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Crossing Cultural Boundaries: The Concept of Canadianness in the Context of Franco-Ontarian Identity in Lola Lemire Tostevin's Frog Moon

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**CROSSING CULTURAL BOUNDARIES:
THE CONCEPT OF CANADIANNES IN THE CONTEXT
OF FRANCO-ONTARIAN IDENTITY IN LOLA LEMIRE
TOSTEVIN'S *FROG MOON***

Abstract

The paper addresses a complex issue of Franco-Ontarian identity as explored in Lola Lemire Tostevin's autobiographical novel *Frog Moon*. The problem is discussed in the context of the changing theoretical discourse on identity in Canada, with a special attention to the categories of national, cultural, ethnic, gender and linguistic identity. The aim of this paper is to examine the concept of Franco-Ontarian identity as represented by Tostevin, a bilingual writer, who feels deterritorialized from French in Ontario, and chooses to write in English but finds herself in a liminal linguistic space where both languages, and hence cultures, frequently enter into a dialogue with each other. Languages and cultures interact, the embodied knowledge of both cultures is translated in the text via a variety of family, regional and national stories which also expose the history and legends of multicultural Ontario with a strong Francophone presence which is often neglected in official narratives of English Canada. Tostevin rewrites many of these official narratives. The Franco-Ontarian identity is shown as challenging the dominant constructed nature of national and cultural identity in English Canadian and French Canadian discourses. The perspective offered in the text problematizes these discourses by a narrative that concentrates on the hybrid nature of Franco-Ontarian cultural, gender and linguistic identity as exemplified by the main female protagonist of the text who lives between languages and cultures and constantly negotiates her identities, in spite of frequent feelings of otherness and alienation from both cultures. The book offers an interesting postcolonial feminist perspective on the problem of hybrid Franco-Ontarian identity and its transformative nature.

Résumé

Le texte aborde une question complexe de l'identité franco-ontarienne telle qu'elle est examinée dans le roman autobiographique de Lola Lemire Tostevin intitulé *Frog Moon*. Le problème est abordé dans le contexte du discours théorique changeant sur l'identité au Canada, avec une attention particulière accordée aux catégories d'identités nationale, culturelle, ethnique, sexuelle et linguistique. Le but de cette étude est d'examiner le concept de l'identité franco-ontarienne, représentée par Tostevin, écrivain bilingue, qui se sent déterritorialisé du français en Ontario, et choisit d'écrire en anglais, mais se retrouve dans un espace linguistique liminal où les deux langues, et en conséquence les cultures, entrent souvent dans un dialogue avec l'autre. Les langues et les cultures interagissent, la connaissance incarnée de deux cultures se traduit dans le texte par une variété d'histoires familiales, régionales et nationales qui exposent aussi l'histoire et les légendes d'un Ontario multiculturel avec une forte présence francophone qui est souvent négligée dans les récits officiels du Canada anglais. Tostevin réécrit beaucoup de ces récits officiels. L'identité franco-ontarienne est montrée comme celle qui conteste le caractère dominant construit de l'identité nationale et culturelle en anglais du Canada et les discours canadiens français. La perspective adoptée dans le texte problématise ces discours par un récit qui se concentre sur la nature hybride de l'identité culturelle, sexuelle et linguistique franco-ontarienne telle qu'elle est incarnée par le protagoniste féminin du texte qui vit entre les langues et les cultures et négocie constamment ses identités, en dépit des sentiments fréquents d'altérité et d'aliénation des deux cultures. Le livre offre une perspective féministe postcoloniale intéressante sur le problème de l'identité franco-ontarienne hybride et sa nature transformatrice.

Among a number of challenges that the contemporary world has to face is the process of self-identification. In times of globalization, which leads to the blurring of the boundaries between nation-states and diasporic groups around the world, the concept of identity tends to occupy a central place in many discourses. As Kobena Mercer notices “now everybody wants to talk about ‘identity’ (...). One thing at least is clear – identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty” (43). Identity crisis results in the inability of an individual to identify with one particular group, and to adjust to its culture.

