

# Tracing Out an Anglo-Bohemia: Musicmaking and Myth in Montréal

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Montréal remains a true haven for humans not entirely thrilled with “the system.” The city is awash in cheap atmospheric real estate, delicious food, and tolerant vibes. Added bonus: most of the English people there are kind of nuts. My aunt who lives in Montréal says, “When the English fled the city, only the kooks remained behind.” This is true. If not outright mad, Montréal Anglophones decidedly lean towards eccentricity: capes, monocles, jodhpurs, and (thanks to a wacky political situation) a rich abundance of conspiracy theories. Talk about bait for the disenfranchised! (Douglas Coupland).<sup>1</sup>

The usual story about anglo Montréal is that most of it has moved away. Then there are tales of plucky diehards who hold tight to their bagels and hope for better times. These 3-o’clock coffee swillers are something different: a community with an ethos and a lifestyle symbiotically linked with the decline of the city (Globe and Mail).<sup>2</sup>

For myself I always feel like we’re drawing on an idealized version of Montréal. When I first moved here that quickly bottomed out. We’re not so self-involved to think that we made this out of scratch. (However) I feel like there is something new going on with the fact that more people are staying in this city who aren’t from this city. There’s more of a dropout culture that has manifested itself because things are so shitty everywhere else. Like why would you move to Toronto anyway? (Efrim of *godspeed you black emperor*).<sup>3</sup>

Toronto has all the money and none of the style; Montréal has no money and all the style (Montréal saying).

Over the course of the last century Montréal has occupied a number of symbolic roles within the Canadian social imaginary. A salient example can be found mid-century, where it figured as a vibrant cosmopolitan city, one where the worlds of sex, sin, and leisure met up with the literary, music, film and art scenes to produce, in many estimations, a North American version of *la vie bohème*. If it were possible to map the nation’s moral geography at the time, the result for many would have confirmed an image of Montréal as Canada’s Sin City. This mapping has been done,



albeit in a way which romanticizes rather than disparages this particular moment. The corrupt yet compelling worlds of the thirties, forties, and early fifties in Montréal have been more than adequately eulogized and mythologized in a number of books and films dedicated to showcasing the city's once seedy glamour.<sup>4</sup> For a segment of the Anglo literary and journalistic elite, it's an era that retains its evocative power because it is understood as the point at which Montréal had reached its cosmopolitan apotheosis, a process of modernization which they saw as impossible to disentangle from the seemingly positive influences of the city's longstanding Anglo-hegemony. For a number of them, this brief period of Montréal urban history represents a pre-lapsarian moment prior to the assertion of francophone rights and claims articulated during the Quiet Revolution. According to many of the Anglo writers reflecting on the city's past, this period helped to position Montréal, within a national urban hierarchy at least, as the liberal, urbane, and quintessentially 'happening' modern Canadian metropolis (an historical moment which preceded its supposed 'demetropolization' (Germain and Rose 2000).

While there remains a residual sense of its lurid past today, a contemporary map of Montréal's social and cultural worlds would most certainly cast the city in a different light. Nowadays, the city is more likely to be conjured up as a complex milieu marked by a starker contrast: on the one hand, it is the epitome of the fallen and ruined city, a once robust financial and transportation hub whose glory days have long since waned; on the other, it is a city whose diminished economic status has fostered among local and non-local artists (and others) an image of a still vital cultural centre. These are not incommensurate images of the city. In fact, they inform two complementary narratives: one of economic decline and weakness marked indelibly by language tensions and sovereignty debates, and the other, a narrative of resilience as expressed through the mythical character of its enduring cultural life. The introductory comments are affirmations of both these narratives, highlighting the city's paradoxical nature. They also suggest how certain developments are perceived as crucial to the emergence of an increasingly aestheticized urban experience. Thus, while alluding to the city's troubled urban milieu, they also affirm a celebratory image of the city framed in terms of its active social and cultural life.

This apparent tension underscores many visions of the city, but reveals itself quite tellingly in the notion of Montréal as the ideal site for an Anglo-bohemia to flourish, an evocative image that forms a part of the discursive economy shaping specific cultural and social dimensions of city life. Each comment directly and indirectly refers to the way in which economic and political forces form the backdrop against which the city-as-sign—Montréal as urban bohemia—is placed in relief. In sharing certain

rhetorical tropes, these comments enunciate Montréal's sociocultural specificity and indicate that the city still resonates with a mythic aura. Taken together, one can discern in these comments a common strategy of meaning-making, one that situates Montréal as a positively charged city-as-sign rendered in such a way that it remains a privileged locale for social and aesthetic activity. As a semiotic gloss on the city's status as Canada's cultural hub, these comments form part of a set of signifying practices which define its cultural and social spheres, helping to transform Montréal's city-as-sign into a city-as-scene, fostering and maintaining an idealized vision of culturally centred urban life to which artists and those not happy with 'the system' continue to gravitate.

While Coupland's allusion to jodhpurs, monocles and capes are today somewhat dated (and perhaps even more so, embarrassing) emblems of its eccentricity, Montréal's bohemian world remains dense with the requisite signifiers that single it out, both socially and spatially, as a subcultural hub. It gains its social and semiotic shape by virtue of its disparate and diverse population: dissenting members of the middle-class, disgruntled intellectuals, disenchanting adolescents seeking to shuffle off a suburban malaise, the many disaffected students, drifters and 'starving' artists. Its spatial character is confirmed by the sites these groups share, gathering in informal settings which allow and encourage forms of individual and collective expression (i.e. cafés, lofts and abandoned warehouses).<sup>5</sup> Cultural rebels, 'plucky diehards,' artists, and café habitués populate a shadow cultural economy, an economy that motivates a world established and cultivated through an underground ideology, one effectively articulated through aesthetic and social codes and embodied in the behaviours, attitudes and signifying practices which define a bohemian lifestyle. Formed through specific symbolic and material practices, all oriented in such a way that they privilege the virtues of cultural productivity and creative labour over economic or commercial success, Montréal's Anglo-bohemia can thus be defined by its members as a social space with its own moral economy, a world relatively independent from what they perceive to be the 'mainstream' or dominant culture, one intimately linked with their understanding and experience of Montréal.

