

# QUEBEC'S *Soul City*

*In last autumn's barely defeated referendum, supporters of sovereignty for Québec claimed a "distinct society" as the strongest justification for severing most ties with the rest of Canada. The author explores that difference in the character of Québec City.*

*by Clark Blaise*

**T**oday, on a bright mid-September afternoon, I'm watching dozens of cars flash down the Grande-Allée, Québec City's major boulevard of the *haute ville*, the upper town, each car with its headlights on. It's not a cortège, not the funeral of a powerful Mafioso—it's the law. In Québec, running lights are wired to the ignition; they stay on despite the bright sun and long summer. No exceptions. It's safer that way, more responsible, *mon ami*. It's like, say, Sweden—Catholic, communal Sweden.

I started coming to la Québec (the city) in 1960, a 20-year-old hitchhiking up from Pittsburgh, looking for something he'd lost. My parents were Canadian, one French, one English, and they'd raised me everywhere except for my father's French Canada. After their violent divorce, I wanted to master all that I felt he'd denied me—his language, my identity. Québec City became his surrogate. Learning its habits, I began to understand him, and, slowly, to forgive. After a while, le Québec (the province) became an addiction. I thought I could become my father, replace him as the person he could have been if he'd had my chances. I brought my young family to Montréal and we lived there a dozen years. It didn't work, of course, but something rubbed off.

Nineteen-sixty was also the most significant year in modern Québec history. The election that year marked the birth of this reasonably tolerant, democratic, secular, outward-looking (almost Scandinavian) society that keeps its headlights on in the daytime, after centuries of autocratic, obscurantist, Jansenist Catholicism. I was witness to the so-called "quiet revolution" without even knowing it. A North American society with which I had passing acquaintance—and on which I even had some claim—had transformed itself overnight, without violence. What overwhelmed me then was the energy released in every direction. It seemed stirringly French, the equal of all the



Québec's famed Chateau Frontenac

Godard and Sartre I'd been watching and reading, and it was happening to people with my name just 50 miles over the border from Eisenhower's America.

In those early years, concerts and plays were staged in open lots and the great *chansonniers* who would go on to stardom in the French-speaking world, Félix Leclerc, Jean-Pierre Ferland, and Gilles Vigneault, were singing for pittance in small bistros, coffee houses, or theaters just about every night. During the student riots in Paris in 1968, I heard the songs of Québec echoing through the cobbled streets of the Latin Quarter. I had the private satisfaction, a little smug, of knowing that the *québécois* had been there first, more completely and more modestly.

Every city has its perfect season—Paris in April, Italy and Greece in May—and for Québec City it has to be mid-September, when the angled light seems to wash the air as it passes through. The college kids have nearly all departed, leaving only Europeans off their tour boats. The days are warm, the nights cool; sweaters in the morning, tweeds at night. Like the gloomy cities of Normandy from where the landless second sons and a few adventurers of the ancien régime waved their good-byes to Europe 350 years ago, Québec appears carved from a single block of gray granite, potentially the New World's most somber city. But on a bright day in the right season, dimensions rise in the grain of wood, nubbinness on the sleekest surface; fissures etch themselves on the granite blocks, adding a dignified levity to everything the light splashes against.

It feels good to be back in Québec. My old fire to find a place for myself in

the world is gone, partially satisfied in Iowa, partially surrendered to age and reality; I can speak French and enjoy the pleasures a second identity bestows, but I can never be French, or feel French, in the way a new generation demands. I left in 1980, amid the first wave of nationalism that peaked in the following year's referendum. I thought the dream of independence had peaked then as well. But that was 15 years ago. This city now turns up new surprises. My friends at Laval University, most of them geographers, have given me names, new doors to knock on. Those years I spent trying to blend in (and always failing) have finally worked. My name gets me a hearing: that is, literally my name, my good French name, not any reputation. It's still my father, dead these many years, opening the doors.