The problem of self-identification appears to be of great importance in Canada, a country initially defined as bicultural, where the British and the French were perceived as two dominant groups. Presently, Canadian cultural and ethnic diversity is recognized in the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* of 1988. Canada's multicultural policy, advocating political and cultural pluralism, makes the country a desirable place to live in, where citizens can

cultivate their cultures and emphasize their distinctiveness. However, Canadianness understood in terms of the “cultural mosaic,” calls the existence of the Canadian national identity into question – it prevents the country, as David Taras observes, from establishing a coherent identity in terms of politics, culture and language:

Canada does not have a system of compulsory national service. Nor does it have a national education system that teaches the same curriculum from coast to coast. It does not have a common set of myths and heroes, a history of contradictory collective sacrifice, or even a common language. Nor is the country linked by a single deeply held tradition of religious observance (4).

A similar thought concerning Canada’s inability to construct a unified national identity is also expressed by Sherrill Grace, who claims that “we [Canadians] lack a truly unifying methodology; we behave as if politically decentred, and we try to allow for (...) ethnic and linguistic diversity (...) as a *national culture*, [but] we have never had a *sealed-off* and *self-sufficient character*” (131-132; original emphasis).

The concept of Canadianness inscribed in the term “cultural mosaic” results in the emergence of multiple complex (hybrid) identities resulting from a great ethnic and cultural diversity which, in turn, evokes the feeling of strangeness and otherness. This viewpoint has been emphasized by Margaret Atwood, who states that “[w]e are all immigrants to this place even if we were born here” (64). It is essential to underscore the fact that the feeling is experienced not only by new Canadians, recent immigrants to the country, but also by Canadians born in Canada, particularly by Franco-Ontarians who constitute “the largest single group of people of French origin outside Québec” (Hébert 51) and whose families have lived in the country for generations.

Franco-Ontarians are frequently characterized by their “double consciousness” (Burke 31) that places them in a liminal space between the mainstream Anglophone culture, which imposes its language, values and traditions on them, and their own culture dependent on French heritage. Their cultural position “coerces” them into constructing hybrid identities that “do not fit into most people’s pre-set categories” (Seelye and Wasilewski xviii). Thus, Franco-Ontarians share certain characteristics with the two cultures: Francophone and Anglophone. As Raymond M. Hébert observes, Franco-Ontarians, on the one hand, are historically closer to Quebec and its culture as they both share certain values such as religion, i.e. the attachment to the Roman Catholic Church and the language (53) but, on the other hand, they are exposed, to a greater extent than Quebeckers, to English, imposed by the dominant Anglophone media and culture, which tends to repress French and

structure “collective imagination” (Langlois 325) that shapes certain points of view and the perception of the world from the Anglophone perspective.

In this article I seek to analyse the complex issue of Canadianness in the context of Franco-Ontarian identity as explored by Lola Lemire Tostevin, a bilingual writer, in her autobiographical novel *Frog Moon*. The novel gives an insight into experiencing the complexity of Canadianness by a Canada-born Canadian who faces a number of challenges caused by living between different cultures.

What appears to be particularly important in Canadianness explored by Tostevin is the fact that even though born in a Francophone family in Ontario and educated in a convent run by French Catholic nuns, the author experiences the feeling of alienation and “deterritorialization” from her Francophone roots as a result of an intensive exposure to Anglophone culture that leads to the loss of her mother tongue and, thus, a part of her identity:

when I started to write (...) my first language had become English; my maternal tongue had become a second language. I believe there was a conscious moving away from everything French when I came out of the convent. My education beyond high school was mostly English and my boyfriends were English. I didn't want to have anything to do with Catholicism which (...) was identified with being French. When I first sat down to write it was so painful writing in French... so I put writing on the back-burner for many years because of that. It was only when I decided to write in English that I finally felt free enough to write (Carey 3).