"Fragile urban habitats of busy streets, cheap eateries, reasonable rents, and decent environs foster bohemia" says Russell Jacoby (Jacoby 1987, 28). The social dimensions of Montréal's bohemian demimonde are molded by the city's notoriously cheap rents, a chronically depressed economy marked by high rates of un- and under-employment, the promise of low-cost but by no means less-refined leisure, the open-minded Euro-civility, what novelist/essayist Hugh MacLennan called its 'cynical urbanity' (cited in Weintraub 1996, 219).<sup>6</sup> With echoes of Maffesoli's notion of "conflictual harmony," (Maffesoli 1996, 31) it is a world that



also emerges through the combination of anglophone, francophone and allophone cultures frequently mingling with an animated restlessness in a highly charged political atmosphere, one which permeates all aspects of everyday life (produced mainly through sovereignty and language debates and in the case of English Montréal embodied in the figures of the suffering ‘anxious anglophone’ and more recently the liberated ‘new Anglo’).<sup>7</sup>

Describing the animated social character of cities—enumerating their various scenes and communities in terms recalling Louis Wirth’s notion of them as a mosaic of social worlds—requires that we define a bohemian world relationally. These disparate spheres act, react and interact to produce the image of a culturally and socially vibrant metropolis. The music scene forms one such sociocultural milieu, one whose organizing and unifying principles are based on a logic of differentiation (from the mainstream/straight society). Members of a music scene work to establish their own cultural and moral economy in order to denote the scene’s distinctiveness as well as their disdain for the straight world. If a scene’s members work to map out a different social, cultural and discursive space for themselves within a city, at the same time the scene’s relation to the city itself can also be theorized in a more complex fashion. Following from Alan Blum’s work on a scene’s particular social relation to the city (discussed in this volume), we can offer a more nuanced illustration of the relationship between city and scene. A scene can be, and often is, construed as an index of urban and cultural vitality and a sign of the quality of social life; a scene signifies the quality of a city’s ‘cityness’ (to borrow from Doreen Massey 1999). And while we can read a scene in an indexical fashion—as a positively-charged sign referring to a city’s fecundity and ability to accommodate diversity and difference, a social form that both carries the traces and points towards the social relations of its larger urban setting—it can also be read in less celebratory terms as its sociocultural practices come to be inflected by the numerous tensions which directly and indirectly structure city life.

Montréal’s independent Anglo music scene exemplifies this relationship. As a social and cultural sphere central to Montréal’s bohemian world, the Anglo music scene functions according to a number of tensions. The way in which cultural and social activity coalesces and coheres (or doesn’t) is taken as an indicator of the peculiar sociality of Montréal. The types and degrees of this sociality can be situated in relation to a variety of issues affecting life in Montréal. We can consider specifically the relationship between language issues, economic and political tensions and their bearing on cultural production and how all can be framed in relation to institutional, industrial and social networks. These tensions are often resolved, negotiated, transformed or, in some cases, reconstituted, within the context of a particular socioaesthetic, and more

specifically, sociomusical experience of the city, an experience that produces and reproduces certain images, discourses and rhetorics which determine how the city is inhabited and imagined by musicmakers. Within this sociomusical experience, the singularity of Montréal's Anglo independent music scene becomes evident.

The discursive function of 'independent' is important to note here. Independent in the context of musicmaking means both a mode of musical production separate from the mainstream recording industry as well as a combined set of social and aesthetic practices.<sup>8</sup> Pierre Bourdieu makes this point more concisely in his discussion of bohemia. A bohemia, he reminds us, as a "society of artists is not merely a laboratory where this singular art of living that is the style of an artist's life is being invented as a fundamental dimension of the enterprise of artistic creation. One of its major functions... is to be its own market" (1996, 58). How that autonomy is perceived or maintained by the actors in a market for cultural goods depends on the the ability, need, or willingness to disavow certain aspects and demands of that overarching 'other' market, the money economy. He terms the former market an economic world reversed, one where financial success is a sign of failure. Here, instead of economic capital, cultural and symbolic capital (competence/knowledge and prestige/status/reputation respectively) are the measures of success, the somewhat artful acquisition and display of which maintains privileged positions within a select cultural economy. If we take independent music as an example of a cultural economy which functions according to a certain logic, visible links with mainstream benefactors, large scale institutions, or, more importantly, the appearance that one may be operating according to the rational calculations of the mainstream recording industry, we find that they require for their disavowal a certain amount of skill, the ability to translate symbolic or cultural capital in such a way so as to consolidate a privileged position or vantage point within the cultural field, showing at the same time adequate distance from (and disdain for) the economic field. A field of subcultural production such as independent music often functions according to a surveillance regime always on the lookout for potential contradictions and compromises. Within the moral economies of independent music, with its rarefied aesthetic politics founded on an even more arcane economy and language of 'cool,' there is little tolerance for those who apparently 'sell out.' And yet, for certain Anglo musicmakers in Montréal the reliance on those mainstream institutions and industries is seen mainly as a necessity, an alliance that must be understood in terms of survival and also some concept of success, however muted, short-lived, circumscribed, ironized or inverted.

The twin notions of suffering and success and the role they play in shaping a particular urban experience are taken up throughout this dis-



cussion. Interviews done with musicmakers (musicians and label owners) over a period of three years (1997–1999) provide the opportunity to explore the relationship between the image of Montréal as an Anglo-bohemia and the means by which musicmakers *work through* a complex set of social and cultural practices to negotiate or reaffirm certain social divisions and cultural distinctions. The comments cited here are particularly germane, coming as they do from people who are not from Montréal; originally from other Canadian cities, they moved here to study and stayed to make music.<sup>9</sup> Their perceptions and experiences of Montréal typify how a singular representation, and, more specifically, how the maintenance of that image, can contain so many tensions. Their comments suggest that the image and social character of the city are often indistinguishable, a conflation that continually works itself out at the level of cultural production within the Anglo music scene. They also reveal the way in which the longstanding trope of Montréal as a city where the ‘two solitudes’ meet continues to be positioned in relation to an image of the city as the ideal location for an Anglo-bohemia to take hold. It is, as will be shown, a complex relationship which allows the notion of suffering to be routinely ironized and valorized, thus illustrating how both these representations are mobilized to work off, and against, one another, deepening as well as complicating the sociomusical experience in Montréal.

