read *On The Road* out loud.

There's this old interview you can see on YouTube
that Jack Kerouac did with Radio Canada in the 60s,
and the interviewer asks him,
« Qu'est-ce que Jack Kerouac pense de Jean Kerouac? »
And Kerouac says
Ça veut dire quoi?
[AS THE INTERVIEWER:] What-do-you-think-of-yourself?
And he closes his eyes
because he closes his eyes a lot
when he's speaking in French, and he says
“suis tanné avec moi même.”ⁱⁱ

Puis, moi aussi, 'suis tanné.

I'm sick of Kerouac the way you get sick of
sitting in the kitchen because the men are talking in the living room.
The way you get sick of the smell of booze on their breath
when they kiss you goodnight with too much affection.
Sick of the whole masculine show going on in the living room,
the performance of soft men pretending to be hard for other men
who are also pretending, and the obligation for you to pretend, too,
because being soft is obviously bad,
so maybe if you were hard,
maybe then
they'd let you out of the kitchen.

Tanné.
The way you get sick of something that's too
familiar. Familial.

I don't know whether it's American or Canadian
or French or English, but it's a brand of masculinity
that seems to put a spell on people.
It's why I think people like to look at pictures of Kerouac
as much as they like to read him. He reminds us
of something, something about fathers and brothers and uncles

something about abandonment and the brokenness of men.

**

Quand je dis que je suis franco-américaine “comme Jack Kerouac,”
je dois dire que je suis franco-américaine d’une façon différente que Jack Kerouac.
Kerouac, for example, il était francophone,
d’une famille francophone,
d’un quartier francophone.
Il est allé à l’école en français,
à l’église en français,
son père était imprimeur d’un journal en français.

During the Industrial Revolution there was a massive migration
out of Quebec and into New England.
Ils disent que la campagne du Québec
s’est vidée, qu’un million de québécoises
ont quitté leur belle province, que la population du Québec
serait 6 million plus large aujourd’hui
sans cette migration-là.

That migration included Jack Kerouac’s family,
who settled in Nashua, New Hampshire
and later in Lowell, Massachusetts.
It was possible there, back then,
to live un vie complètement en français.
In Lewiston, Manchester, Lowell, Woonsocket, Worcester, Winooski,
where am I forgetting?
Oui, and Jack Kerouac was that kind of Franco-American,
the kind that grew up in a francophone culture
within an anglophone culture,
which is maybe why the Quebecois
seem to think he is just like them.

But the story of that vast migration into the U.S.,
which itself is not well-known,
this story obscures other stories.
It obscures that there have been many different
French-speaking and French-descended peoples
on this continent for a very long time.

My ancestors, French and English,
were the door-crashers of colonialism.
We got here early. We did not want to miss the deals.
And when they got here, they spread out,

the French more than the English, I think.

The Quebecois consider themselves the Franco-Americans par excellence, like the rest of us aspire to be Quebecois, but they actually get to be Quebecois. But New France was bigger than Quebec. It was l'Acadie and Lousianne, Detroit and Haïti. The slave trade and the fur trade and manifest destiny, colonialism was not just an English business.

So, yes, there was a big migration of French-Canadians into New England in the late 1800s, big enough to dramatically change the cultures of New England and Quebec. But French peoples were also already here, all over the place. They came first, and the border came later.

The story of that migration also obscures the fact that when we not everyone who did migrate came to one of these cities, these industrial centers, where they could live a life that was, culturally, quite unchanged from what they had left. Some landed in the countryside to work farms or in small villages where they were the only French people, the only Catholics for miles. Like my great-grandparents, Wilfrid and Josephine.

**

This is the romantic story of Wilfrid and Josephine's meeting:

My great-grandfather, Wilfrid-Pierre Bilodeau, left his village, St-Lazare-de-Bellechasse, and took off with his brothers for the States, where they would earn their fortunes.

He left in his teens, in the 1890s, and we don't know where he went. We think he spent some time in New Hampshire, and my aunt Dolly remembered him saying that the first time he saw the ocean was in Rhode Island. I have a picture in my head of him with his pants rolled up past the ankles, a picture that comes from no where but my imagination.

His brothers all ended up going back home, but for some reason, Wilfrid decided to stay in the States. He did go back home for visits, and on one of those visits, he met my great-grandmother, Josephine Corriveau. He was in his twenties. She was fifteen years younger than him, which is to say that when they met, she was a child, and he was not.