What she states points to an intrinsic relation between language, culture and identity. Tostevin's breaking of ties with French, her mother tongue, and her decision to write in English, entail the hybridization of her identity. The “self” that is stretched between two cultures appears to be one of the traits of Canadianness. Thus, being a Franco-Ontarian who lives a bilingual life in a liminal cultural space results in constant transformations and fluctuations of identity that is never complete. Although the author claims that she lost them, both her mother tongue and French identity to English still reverberate in her writing.

Tostevin's *Frog Moon* exposes the complexity of Canadianness in the context of Franco-Ontarian identity, that transgresses the boundaries between two different languages and cultures. The aim of my interpretation is to point to the issue of Canadianness based on crossing cultural boundaries with reference to three aspects that play an important role in the construction of Canadian hybrid identity of the female protagonist of the novel. This article is also to discuss the way Canadianness presented by Tostevin may influence the perception and even the experiencing of a multicultural identity that appears to be more common in the contemporary world. I begin my analysis by

discussing the concept of culture translated via memories, family and regional stories, and legends that influence the construction of identity. Subsequently, I focus on the role of the two official languages in Canada – English and French – between which the narrator oscillates in order to establish her “self.” Finally, I analyse how crossing boundaries between traditional gender roles imposed by patriarchal culture and feminist consciousness shapes the identity of the protagonist.

In the course of the novel, Laura, the female protagonist and the narrator, constructs her complex Franco-Ontarian identity through unveiling various details from the past. She weaves her memories and different family and regional stories into the main narrative of the novel. The importance of memories and stories in establishing one’s identity is emphasized by Julian Barnes who states that “memory is identity (...) what you remember defines who you are” (140). To use Stephanie Lawler’s words, Laura is “engaged in the process of *producing* an identity through assembling various memories, experiences, episodes” (11; original emphasis) and thus she “makes a *story* out of [her] *life*” (11; original emphasis). The narrator of *Frog Moon* points to memories and storytelling as having the power of creation: “they shape people, towns, landscapes, and cheat you into believing certain things about yourself. They select, discard, and amend plots that become history. That’s how we invent ourselves” (Tostevin 22). A similar thought concerning dependence between storytelling and identity is expressed by Ian Hacking. He emphasizes also the dependence between one’s own stories and the stories of other people:

[w]e constitute our souls by making up our lives, that is, by weaving stories about our past, by what we call memories. The tales we tell of ourselves and to ourselves are not a matter of recording what we have done and how we have felt. They must mesh with the rest of the world and with other people’s stories (...) their real role is the creation of a life, a character (250-251).

For the narrator, the most immediate source of knowledge through which she gains access to her identity are parents: “[m]y first memory is of my mother (...) [and] my father telling stories” (61). The formation of her “self” is strongly visible in the life stories of her parents: “[m]uch of what I know of the lives of my parents has been passed on in the form of stories revised over the years, tall tales that grow taller as they spin themselves into the spine of my history, each tale an acoustic mirror reflecting the different facets of my background, my geography” (Tostevin 151). One of the first stories she is acquainted with, that reveals part of her identity, is the story of her nickname “Kaki”: “[b]y the time you were three months old you answered to the name of the frog. Not usual for a French Canadian, except that my frog was Cree.

Kaki. (...) Undoubtedly because we were French Canadian but also because I was born in the month of June, month of The Moon of the Frogs” (39). Although being a Franco-Ontarian, Laura’s nickname suggests an element of another culture – the Indigenous one – in her identity. However, “Kaki” was not the name she wanted to be identified with. When christened, she was given a name that indicates her Franco-Ontarian background, and that gives her a sense of certain identity, of being a part of her parents’ stories:

[w]hen I’d been christened I’d been given a name, and by virtue of that name I’d become a main character in the stories my mother and father told me. This was my family bond, the name I was to carry through the family album, except that at three months I was given another, as if my character had taken a small detour through some other plot. Kaki was not my name. I was not Cree. I was not a frog (41).