Underscoring the sometimes frustrating and frustrated dimensions of cultural production in Montréal is the the rhetoric of weakness and suffering that remains attached to many aspects of musicmaking in the city. Musicmakers often point to the diminished resources and lack of support (from audiences, other labels, other musicians, promoters, local radio, government granting agencies, etc.) as primary factors affecting musical practice in Montréal. For those who choose to stay, this choice often necessitates the employment of certain heroic narratives, survival myths evincing what Bourdieu has called “the prestige of romantic triumph” (1996, 55) (and we should be mindful here of a complementary narrative trope indigenous to bohemia: the narrative of dissipation—see Siegel 1986 and Wilson 2000). Among independent musicmakers, these conceits are often ironized in the form of a heroic anti-heroism, a self-conscious posture of disdain and disavowal struck in relation to other people and places that appear to offer more visible (‘easier’) points of entry into the mainstream recording industry (i.e. Toronto). More generally, these attitudes are part of the symbolic, imaginative and creative labour used to make sense of the city in distinctly sociomusical terms. They also help to articulate a sense of belonging for members of the scene, mapping out a highly charged social milieu marked as much by its inclusivity as by its exclusivity.

On a broader scale, the codes of being and belonging are evident in the individual dispositions, social positions and subcultural postures which contribute to, and must be understood in relation to, a sense that things in Montréal are done with seeming ease, but never appear to come easy, where what was originally a choice takes on the nobler character of necessity and where a willful marginality (and perception of isolation) takes on a different resonance in a city that once played a central role in a national and international economy but has itself now been pushed to the periphery. (Thus, following from Coupland, one is led to ask how easily Montréal's supposed eccentricity can be correlated to its ex-centricity).<sup>10</sup> As a result, the perception that Montréal's cultural life functions according to an ingrained anomie and produces an acceptable ambience of idleness/inertia is taken as a commonplace by the scene's members. As one interviewee put it:

In Toronto people want to succeed. People here accept that they won't. It's a choice. You probably feel slightly depressed. You won't get a lot of money or the big record contract. People are living a more accepted, more realistic existence here. It's low key. It's that kind of humble low-keyness here. Here it's a lifestyle (Gen from *Derivative Records/Pest 5000*).<sup>11</sup>

Comments like this can be paired with the notion of *working through* to indicate that the valorization of certain kinds of labour—symbolic, imaginative and cultural/creative—is deeply rooted in the networks, social hierarchies and systems of exchange and evaluation specific to a bohemian demimonde. This sense of *working through* is meant to suggest one way in which Montréal musicmakers make meaningful, and occasionally resolve, the otherwise fraught relationships between the (Anglo-centric) transregional aspects of independent music production and distribution and the local circumstances that keep them, literally and figuratively, grounded. It is a term that also helps to frame an examination of the interdependent nature of the Anglo-centric industries, institutions and social networks which provide the lines of continuity underpinning certain musical practices. The result is a phenomenon which can reveal how mediated and mutually reinforcing, and thus how complex, social relations and cultural practices often are in Montréal.

### *Setting the Scene*

Montréal appeals to me because it's isolated already. I like lower-expectations complex, so it's kind of like Canada reduced even more. So if you can hang on to an aesthetic sensibility against the odds it makes you even stronger. That's a really backwards and noble way to think about it, but it appeals to



me on a really 'primal' level (Patti from *Derivative Records/Pest 5000*).<sup>12</sup> You do feel like an exile living in this city. I feel isolated from whatever the motor of the economy is. I feel completely removed from it and everyone I know feels completely removed from it. And that's a healthy thing for me... I left Toronto because everyone I knew was getting jobs in the film industry and that doesn't happen here. That's good, I'm happy about that. I walk around the street here and I don't feel connected at all (Efrim).

Suffering builds a scene's character. Not the most delicate way to start a discussion of musical scenes but an assessment not entirely misplaced if one wants to consider the conflicting and competing ideas and agendas of all those musicmakers (musicians, promoters, record label owners, etc.) organizing and managing their cultural practices according to their diverse needs and often divergent interests. In Montréal, the social and spatial consequences of these notions of suffering and tenacity are evident throughout the anglophone independent music scene. This sense of weakness can be positioned vis-à-vis the larger political and socioeconomic situation of Québec and the discursive construction of the Montréal Anglo (as something distinct from the Toronto Anglo) which structure both the real and imagined space of the province's largest city. In both instances, they can be seen as local manifestations and articulations of larger social and political forces.<sup>13</sup> Outlining the ways in which certain images are marshalled together to position Montréal within a national urban hierarchy illustrates how this particular representation of urban social and cultural space is fostered mainly through Anglo-centric social networks, industries and institutions, how this transforms or reproduces social and spatial divisions, and how it helps to articulate a sense of belonging.

Consider the social character of Montréal's current Anglo music scene: with its actors eschewing the mainstream or straight world, this social world, has, at one level, the character of what Erving Goffman (1961) has called a "focused gathering." Clifford Geertz has summed this up neatly as:

a set of persons engrossed in a common flow of activity and relating to one another in terms of that flow. Such gatherings meet and disperse; the participants in them fluctuate; the activity that focuses them is discrete—a particulate process that reoccurs rather than one that endures (1991, 249).