Human geography, a speciality at Laval, is the study of the relationship between space and habitation. One author, Dean Louder, traces the shadow society in America left by old French parishes throughout the United States. Another, Luc Bureau, writes about "the geography of the night," the world of dissolved topographies and cartographic uncertainties. Shadows, memories, traces, might-have-beens: if Wolfe hadn't scaled the cliffs of Québec in 1759 and defeated Montcalm, if the Acadians hadn't been expelled to Louisiana, if Napoleon hadn't sold half the continent, if the church hadn't seized control of the French-Canadian soul—this, and comedy about it, is the stuff of Québec's wistfulness and irony, its music and art.

Within an hour of settling in my room, I'm in the office of Dr. (in geography, of course) Hugues Morrissette, the director of the St. Lawrence Development Project. I say office, but it's an unrenovated old house on the Grande-Allée serving as a government building. The furniture is pure summer cottage; the air hangs blue with everyone's smoke. The hours are long but unfixed. Québec is a personalized bureaucracy. In a former dining room, a meeting is going on in English for a group of city-councillors from Great Lakes ports. I had never before considered the intimacy of trade links between Toledo and Québec.

Hugues ducks out of one meeting in order to test, in a jocular way, my knowledge of recent Québec writers and music, the new Québec rapper, Richard Desjardins, whom he wants me to hear. He suggests my week's dinners and bars.

In an American context, one would hold Hugues's weight and cigarettes against him as a kind of lack of discipline, but in upper-town Québec there's a puckishness, even rascality, to the *pur laine* personality that acts as a filter against easy assumptions.

I may spend time on my NordicTrack trying to banish stress and paunchiness, and he probably spends it listening to jazz under a cloud of smoke. Stress and strain must be part of his job, but comfort and confidence are what come through. "I tell you, I have known many men like your dad, my friend," he laughs. "They were tough guys, eh?" A gray-haired but youngish man in a T-shirt and denim jacket comes down the stairs, and before he can exit, Hugues waves him over. As the man approaches, Hugues says to me, "Léonce is a very interesting man. Knowing him will enrich you."

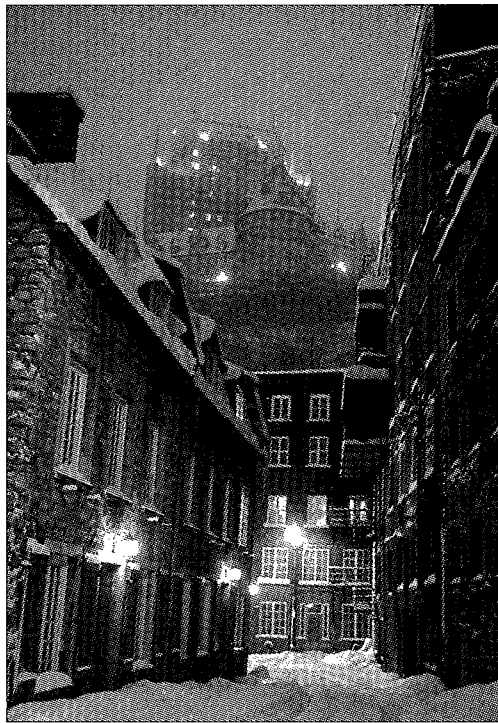
"Alors, Léonce," I ask, shaking his hand and knowing nothing about him, "where are we going?"

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And so we exit to the Grand-Allée, past the new government high-rises and the hotel towers, and the long walk past the National Assembly building with its statue of Maurice Duplessis out front—Duplessis, the Huey Long of Québec history, the architect of its stagnant, profascist, predemocratic provincialism (startlingly revised by a new generation of Parti Québécois *independentistes* as committed Québec nationalism), whose death launched the quiet revolution—up to the old city gate and down the corkscrew of Côte de la Montagne to the *basse ville*, the lower town, and Léonce’s favorite bar.

The bourgeois *haute ville*, with its administrative, religious, and managerial fortresses—big, stony, and defensive, the old monasteries and forts and parliamentary offices—was always a stuffy place unless you had a proper pedigree, which in the past I never did. That left me the proletarian lower town, disreputable and a little dangerous back then, which Léonce—a kind of public philosopher with a geography degree—knows quite well. Now, of course, Québec has cleaned itself up. The *basse ville* is mainlining tourist dollars, gentrifying its old housing stock, pouring new funds into old hotels, converting warehouses to lofts. Even old-time, tubercular, working-class areas like Limoilou are getting gentrified; Hugues had given me tips on restaurants in what I remembered as very questionable neighborhoods.