It may be assumed that Laura did not want to identify with her Cree name, as if it stood in contradiction to her consciously constructed “self.” Given these two different names by which she was called in different circumstances, the narrator’s Canadianness, namely her Franco-Ontarian “self,” is based on crossing the boundaries between two different cultures and fluctuates between two identities, as if she lived a double existence.

Listening to the stories told by her parents provides Laura with an opportunity to gain knowledge about her roots. Furthermore, in the process of constructing her identity, she locates her “self” within wider narratives produced by culture. She “looks upon stories, the telling of them, as part of reality” (69) and recognizes them not only as a part of who she is, but also a part of the Franco-Ontarian tradition she was raised in. What ought to be emphasized is the fact that “people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; (...) ‘experience’ is constituted through narratives; (...) people are guided to act in certain ways (...) on the basis of (...) the memories derived from a (...) repertoire of available social, public and cultural narratives” (Lawler 20). Being a part of culture, legends and folktales of Ontario helps Laura to understand who she is. As Paul Ricoeur comments “the self does not know itself immediately but only indirectly by the detour of the cultural signs of all sorts, which are articulated on the symbolic mediations which always already articulate action and, among them, the narratives of everyday life” (198). Laura is engaged in the process of interpretation and reinterpretation of her identity through regional stories which are very often used as the ways of explaining the reality that should not be exposed directly: “[t]hese myths often covered up what was really going on, but we’re not supposed to talk about that” (Tostevin 52). Told on different occasions, they explain the construction of certain aspects of Laura’s identity. Most of them

touch upon the concept of transformation that is in accordance with the changeable nature of identity. They lay the foundations for a constant reinterpretation of the narrator's "self."

Tostevin develops the concept of Canadianness by referring to folktales and legends Laura was familiarized with in her childhood. They convey certain values prevailing in the Franco-Ontarian culture and tradition that influence the construction of the protagonist's "self." The narrator refers to two important stories that enforce particular patterns of behaviour – the tale of "loup-garou" (a werewolf) and the legend of Rose Latulippe. The first one addresses the issue of girl's modesty: "the young girl also knows it's important not to expose any part of her body to the moonlight at the top of the dorm windows. That could turn her into a *loup-garou*. (...) She's heard of children who exposed themselves and grew long silken hair on their bodies, and slanting eyebrows that met on the bridge of the nose" (31-32; original emphasis). For fear of becoming a werewolf, a bloodthirsty creature which a human being turns into, Laura, under the influence of the tale, transforms who she is, into a person her culture tells her to be. It is through this story that a certain Franco-Ontarian female identity is shaped. Laura was taught what patterns of behaviour were appropriate for women in the tradition of the culture she was raised in. What is more, the legend of Rose Latulippe, who neglected her father's warning to stop the merrymaking before midnight on the eve of Ash Wednesday, serves as another cultural lesson for Laura. Her mother used this legend as an allegory to explain certain events from her life that led to the construction of her identity: "[m]y mother almost never misses an opportunity to turn an event into an allegory. Allegories allow her to hint at things other than what is actually being said. (...) Repeating the legend of Rose Latulippe while dissociating herself from its main character allows her to warn me against, while differing from, the moral of the tale" (53).

Frog Moon presents also an interesting approach towards Canadianness through Franco-Ontarian identity as based on what Susan Billingham calls "the doubleness of tongues" (195). Laura negotiates her hybrid identity through crossing the boundaries between French, her mother tongue, and English, the language that has dominated her life. She constantly oscillates between these two languages and attempts to reconcile them to construct her "self." The narrator, as Colleen Ross points out, "leads a double existence (...) as a Franco-Ontarian whose mother tongue is French and who has been conditioned to write, speak and live in English" (166). On the one hand, it is French of her childhood that binds her to her roots and imposes certain lingual identity and, thereby, particular traditions, values and the perception of the world. It is the language of all that is close to Laura – her emotions and feelings. Kathleen Saint-Onge, who likewise was raised in French Canadian culture and later moved towards Anglophone culture and its language, states