Rather than the cohesion afforded by longstanding organized social groups, focused gatherings are marked by their temporary, loose-knit, casual and ad hoc character. Focused gatherings amongst musicmakers in Montréal acquire their social character primarily through the vast number of informal meeting places which always threaten to disappear, lending the city's Anglo music scene a sense of fluidity and looseness, an



ambience of instability confirmed also through a migratory anglophone population whose numbers are always fluctuating. In both instances, what is maintained among Anglo musicmakers is an indelible image of urban fragility and instability that allows them to rhetorically position Montréal as the ideal setting for a bohemian world to unfold.

On another level, and as a counterpoint, Montréal also acts as a staging ground for an artistic underworld where social gatherings are guaranteed their recurrence through individuals' links with social and cultural institutions and their involvement with key industrial sites. Once again noting the indexical relation between city and scene, cultural practices at the micro-level of the scene become intentional and unintentional indicators of the political and economic situation affecting social and cultural life in the city as a whole. We can consider the significance of these urban dramas by citing two examples of institutions and industries and the role they play in securing for many anglophones a place in Montréal's music scene: Anglo-dominated institutions such as McGill and Concordia and the locally-based, predominantly anglophone, international record distributor (one-stop) Cargo Canada.

For many anglophones, universities are primary points of entry into the city's numerous artistic scenes. They provide one line of continuity which can be traced back to a well-established tradition of generating and regenerating the intellectual and cultural fields required to draw out the future cultural and subcultural élites, cultural rebels, artists and creative denizens who continually replenish the city's underworld. Here a field is a "structured space with its own laws of functioning and its own relations of force independent of those of politics and the economy" (Johnson in Bourdieu 1993, 6). Fields function according to a logic of exchange related to various types of capital (intellectual capital in an intellectual field, cultural capital in a cultural field, etc.). For anglophone students, McGill University or Concordia University (where the language of instruction is English) serve as social and institutional settings structured by the intersection of intellectual and cultural fields. While here, they are introduced to a number of interlocking social networks and cultural institutions that function mainly in English.<sup>14</sup> These institutions and their ancillary networks provide a broader context for cultural activity which is insulated from the larger economic and political forces at work in the city. To take an example: through the university, the musically-inclined can find their way to campus-based community radio, a pluralistic social space which acts as a transitional zone bringing together a university community and the larger urban community. Community radio is a place where students, activists, and artists/musicians not affiliated with the university gather and where diversity and difference are positively charged, its heterogeneity marking its distinction from the mainstream or dominant culture. In this



capacity, community radio allows individuals so inclined to be slowly ingratiated into a broader social and cultural space which extends beyond the campus. From here, aspiring musicmakers can find themselves immersed in city-wide industrial and institutional networks which link together a range of media, media outlets and musical fora which serve to deepen the urban sociomusical experience (and here one can list CBC Radio, alternative weeklies such as the *Hour* or *Mirror*—or their French equivalents, *Ici* and *Voir*—club/performance spaces, record shops, bars, etc.).

All of these spaces are structured by a number of overlapping fields which determine individual actions and group interaction. The dynamism of these fields means that they are productive as much as they are produced, influenced as much as they are influential. That is, they are settings where individuals struggle to position themselves in relation to the various hierarchies structuring the field and actors' jockeying within them is both affected by and affects their shape. Also, the kinds movement or degrees of mobility through these fields are determined in large part by the relationship struck between their objective structure and the individual habituses of the field's participants. The relationship between habitus and field is a complex one:

[A] field consists of a set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power (or capital), while habitus consists of a set of historical relations "deposited" within individual bodies in the form of mental and corporeal schemata of perception, appreciation and action (Wacquant 1992, 16).

Habitus in other words, "expresses first the result of an organizing action, with a meaning close to that of words such as structure; it also designates a way of being, a habitual state (especially of the body) and, in particular, a disposition, tendency, propensity or inclination" (Bourdieu, cited in Wacquant 1992, 18). Even though it is both regular and regulated, there is little sense of calculation or strategy in all of this; instead, habitus orients individuals and their activities in such a way that they appear natural, or as 'second nature.' Thus, for those with the 'right' inclination or tendency, universities can also serve as exit points, secure environments offering an opportunity to fashion a revamped identity in a context that provides the latitude needed for personal reinvention. They are settings that encourage new encounters and experimentation, fostering individual and socially directed actions which appear to occur without obvious deliberation, the end result being a cosmopolitan sensibility attuned to the peculiar rhythm of the city's cultural and social life. Here then universities are, to paraphrase Bourdieu, laboratories for raising living to an art. It is important to note that in their dual capacity as points

of entry and as exit points, they are spaces of possibility functioning in some fashion as introductory settings easing the transition into the broader cultural space of the city. These institutions have an established link with Montréal's Anglo-bohemian scenes, affording its members a sense of sociohistorical continuity and spatial contiguity, but also determining how the city comes to mean what it does for them.

If they are inclined to follow the numerous trajectories and channels drawing them out from the university and into the city, Montréal's independent musical culture supplies to aspiring musicmakers a repertoire of subcultural styles and lifestyle options. The nascent cultural sensibility fostered in the university expands in an urban setting where a properly oriented habitus guarantees 'survival.' It does this because it is "a system of lasting and transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks" (Wacquant 1992, 18). For those whose entry and later mastery of the field comes as a result of a finely tuned sense of perception and appreciation, combined as it is with the successful deployment of their cultural, intellectual or symbolic capital, their eventual contribution acts at once as a tacit acceptance and an embodiment and objectification (as daily habit and habit of mind), of the mores, values and attitudes of the bohemian world.<sup>15</sup> Whether it be through something as seemingly innocuous as the adoption of a type of dress or as profound as inventing a new mode of existence, each is simultaneously an actualization and affirmation of the flexibility and legitimacy of Montréal's bohemian world and each in their own way works to preserve it.