Québec was always two distinct cities: an upper and a lower, convenient divisions for the European and Catholic mind. Row housing on the Grande-Allée is classic 19th-century brownstone on the New York model, except that the stones are pocked and gray, with long, mournful windows. Le Corbusier, the great architect, had called the Grande-Allée “the loveliest street in America,” and I too can think of none finer. But he was describing a Grande-Allée even older than that of my first impressions, before the conversion of every graystone into a hotel and every front yard into an indifferent courtyard restaurant with plastic chairs under umbrellas.



Nighttime in the basse ville

Once you enter the old city behind the wall, you lose a century or even two. When the Grande-Allée narrows and changes its name to St. Louis, comparison with anything on this continent becomes irrelevant. These blocky brick structures, three and four stories high with their outer walls plastered over and their painted metal roofs, are examples of 18th- or even 17th-century residences, built with the expectation of a fortified wall to protect them. They look inward, to courtyards hidden from the street.

By urban American standards they are buildings without a sense of their own importance, without announced fronts, as though every street including St. Louis were an obscure side street and no building dare prevail on any block. They are set tightly against a narrow sidewalk, in a way reminiscent of



Benjamin West's *Death of Wolfe* (1770)

country towns in France. Life goes on behind small windows with minimal gauze curtains, the smudged blur of the TV's eye announcing a presence within, six inches from the pedestrian flow.

If the upper town belonged to businessmen, priests, and politicians, the lower town was home to sailors, whores, and wanderers of no fixed country.

The cliffs separating the two towns were deemed unscalable, God's quarantine, an *idée reçue* that lulled the French general Montcalm into complacency and challenged the British general, James Wolfe, to climb it one mid-September night (that mid-September light makes heroes of us all) in 1759 and, by morning, on the Plains of Abraham, to end French rule in Canada for all time.

And to create, with one fatal bullet to Montcalm's gentlemanly breast, a situation. Doubtless, the British gave little thought to the future of the rump, popish civilization they had conquered. It would disappear in a generation or two, follow its priests west or south or back to France. The British embarked on their ethnic cleansing of the Maritime Provinces, creating the Cajun culture of Louisiana, but the Québec population clung to its land and towns. Despite the English dominance of Montréal and even of Québec for most of its history, the French-Canadians continued to breed, to nourish their roots, to keep a low, tenacious profile.

*Québecuicité*—what I'll call Québecness—is a kind of collective seduction. Women are beautiful (and famously, hold your gaze); men are puckish, phrasing their thoughts with wit and irony. Charm is a self-conscious commodity in Québec. Rhetoric—that legacy of legal and religious study—is cultivated and respected here, much as it is in African American politics. It's all on display at Léonce's favorite bar in the Hotel Belley, located on a slim slice of St. Paul where it meets the Boulevard Charest in the lower town.

For Léonce, Belley is a place where everyone gathers, yet it doesn't seem crowded. He knows someone at each table, an artist, a writer, a journalist, an actor, a public philosopher like himself, attached to the government but also free floating. He phones his ex-wife, who might want to join us, and who often stops by, but she isn't in. There's nothing odd here that isn't replicated elsewhere, yet the texture is somehow more benign, more at ease, than that of any American city I know. The mix of art and government, of working class and artists, the complicated pasts they all seem to share, and the sense I have of my acceptance in various circles: all of that would mark this as an exceptional bar. One sentence describes it all: *québécois* are a tribe.

**T**hat first evening, Léonce and I walked back to the upper city on Rue de la Canoterie. "Take your time on this street," he said, not because of steepness but for the beauty. Even the deep-dyed *québécois* Léonce paused to take it all in: a big Italian cruise ship in the harbor, the row of mewlike housing behind St. Paul Street, the drying clothes flapping over an alleyway. At the top of the street, the ancient buildings loom like monstrous boulders. These are pre-Louis Sullivan, pre-steel, pre-plate glass structures.