“[m]y emotions are completely entangled in French rather than in English – a connection of first language and inner being that is potent, even gut-wrenching” (8). This phenomenon is also experienced by Laura, who associates her feelings with her mother tongue – “I often revert to French when exasperated. As if some emotions can only be expressed in the language closest to those emotions” (Tostevin 23). On the other hand, however, English started to occupy the central place in Laura’s life. At first, it served as an escape from the constraints of the convent since her mother tongue seemed to imprison her, to deprive her of who she was: “[t]he young girl has always written her French compositions in words and sentences that are proper and fitting for a convent. They have never extended beyond convent walls” (171). At that time Laura realized that English, the language “[t]he nuns don’t feel competent to teach” (171) may replace French so that she could gain access to other aspects of her “self” and construct her identity without hindrance.

Nevertheless, Laura’s identity stretched between French and English constitutes a problematic issue in her family since “language can break a family apart” (Saint-Onge 49). She fluctuates between “her present life as Anglophone mother and wife, and her past life as a young Francophone girl” (Ross 166). Laura is aware of the conflict between English and French: “English [is] the main prong in a French Canadian three-pronged fork” (Tostevin 47). That is why, she refers to herself as a hyphen whose aim is to ensure unity and coherence within her family – “I am, after all, the third element that provides coherence between my children and my parents and their different languages” (141). It is through this hyphenation that Laura attempts to bridge the linguistic gap between her French speaking parents and her two children – David, who refuses to speak French, and Louise, who speaks a superior kind of French.

Living in English for most of her life distances Laura from her mother tongue. She expresses her inability to function and communicate within the frames of the French language:

[t]he only tongue that could tell my parent’s stories is the tongue I have all but lost, a language as depleted as if on a winter’s morning, cut off at its source, it had simply withered in my mouth. Cut off from memory, from the slumber of childhood, I cultivated my second language until it replaced my first. As he speaks to me in French, the words, as I write them down, transform themselves into English (161).

It is English that has become her first language: “[m]ost of my life was lived in English, and French no longer came naturally to me” (144). When Laura refers to her life spent in-between languages, she observes that “[t]he child who spoke French is no longer the adult who speaks English” (24).

Furthermore, the narrator realizes that moving away from her mother tongue contributes to the loss of a part of her identity since, as Billingham rightly observes, “[t]he loss of the mother tongue is frequently experienced as a loss of memory or identity” (195). Laura intends to retrieve her mother tongue, through which she will be able to retrieve her memory and identity. She is aware that “living in a language that is not your mother tongue cuts you off from memory” (Tostevin 24). In fact, her hybrid lingual identity places her in neither language or culture. Crossing the boundaries between them entails what Saint-Onge calls the process of “self-othering” (159), of becoming “foreign” not only to other people but also to herself: “I must seem so foreign to them [the children] at times. (...) I sometimes feel as if I don’t belong to either my children or my parents. During those moments, when the mirrors of both languages crumble, I have the unsettling impression that I will always remain a stranger to myself” (Tostevin 25). The narrator tends to perceive herself as “the other”, a stranger who does not have her own place she could identify with. To use Saint-Onge words, Laura is “une Canadienne errante (...) forever in search of identity” (29). As Tostevin demonstrates, Canadianness is based on a certain language “conflict” where English, belonging to the mainstream Canadian culture, tends to repress other languages. Furthermore, it imposes certain worldviews and influences the ways in which a hybrid-identity individual functions in the world.

Throughout the novel, the construction of Laura’s Franco-Ontarian identity is based also on crossing the boundaries between traditional gender roles imposed by patriarchal culture of the Western world and feminist consciousness. In her life, Laura attempts to challenge the prevailing stereotypes concerning the two biological sexes, where “women have been associated with the body, nature, and emotion; (...) these terms have been opposed to mind, culture, and reason, which are associated with men” (McLaren 81). This particular approach resulted in the oppression of women who were treated as inferior, and domination of men who, in turn, were perceived as superior. Gender identity in *Frog Moon* is exemplified by the narrator, who transgresses the boundaries between what is believed in patriarchal culture to be an ideal woman and her own images of a woman.