While English universities and community radio serve as one point of entry into Montréal's Anglo-bohemia, many individuals try to make sense of the city's depressed economy while remaining true to their musical aspirations by working for any one of a number of industrial actors that play an important support role in the city's anglophone musical culture. Since 1987, and until its bankruptcy in 1997, the one-stop distributor Cargo Canada had been one such company, employing a number of native and non-native anglophones to work in its offices and warehouse.<sup>16</sup> Although it was a national distributor, Cargo played a central role in defining the sociomusical experience of Montréal. Besides being an employer offering a workspace where musically inclined individuals could meet, it also stocked record shops, supplying a number of them with imports and domestic releases, it often fronted the capital for many of its employees seeking to set up their own boutique labels, and, perhaps more importantly, Cargo served as an entry point to national and international music markets and audiences.<sup>17</sup> Functioning with the same insulating capacity as the English-dominated universities, a job here acts as an effec-



tive protective mechanism against social and economic conditions that might otherwise mean leaving the city. This is strategic in a simple and pragmatic way: in many cases the success or failure of these industrial actors has little to do with provincial politics and linguistic tensions and more with the vicissitudes of global marketing and promotion in the major recording industry. And while taking into account the caprices of the mainstream recording industry (which reaffirm on one level a sense of suffering, struggle or neglect among local musicmakers), the interconnect- edness of both industrial networks and institutional settings offers the compensatory support needed to maintain a productive cultural space and further bind individuals to the scene and the city itself.

While habitus and taste affect the ability to ‘get-by’ creatively, there are more mundane, but no less powerful, factors that also shape the music scene. Musicmakers’ abilities to function within the scene are determined by the distribution of local resources, as well as how effectively translocal support can be utilized in order to ensure musical survival. Access and the ability to mobilize local and non-local support and resources depends on the degree to which economic, political and social forces impinge on local circumstance, which in turn may determine both the desire and ability to get beyond it. These forces can be characterized generally as either centripetal or centrifugal, each having a bearing on the shape and meaning of musicmaking in Montréal. Centripetal forces result in a renewed sense of, and inward return to, regionalism and tradition. In a period of economic downturn or political and social upheaval, this can mean ‘making the most of what you’ve got,’ which often translates into a subterranean form of regional boosterism and low-grade civic pride, through which Bourdieu’s notion of romantic triumph finds, effectively, a home. Efrim alludes to this, suggesting how a specific image of Montréal is cultivated:

We’re very vocal about that fact that we’re from Montréal. That’s part of our schtick. It’s conscious on that level. It’s about being really into this city and into the circumstances that have allowed us to exist. And knowing what’s different and special about this city. This all sounds smarmy but just in terms of whatever our aesthetic was when we put out the record and the CD and when we were thinking about how we wanted to present things outside of a local situation I think there was a desire to create an exaggerated mystery about what it was like to live in Montréal and Mile End.

There are two things to note here: In imposing certain limits or, as Efrim suggests, by framing constraints in such a way that ‘circumstances’ appear imposed on you, centripetal forces mobilize a scene’s members, confirming the sense of unity and cohesion from within, helping to form a loosely bound regional niche or pole around which people and activities

coalesce into a meaningful set of sociocultural practices and affective alliances. At the same time, the mythic aura surrounding Montréal—Efrim’s “exaggerated mystery”—ensures its position in the national imaginary as a bohemian center, lending the city’s cultural life an appearance of affective and authentic depth which is extended to the city as a whole, the conflation again of city-as-sign and city-as-scene which can then draw people with an affinity for a similar lifestyle in from elsewhere.

Centrifugal forces, on the other hand, gain strength in response to those local restrictions which can only be alleviated by extending market and imaginative horizons beyond the narrowly city-specific. These are forces that tend towards dispersal, outward movements and gestures founded on a desire to find and build alliances that transcend or transform local parochial restrictions, locating stronger, more established links and support systems to transcend weaker local links and diminished resources. These are forces that also enable the dissemination of the image of bohemia, ensuring that Montréal’s reputation as (sub)cultural hub radiates outwards.

As the overarching determination of social life in Montréal, language functions also to mediate the intensity and effect of both centripetal and centrifugal forces. In a predominantly bicultural and bilingual city such as Montréal, language often serves to galvanize people along certain axes of differentiation. These can be axes shaping social as well as spatial relations, affecting where one lives in the city as well as how one moves through its cultural landscape. At the same time, linguistic tensions can heighten the desire of individuals to leave the city. In both capacities, the distinctions drawn between language groups structure the motivation and direction of symbolic, material, spatial and cultural practices, all of which must be considered in relation to centripetal and centrifugal forces.

While there is a great deal of overlap between francophones and anglophones (as well as allophones) in the bohemian underworld, the distinctions between them often make their way back into cultural practices rather obliquely.<sup>18</sup> How these two worlds might come together is the subject of some debate:

Whatever scene exists now, for it to continue that sort of outreach (to francophones) is going to have to happen. I’m unhappy that it hasn’t happened yet. I don’t know how to make that manifest but I think it’s important. The fact is that this scene, the community I feel part of is shrinking everyday. There’s still people leaving this city daily. There’s still people breaking down just due to the stress of the city. Maybe not leaving, but they’re removing themselves from the scene. There’s always people coming to replace them, but they’re young, they’re just getting into school. It’s a bit harder. You have to wait for those people to decide whether they want



to stay here or decided to do something outside of school. Before they really become an active part of anything going on here. I think for the security of anyone trying to do anything local that sort of outreach has to happen... There is a huge division between francophone and anglophone musicians. I know there's a parallel universe going on among francophones. There are bands that are mirrors of us, but we live in ignorance of their existence and they live in ignorance of ours. I know that for a year there has been a French space with bands doing the same sort of thing that we had no idea about a block over (Efrim).

Francophone and anglophone is very divided. I have very little knowledge of the other side. Although there seems to be some blending right now with the godspeed scene. They have francophone members, so being such a large collective that sort of invites mingling. There's like a whole thing going on over there, and I'm like: "Hey, what's going on over there?" I went to a gig that was totally francophone, absolutely one hundred percent francophone. There's a whole college scene of kids that are into funky, weird punk rock avant-garde and you'll never meet them. I went to this loft gig and it was eerie. I feel like I'm in my community, except I don't know any of the people and they're all speaking French. There was this great band called Cayenne playing and it's weird because I don't even feel like I'm in my own city. It signals a strong division I think (Gen).