Windows are tiny, walls are thick; six months of the year night is long and the light is frail.

When I first started coming to Québec, I could feel centuries of stored-up penury and denial in those stones. The visual clichés of old Québec were still in evidence: black-hatted *curés*, eyes cast downward, fingers laced against their bellies, ran their mysterious errands, barely nodding at the greetings of their parishioners. Uniformed convent girls wound their way down the streets, behind the nuns. I used to sit and read in the garden of the Ursuline convent, one of the quiet, undisturbed, urban places in the world. Now, those populations, that piety, are gone.

Hotels and restaurants have been carved from former residences. The churches have become quiet museums. Laval University has moved to the suburbs. In the rooms where I once stayed, the walls were hung with crosses and sacred hearts and portraits of the suffering Jesus; now the paintings are of Québec landscapes and smiling, seductive women. Today, the church is a threatened institution, the supply of nuns and priests, which had seemed endless, is now augmented by importation from the Third World.

Québec is the center of independence, the articulator of a call to action. The enemy of Québec, in the eyes of ardent nationalists, is not Toronto, or New York, or even Ottawa; it is Montréal. Montréal is the modern metropolis, the center of immigration, English dominance, crime and squalor. Québec is dangerously drawn (it seems to me) to the politicization of its purity, the elevation of its charm and artificially maintained exquisiteness to a kind of dangerous, nationalist fantasy agenda of governance.

I was taken to the Belley bar on another day by a geography post-doc at Laval, out to show me all the neighborhoods of Québec. To Louis, Belley is a “Proustian” bar, where you can drink all day, all weekend, without getting drunk. It’s a place to experience an essential bar-ness, with a red wine in hand, slowly sipped. Everything pleases, nothing compels. One part of the hotel is chopped into the cliff-face; bare rocks line the stairwell. He calls its rooms Proustian rooms, where you can make love all weekend without actually having sex. Americans, he fears, might not understand.

Québec City played a central role in Louis’s life, some 20 years after it had flared so brightly in mine. His first visit to Québec convinced him that he was not a “French-Canadian” like his father, or like the philosopher-king Pierre-Elliott Trudeau, or the politician from his hometown who has become the current prime minister of Canada, Jean Chrétien. Those guys were embodiments of the Montréal and Ottawa reality, where all the grit and grime of the continent—industrialization, immigration, compromise with the English, even having to speak English in order to survive and prosper—is an essential part of the bargain. Louis’s English is excellent; he’s married to an American and has taught in Indiana. Like many a *québécois*, he loves the United States and loves English; the difference is one of choice. He chooses—English doesn’t use or choose him.

The Proustian point is its pointlessness. Non-*québécois* drink to get drunk, do other things in order to win. Québec is more elastic, less structured. It’s the Latin American streak, evident in its Argentine-style office hours, and in lunches and dinners that stretch into drowsiness. In many ways, that’s the best thing one can say about Québec: it is to be savored for its own sake, because it has survived, because it lost its only war, because it’s still here.

“It’s a city that talks,” said Remy d’Anjou, director of the Medieval Festival,

over a long, Falstaffian lunch a couple of days later at his favorite *basse ville* restaurant. "Even the stones have stories."

He's a big man, for 20 years the Bonhomme de Neige of Carnival, Québec's Mardi Gras celebration, which takes place in midwinter ice and snow. Now he's created something for the summer, a biennial celebration of something Québec never was but should have been—a medieval city. A million visitors are expected in August, when Québec is turned over to period musicians, theater, costumes, armaments, food and art, when every aspect of the city steps back 300 or 400 years from even its ancient origins, to celebrate the European connection.

**W**hen you leave the company of a showman such as Remy d'Anjou, your eyes are freshly aware of the ruined walls of the lower town, the historic plaques attached to the most modest buildings. We'd been eating on rue du Sault-au-Matelot, half a block from the back wall of the old Québec fort where the American upstart, Benedict Arnold, had spent the winter of 1775 trying to do to the British what Wolfe had done to the French. On the last day of the year, after severe losses from cold and disease, Arnold lifted his siege and went upriver, sacking the lesser fort of Montréal and going back to New York to receive his expected tribute from George Washington and a grateful Congress. That never happened, and American history knows the result. Even the stones have stories to tell.