A strong presence of the French Canadian perception of women and their roles is also expressed through the legend of Rose Latulippe. From this traditional perspective, women are perceived as the incarnation of evil and that is why they should be controlled by men. This belief was passed down from generation to generation as “French Canadian fathers, afraid their daughters will dishonour the family, have related various versions of the legend of Rose Latulippe. Woman and her demon’s gifts, because the Devil always entered a family’s affair through the female side” (51). Thus, this Franco-Ontarian legend engenders prejudice towards women seen as weak, suggestible and

deprived of common sense. It also suggests women be obedient and submissive to men. This negative image is reinforced by men who state that women are a “hindrance to our national development” (181). The narrator points to the perception of women as unable to undertake any activities that go beyond their household duties. She observes that women who are teachers are treated as incompetent, emotionally underdeveloped and with mediocre educational background. Men claim that “[w]omen teachers appear as immature, poorly trained, uncultured, inexperienced girls (...) who are really looking for a husband, and are loath to accept responsibilities or study for their job a minute longer than the law requires” (183). However, the narrative reveals the rising of feminist consciousness in Laura that encourages her to go beyond the boundaries of patriarchal culture.

For the narrator of *Frog Moon*, the division between the female and male sphere of life is very clear. Feminist thought concerning women is reflected in the memories Laura has from the convent in which she was educated in her childhood. One of the most important rules Laura was taught there was the rule of silence. Apart from praying and singing religious songs, the girls were not allowed to speak. In fact, ‘Song of Songs’ is “the only occasion in the Bible where a woman is given la parole, speech, where a woman speaks – we can’t overlook the fact that it was probably written by a man” (Williamson 274). The rule reflects the situation of women in patriarchal culture – they are silenced and, metaphorically, deprived of their voice. As such, a woman is unable to tell stories and construct her identity. It is the outer world that shapes her identity and imposes certain roles. However, Laura is a rebel and challenges the rules established for women. Under the influence of her parents’ stories she decides to fulfil herself as a writer and not solely as a housewife. It is through the conscious use of language that she, as a woman, is able to construct her complex Franco-Ontarian identity and eventually to “invent [herself] on the page” (276).

Franco-Ontarian identity constructed by Tostevin in *Frog Moon* points to a complexity of Canadianness, that is experienced by a number of Canadians. Based on different aspects, such as memories, stories, language, and gender, as presented in the novel, Canadian complex (hybrid) identity is a construct prone to alterations and transformations. In *Frog Moon*, Laura’s “self” comes into being through various stories and legends from the Franco-Ontarian tradition. Her Canadianness is also dependent on language and crossing the boundaries between French of her childhood and English of her adulthood. The aspect of living in two language “worlds” remains important while referring to Canadianness, particularly due to a number of different minority groups inhabiting the country. Furthermore, in the construction of identity, Laura goes beyond the boundaries of the norms and images imposed by patriarchal culture and moves toward feminist consciousness.

As *Frog Moon* demonstrates, Canadian identity means being engaged in a process of constant crossing boundaries between cultures, in various spheres of life, that frequently overlap and enter into a dialogue with each other. Due to globalization and numerous migrations, the emergence of complex (hybrid) identities may be observed in many countries worldwide. Although Canadianness explored by Tostevin points to challenges and conflicts that a person of hybrid identity living in a liminal space between cultures has to face, it may also be approached as a model to follow for other countries which are becoming more and more multicultural due to a number of immigrations. Canadian complex identity in *Frog Moon* bridges the gap between different cultures. It also points to the fact that the perception and understanding of the “self,” other people and the world in the case of people of hybrid identities living a double cultural existence is enriched by different, wider perspectives “imposed” by these cultures. Tostevin's *Frog Moon* may be approached as a unique insight into one's complex “self.” This autobiographical novel presents also inner struggles and opportunities that living in a liminal cultural space in Canada entails and allows other people to understand Canadianness and hybrid identities better.

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