As varied as they are in describing the cross-over potential of francophone and anglophone crowds, both comments suggest that the uneasy and uneven coexistence of centripetal and centrifugal forces in Montréal has a profound effect on social and musical interaction in the city. Moreover, these comments suggest just how deeply-rooted the distinctions are between francophone and anglophone musicmakers and their respective musical worlds. At times, this means rendering the francophone scene barely visible or impenetrable; at others, its very presence makes the city seem a foreign place.

Language, then, heavily inflects not only the visible and audible aspects of musicmaking and its relation to the cultural spaces of Montréal, but at a fundamental level also shapes the networks, or more specifically, the systems and patterns of cooperation structuring musical culture. Ruth Finnegan's term for these musically based webs of interconnectedness and the apparatuses that underpin them, is pathways, and her definition allows a more nuanced sense of how certain networks function socially and spatially (1990, 323). Pathways can be both real and/or symbolic: the former are the streets, subways, routes to and from venues, studios and meeting places; the latter include the manner in which certain individuals become musicians (career trajectories, or, for instance, the path taken

from university student to community radio volunteer to musicmaker) or the role the broadcast, recorded and print media play in disseminating musical knowledges. Pathways, generally, are part of the social, geographical, historical, cultural, ideological means and strategies deployed to negotiate a position or privileged vantage point within a musical culture. More importantly, they serve as communicative channels that link routes to routines, channels in which the degree and kind of movement can be heavily determined by language. As such, they can be construed as mappings of the anglophone habitus onto both imaginative spaces and built environments, constituting the affective alliances that are inscribed not only onto the scene's imaginary but also its relation to the city. They are, as David Chaney suggests, a series of connections, a multiplicity of affiliations that constitute local frameworks and as such can be imaginative frameworks as well as frameworks for action (1997, 141). In the case of both the francophone and anglophone musical worlds, pathways provide opportunities for a number of physical and imaginative encounters which reinforce, reaffirm, and ultimately guarantee the continuation of musical cultures across and through disparate institutional sites, industrial networks and cultural spaces.

The successful negotiation of Montréal's real and symbolic pathways is contingent upon how one uses the industrial infrastructure, as well as how effectively one navigates through the institutional and social networks binding the city's music scenes together. This complex musical world and its relation to the sociolinguistic dimensions of cultural life has led to notable developments in the local music industry. Over the last twenty-five years, the francophone music industry has evolved and matured substantially. The emergence and rapid growth of francophone indies in the province provoked a shift in the distribution of power between local and transnational firms in Québec, the consequence being the economic reinforcement of the local industry as a whole. They did not achieve this position simply because of their place in French-language genres, as Line Grenier states:

[T]hey also achieved such a success because, despite their relatively small size, their almost chronic under financing and the lack of appropriate industrial and commercial infrastructures, they played the cards of diversification and vertical integration well. Using similar strategies as those adopted by transnational firms, albeit on a much smaller scale, they were quick to form allied industry interests in artist management as well as television, film, video and stage production... but perhaps most importantly, québécois indies could also rely on an increasingly active network of locally owned national distributors (1996, 315)



The emergence of a strong independent music scene and community among francophone musicmakers parallels in many respects the kind of musical world created by Montréal's anglophone independent scene. However, the scope and reach of each scene's musical output is unevenly distributed, with francophone musicmakers bumping up against the constraints of a global but still much narrower (and predominantly Anglo-centric) audience.

For this and other reasons, the somewhat divergent evolution of these two musical worlds has played a significant role in determining how musicmakers relate to one another in Montréal. Emerging from localized processes of individuation and in relation to translocalized networks of inclusion and exclusion unevenly structured along language lines, there has been a pronounced effect on how each musical world's pathways cater to the many needs and desires of their respective musicmakers. The different direction and motivations of these musical worlds means, for example, that support personnel are utilized differently. Both these worlds would fail to flourish if they were not supported by a broad range of local resources, reinforced by the extended patterns of cooperation and reciprocal ties established between members of various artworlds and the institutions and industries which define them (Becker 1982). This has certain social consequences, for as the situation at the city's Anglo-dominated universities and Cargo Records suggests, institutional and industrial modalities shape artistic and bohemian attitudes along language lines, returning us again to issues surrounding aesthetic autonomy and creative independence as well as how a sense of belonging is articulated in terms of inclusivity and exclusivity.

While these musical worlds are not mutually exclusive—their borders being semi-permeable—in the case of many anglophones this has meant a continual reliance upon established English-based cultural industries, institutions and resource pools as well as the pathways they generate and support. This further ensures that the structures determining the shape and reach of many pathways remains highly selective, exclusive and exclusionary. As dependent as they are upon symbolic, industrial and social networks, these are affiliations, local frameworks and spatial practices where the degree of interaction is heavily influenced by language, a phenomenon which requires a more in-depth discussion as to how the images and myths of Montréal come to affect social relations and cultural practices.

### *Tracing out Bohemia*

There is not a great capital in the world to-day without its purely imagined and invented "Bohemia"... and in this "Bohemia" are supposed to dwell



the “Bohemians.” There never was such a place even in the conventions of literature. It is now and always has been as mythical as More’s “Utopia” or as the gardens of the Hesperides (Raoul Auerheimer 1990).

Montréal’s like that expatriate community in Paris between the wars. The kind of sense of moving to a place which is cheap, where you don’t necessarily speak the language, which is somewhat depressed, not only economically, but also in spirit and beautiful in its decrepitude (Gen).