All of the girls in her family were married by reverse dowry. That is, their father, Msr. Corriveau, required suitors to pay a bride price to marry his daughters. So on one of these visits home, my great-grandfather put down a deposit.

He went back home in 1912, and they married in the church in St-Lazare. He was 33 and she was 18. After, he took her back to Vermont, to a little town called Rochester, where at that time he worked for the Eastern Magnesia Talc Company, and that is where Josephine gave birth to my grandmother exactly nine months later.

Ma grand-mère, qui disait toujours qu'elle est née à Vermont, mais faite au Québec.

And that always seemed funny to me, that my grandmother would say that, but think about it: her mother was an eighteen-year-old kid, living in a village in Vermont where she didn't know anyone, probably couldn't communicate with anyone. And then that kid had a baby, and I don't know if you've ever had a baby in a strange town where you didn't know anyone, but I have, and you bond with that baby in a special kind of way.

I think she liked being in the U.S., my great-grandmother, as much as you can like a choice that someone else made for you.

There's a story in my family about a visit she made to Quebec. They used to go up to visit family, including an aunt who lived in Quebec City, right down in the old part of town, on one of those lower streets that's all souvenir shops now, and on one trip my great-grandmother and one of her daughters walked onto the ferry to cross and visit this aunt, and on their way back, on the ferry, my great-grandmother ran into someone she knew, a man. Her daughter watched from afar as she talked to this man, standing on the deck of the ferry. Her daughter watched as she and the man talked and wept together. On the other side of the river they said good-bye. And that was the one and only time she saw the man who she would have married if she'd had a choice.

And so when I married for love and crossed the border into Canada, it felt like I was giving something back to her, like I was mending something. I thought I might be able to pick up a dropped thread somehow. I thought my great-grandmother would be so happy.

**

Jack Kerouac, quand il voulait retourner à ses origines,
il n'est pas allé au Québec. Il est allé en France.
Ça me dérange.

Mais c'est un problème très commun
parmi les généalogistes, que nous ne cherchons pas
nos aïeux tellement comme nous cherchons
un pedigree. Oui, pedigree, comme un chien.
Nous voulons une connexion personnelle
avec un personnage qui peut nous rendre plus
centrale à l'histoire du colonialisme.
Puis, nous n'allons pas en Europe pour chercher
notre ancêtre le chiffonnier ou la prostitué.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jean-Louis Lebris de K  rouac
va en France pour trouver son nom sur une liste des
officiers de l'arm  e de Montcalm.
He believed his ancestor was a military officer,
a Baron, in fact, and therefore the name
Lebris de K  rouac must be in some old book
on the royal houses of France.
He figured that must be why his family
never changed their name, because Lebris de K  rouac
must have been a name worth keeping,

[AS JACK KEROUAC]
Well Why do people change their names?
Have they done something bad, are they criminals,
are they ashamed of their real names? Are they
afraid of something? Is there any law in America
against using your own real name?
I had come to France and Brittany
just to look up this old name of mine
which is just about three thousand years old
and was never changed in all that time...^{iv}

Well people change their names for lots of reasons, Jack.
Marriage first and foremost.
Ah, but you didn't mean women when you said *people*.

Once a kid in Quebec told me that if you change your name,
then you're not Quebecois anymore.
So I told him about a family in my neighbourhood growing up
the Abairs, A-B-A-I-R, Abair,
who either got the spelling changed for them
by some government functionary with a good grasp of phonics,
or they might have changed it themselves
so they wouldn't become the Hee-berts.

See, self-preservation is complicated.
You'd think someone named Jean-Louis
and Jack would get that.

Anyway, Jack wrote a book about his trip to France
called *Satori in Paris*, and I think you'll enjoy it
if you thought the best part of *On The Road*
was being on a road trip with a drunk person.

Satori in Paris, written in 1967, ten years after
On The Road and two years before he finally

drank himself to death.

*[AS JACK KEROUAC]
Methinks women love me and then they realize
I'm drunk for all the world and this makes them realize
I cant concentrate on them alone, for long, makes them jealous,
and I'm a fool in Love With God. Yes.^v*

Yes, and God is booze.
I'm not saying the man wasn't Catholic,
just that transubstantiation was his favorite part of Mass.