The big difference between the Québec of my youth and that of today is the revitalization of the lower city. In many ways, it's inevitable, and healthy. The economic balance between governmental and tourist services, which together drive the economy of the upper town, appears to me to have gone a little off-kilter, forcing the upper town to live off its tourist dollars. The museumlike, immaculate quality of the *haute ville* can also be an inhibiting factor. Entrepreneurial energy is flowing to the lower prices and available space of the *basse ville*, and the tourists are following, not leading.

Very little of the continent's grit and grime or its social conflicts touches Québec. Street crime, assaults, rape, and discrimination are practically unknown. Within the tribe of *québécois*, relations are open, equal and tolerant. Louis took me through the St.-Jean-Baptiste quarter, where Québec's gays and artists tend to cluster, and which features the best bookstores, fine bars, and restaurants—new services for new populations.

Sometimes the casual equality, the tolerance, the Europeanness of Québec even surprises (and charms) a frequent visitor. On the fourth day of my visit I was using the men's room in one of Laval's academic buildings when, without warning or the usual rattling of mops, a young woman of student age entered. She methodically filled the towel racks, the toilet paper dispensers, cleaned, swabbed, and polished the porcelain, as a steady stream of young men entered and used the facilities. No backing off, no embarrassment, no problem. In Québec, intimacy is common, but privacy is never invaded.

Like my Laval friends (it's no accident), I was a geographer in college, drawn to the suspicion that something larger—call it geography, even God—influences our collective destiny. No place in America feeds that speculation more richly than Québec City, maritime Europe's first port of call, American shipping's last farewell. Québec is North America's most European city, an old imperial capital reduced to provincial status but still dreaming national dreams. The recent defeated referendum that nonetheless revealed francophone Québec's democratic desire to separate from Canada can be read in many

ways, from sincere to calculating, but everyone would agree that it means a determination to implant Québec's special status, unique identity, and singular history and achievement on the Canadian consciousness. Québec is different, but it is not holy. The danger is that too long a dismissal of the first claim results in the vindication of the second. Then, there is no turning back. Québec right now is on the edge; I hope (and predict) that Québec's future will be a continuation of, not a break with, its history.

Québec's location, so remote on the chilly longitudes of North America, confers centrality on the watery latitudes between Europe and Chicago, Rotterdam and Duluth. Take a string and loop it from Duluth, the westernmost port opened up by the St. Lawrence Seaway, across Lake Superior and down to Chicago, then back to Flint and Saginaw and Detroit, down to Toledo and Sandusky and Cleveland, to Buffalo and Toronto and Montréal, and end it at Québec. Then stretch it across the Atlantic to the eastern port of Rotterdam. Québec is no longer so remote. Whatever its political status, Québec's economic future is tied to shipping and to tourism, to being the natural commercial and cultural link between Great Lakes America and the European Union.

Québec means "where the waters narrow," thanks to the presence of Île d'Orléans, which squeezes the widening river into two narrow channels. One can stand on the *terrasse* behind the landmark Chateau Frontenac Hotel, look downriver, and see the past and future of Québec mingle. Nothing passes upstream to Montréal, the seaway, and the Great Lakes, or downstream to Le Havre and Rotterdam, without Québec's knowledge, approval, and margin of profit.

Québec is the total historical, social, cultural, and political package. If Québec City were uninhabited, a monument to vanished imperial vanity like India's Fatehpur-Sikri, or the Incas' Cuzco, it would still be a treasure. But by remaining a living culture, surviving numerical odds that have swamped nearly every other non-English civilization north of the Rio Grande, it is a miracle. It's that combination of convenient modernity and stubborn retentiveness that accounts for all that's attractive in Québec culture, all that's touristic, and all that's politically problematic today and for the foreseeable future.



*A juggler entertains the café crowd on Québec's Rue St. Joseph.*