The (city’s) political and economic history over the last thirty years has created the conditions upon which people, either from Montréal or not, are much freer just simply on economic grounds to pursue their muse or whatever. There is a palpable, but hard to define atmosphere of alienation or tension or something, maybe even decay as well, that ends up having its effect (Ian from Constellation Records).<sup>19</sup>

“People do not live in places but in descriptions of places,” the poet Wallace Stevens wrote to his friend Henry Church, describing his inspiration to compose “Description Without a Place.”<sup>20</sup> Gen and Ian accept that they inhabit an image of Montréal as a bohemia as much as they inhabit Montréal itself, and thus simultaneously affirm and deny Stevens’ and Auerheimer’s assessments of how meanings accrue to places. Gen and Ian’s comments, if considered alongside those of the other musicmakers cited here, indicate another important dimension crucial to the maintenance of Montréal’s image as the perfect harbour for a flourishing urban bohemia. Although some elements of it are articulated through the mutually reinforcing elements of habitus and field, embodied in habit and tastes or objectified in style, the successful reproduction of the image of Montréal as an Anglo-bohemia depends also on the narrativization of local experiences and their eventual projection to others outside of Montréal. Its mythic qualities radiate outward, taking shape through mobile (and mobilized) forms of cultural representation of the city, with a specific cultural identity produced through a complex matrix of articulations and mediations. Montréal’s promise of bohemian life—whose local flavour and non-local appeal, as one national newspaper put it, is founded on its apparent “laissez-faire contentment,”<sup>21</sup>—as well as its most recent structure of feeling, was voiced in Coupland’s slacker ur-text, *Generation X*. (He lived in Montréal while writing it.) The mediated experience of place emerges through the articulation of indigenous idiosyncrasies, including those embedded in narratives of place, with local cultural and social histories coded with the semiotic richness needed to create the mythical textures (and in the case of novels and news stories, textualizations) and meaningful aura attractive to both local and non-

local bohemians and musicmakers.

Related to this, the ease or difficulty with which one can use the scene's pathways to travel through the cultural spaces of Montréal also introduces a whole range of tensions which determine the discursive shape of Montréal's independent music scene. There are also fundamental tensions between the forces of continuity and change, fixity and flow, margin and mainstream, centre and periphery, and, notably, between notions of local participation as a sign of resistant/idealist regionalism versus global/translocal oriented musical activity as a mark of a pragmatic/realist cosmopolitanism. If we understand these antimonies as unfolding along an axis of differentiation structured by culture and language, they emphasize the way in which these spaces are often fraught with visible/audible and invisible/inaudible conflicts, irresolvable contradictions and a number of competing discourses. Taken together, they provide the discursive and imaginative frameworks for the mythmaking that underpins a scene's symbolic infrastructure. They also underline the frisson that motivates musicmakers to act in the manner that they do, shaping the range and direction of musical and social practices as well the degree of interaction between members of a scene. As such, they are highly charged determinants in how the scene becomes rhetorically constructed through a variety of media, individuals and institutions, informing the practice of mythmaking and determining the degree to which this discrete lifestyle option remains sustainable (for insiders) and appealing (to outsiders).

Generally speaking, this type of mythmaking serves as an indispensable form of cultural representation, a rhetorical and discursive mechanism which while at the same time it grounds musicmakers locally serves also to attract other non-local musicmakers. An integral part of the symbolic framework underpinning musicmaking, the store of images mythmaking produces ensures a certain continuity over discontinuity, a sense of coherence in the face of incoherence, or in the words of Barthes (and this is its ideological function also), a "blissful clarity" that can easily ameliorate and aggravate any number of anxieties (1972, 143). Myths are also important rhetorical and discursive strategies many musicmakers consciously and unconsciously employ to make sense of a given place and lend meaningful charge to their musical practices. Myths in this case serve to anchor musicmakers in localities, establishing or renewing narratives and symbolic systems which lend affective depth, coherence, a sense of shared experience and belonging, semiotic richness, historicity and thus a distinctive cultural identity to a specific place. In another sense, a successful myth can gain over time the symbolic charge that attracts outsiders, which in turn confirms the value of its mythic status and ensures its survival. Myths secure their place in the local imaginary in the first case through an accumulation of historical encrustations, with the accretion of

mythic signifiers giving a place a fixed and meaningful unity established through the multiple articulations of regionally-specific systems of representation, or what Rob Shields calls place-image:

These are the various discrete meanings associated with real places or regions regardless of their character in reality... A set of core images forms a widely disseminated and commonly held set of images of a place or space. These form a relatively stable group of ideas in currency, reinforced by their communication value as conventions circulating in a discursive economy (1991, 60–61).

Place-images are rooted in idiosyncratic symbolic and imaginative frameworks which help to embed individuals and groups in a particular place and at the same time serve as framing mechanisms that encourage or circumscribe cultural activity and expression. Place-images function in tandem with myth-making to establish a city-as-sign (see also, Short and Kim 1998). With a cultural identity organized, articulated or communicated in such a way that it can attract or repel people and ideas, the resulting activity contributes to the broader sense of horizontal flow created by the movement of musicmakers, commodities and ideas across and through a scene.

The fixity and flow which characterizes the tenor of city life is easily transposed to descriptions of musical scenes. In Montréal, this sense of fixity and flow in its musical scenes is inflected by the myths and place-images accruing to social and cultural life in the city. The two overarching and intertwined representations that form the discursive envelopes containing social and cultural life on the margins in Montréal are found in the myth of two solitudes and the place-image of Montréal's Anglo-bohemia. Together they function to reinforce the notion suffering and survival which are the scene's central tropes. With regard to the place-image of Montréal's Anglo-bohemia, the perception among musicmakers is that there are crucial qualitative differences to social life and cultural expression in Montréal (notwithstanding Coupland's belief in the city's sartorial idiosyncracies). These differences are marks of distinction, articulating an exceptionalism rendered most often in terms of social life, producing a city-as-scene/city-as-sign whose enduring mythical dimensions within a national urban hierarchy function to distinguish Montréal from other Canadian or North American cities. Thus, in considering the city's myths and place-images, what remains particularly salient are the means by which these narratives and representations are produced and reproduced, how their symbolic dimensions are internalized, embodied and inhabited through lived experience, how they are then articulated, referred to, reinforced or transformed through cultural practices and



musical forms, and, more generally, how they mediate the sociomusical experience of Montréal.