Satori, I understand, is something like
an epiphany. A kick in the eye,
Kerouac calls it. And to reach satori,
it seems, one doesn't require Buddhism, but
requires, rather, a great deal of cognac.

So Jack Kerouac drinks his way across France,
in search of his pedigree,
which is not the same as an identity.
Most of his research takes place in bars and cafes,
although he does go to the library a few times,
only to discover that many of their records were burned in the war,
which then he admits he knew was the case,
before he even left home, in Florida.
but he's still pissed off enough at the librarians
that he has to go get drunk in revenge.

Then, fed up with Paris, he gets a flight to Brest,
or rather, he buys a ticket, but gets so drunk at the airport
he misses his flight and loses his suitcase,
so he ends up taking the train,
and everywhere he goes,
he explains to people that he is Breton
“watered down by two centuries in Canada and America,”
and he's the first in the family to come back—
he says that,
that he's the first in the family to come back.
And maybe this is really why he pisses me off—

*[AS JACK KEROUAC]
Je n'ai pas appris le français des livres,
mais à la maison, je ne savais pas parler
l'anglais jusqu'à j'avais, oh 5 ou 6 ans.
Je suis ne à l'Amérique mais mes parents
sont nés au Canada, au Québec*

le nomme de ma mère est L'Évêque...^{vi}

Jesus, Jack, shut the fuck up,
you're a working class kid from Lowell,
not a Breton fucking Baron.
And it pisses me off
because I do exactly the same thing.

**

I've been in Canada for ten years now.
I got married and I immigrated to Canada.
And I thought, in a way,
that I was coming back.
I wanted to be one of you.
I thought in a way that I already was.

When my son started school,
when we signed him up for kindergarten,
I had to go meet with the principal,
la directrice, pour...démontrer quelque chose,
j'imagine. Je ne sais pas—
I still don't know what I was doing there,
whether I was there to prove my fluency
or some kind of kinship between us.

« Est-ce que vous êtes francophone? » elle m'a

dit. Ça veut dire quoi?
J'aimerais en être une, mais
n'est pas si simple.

Est-ce que...Est-ce que je parle français?
Comment—
How—
Who—
Qui—
Who put this tongue in my mouth? Cette langue—
Who says this is my tongue?

Je n'ai pas dit ça à la directrice.
Pour elle, j'ai raconté une histoire :

À la maison, nous parlons surtout en anglais,
mais mon mari a fait toute son éducation en français en Ontario.

Et moi, je viens des États-Unis, d'une famille
qui était francophone anciennement.
Ma grand-mère est née au
Vermont, mais elle disait toujours
qu'elle a été conçue à Québec.
Sa famille parlait français,
mais parce que ce n'était pas un avantage de
parler français là-bas, elle ne l'a pas enseignée
à ses enfants.
Puis, moi je l'ai apprise comme
adulte, depuis mon déménagement
au Canada, et je suis le seule
membre
de ma génération de ma famille
qui peut parler,
même si je ne le fait pas très bien.

And here she has to say:
« Non, non, vous parlez très bien,
madame. » And I have to answer:
“Merci. Je manque de confiance.
Mais c'est important pour moi que
mon fils pu... puisse parler français,
qu'il pu... puisse communiquer avec
ses cousins francophones canadiens,
et pour ça nous aimerions faire l'inscription. »

I passed the test, whatever the test was.
The fact that my husband went to a French school
in Ontario was supposed to be what
entitled our son to go the school,
so really that's all I needed to say.
But the question,
« Est-ce que vous êtes francophone? »

I don't know the fucking answer to this question.

ⁱ Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*, New York: Penguin Books, 1991. Print. P. 270.

ⁱⁱ Jack Kerouac, Interview with Fernand Séguin, on the Radio-Canada show *Le Sel de la Semaine*, 1967. Available on-line at <https://vimeo.com/163981792> (accessed 6 September 2018).

ⁱⁱⁱ Some of this language is borrowed from a review of *Satori in Paris*, “More Babbitt than Beatnik,” Andrew Sarris, *New York Times*, February 26, 1967.

^{iv} Jack Kerouac, *Satori in Paris*, New York: Grove Press, 1985. Print. P. 72.

^v *Ibid.*, P. 25.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, P. 81. (Translation mine.)