Both myth and place-image function as simple and reductive stereotypes or cultural fictions, convenient symbolic shorthand standing in for the complexity of social relations and interactions in the city. Given this elliptical character, they have a tendency to elide other aspects of social life in the city. Anglo indie musicmakers, for instance, talk in terms of francophone and anglophone, with no mention of allophone participation. While the notion of two-solitudes might be less tenable given demographic shifts over last fifty years, it still remains part of a strategy of meaning-making and thus essential to cultivating a sense of belonging. Because myths and place-images are fixed as always-already there, as a deeply entrenched system of meaning and representation inscribed onto Montréal's cultural and social landscape, etched into the (local and national) social imaginary, they ultimately mediate the degrees and kinds of social interaction and lived experience as well as cultural expression. They are as much a product of material and social conditions in the city as much as they produce them. As an integral part of lived experience and signs of the dense symbolic texture of Montréal, myths and place-images are actively and consciously (and unconsciously) reproduced in ways that influence cultural practice and the range of movement within the city's cultural spaces. In affecting and effecting discursive economies and material practices, they both describe and prescribe cultural activity and social relations in the city.

As part of a social and aesthetic lineage which extends from salons in nineteenth-century Paris to the happenings in 1960's New York, Montréal musical life is solidly entrenched within a matrix of mobile and durable social, spatial and cultural practices which have always determined the means through which bohemians make a habitable world out of seemingly inhospitable urban decay, economic decline and cultural detritus.<sup>22</sup> The dissemination, reproduction, mediation and the continuing tenacity of this image of Montréal among musicmakers remains embedded within an interlocking network of institutions, industries and urban sites. It finds expression on Montréal's streets, in studios, performance and rehearsal spaces, bars, between the pages of newspapers and fanzines and over commercial and community radio airwaves. These multiple articulations function to produce and reproduce the discursive and symbolic space of an imagined community united in common cultural purpose. At the same time, the imaginative and affective hold of these images is indirectly reinforced through English-dominated (or Anglo-centric) institutions such as universities and radio as well as Montréal-based segments of the global recording industry. These institutional and industrial sites have a dual function which contributes to the perpetuation of both myth and place-

image: to insulate many anglophone musicmakers from the negative effects language tensions might have on cultural practice, and to serve as conduits or points of entry into the Anglo-bohemian underworld. By learning and acquiring the specialized knowledges required to manoeuvre around these sites and using the interlocking ancillary networks connected to them, Anglo musicmakers can transform their situation in such a way that any sense of 'suffering' or 'frustration' is either rendered irrelevant, displaced, temporarily suspended or, at some strategic level, renewed. Taking advantage of the various networks available to them, be they industrial, institutional, or social, Anglo musicmakers in Montréal continually find the means to establish and work within a cultural and discursive economy that appears to have only tenuous relation to other economies in the city, thereby rhetorically distancing themselves from larger political dimensions of life in Montréal, but simultaneously reproducing, sometimes acutely and sometimes obliquely, longstanding social divisions and cultural distinctions.

#### Notes

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1 Douglas Coupland in the introduction to Richard Linklater's *Slacker* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), 2.

2 "A life of 'laissez-faire contentment'" *Globe and Mail*, March 27, 1999: C11.

3 Efrim of *godspeed you black emperor!* Personal interview 13 Jan. 1999.

4 See Will Straw "Montréal Confidential: Notes on an Imagined City" in *Cineaction*, No. 28, (Spring 1992), 58-64; see also Gilmore, John, *Swinging in Paradise: The Story of Jazz in Montréal* (Montréal: Vehicule Press, 1988); William Weintraub, *City Unique: Montréal Days and Nights in the 1940s and '50s* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1996).

5 See Graña and Graña, 1990: xv. Elizabeth Wilson also says as much: "café culture was the consummation of the bohemians' love affair with urban life," in *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 34.

6 In 1996, Montréal had the highest rate of unemployment of 23 North American cities at 11.9% (Bureau of Labour Statistics, Statistics Canada, 1997). Ironically, among North American cities, according to a Price-Waterhouse survey on high-tech employment, Montréal had the highest percentage of high-tech workers per capita. See also: "High-tech boom reveals Montréal's tale of 2 economies" *Toronto Star*, October 20, 1997: A1; "Montréal Holds First Place for Poverty" *The Calgary Herald*, June 26, 1996: A9.; "Montréal's Economy Stagnating in Poverty, Study Says: The city has the highest rate of unemployment of any city in North America" *Vancouver Sun*, June 14, 1997: p.A9.

7 *The Montréal Gazette* ran a series on the 'new anglo,' a series of stories dedicated to exploring the lives of anglophones who've decided to stay in Montréal and typified in stories like "New face of Québec anglos: English-speaking Québec has been transformed by social, political and economic change" *Montréal Gazette*, June 12, 1999: 1.

8 David Hesmondhalgh suggests independent music (indie) "proclaimed itself to be superior to other genres not only because it was more relevant or authentic to the youth who produced and consumed it... but also because it was based on new relationships between creativity and commerce" (1998, 35).

9 Two of the respondents are from Ottawa, one from Toronto, the other from Winnipeg.

10. For more on the devolution of Montréal's economy over the course of the twentieth century, see Code, G. Lewis, 1996a; 1996b; Linteau, Durocher, Robert and Ricard 1991.

11 Personal interview with author 25/11/99. All other references are from the same interview.

12 Personal interview with author 16/5/98. All other references are from the same interview.

13 For more on this, see Annick Germain and Damaris Rose 2000.



- 14 McGill has long been considered a “fortress of English power in Québec” (see Dion 1972, 66–79).
- 15 John Fiske defines the habitus as “the meaning of habitat, habitant, the processes of habitation and habit, particularly habits of thought” (Fiske, in Grossberg, Nelson and Treichler, 1992, 155).
- 16 “Cargo Files for Bankruptcy Little Impact on Music Industry Seen” *Billboard*, 24 Jan. 1998.
- 17 As it restructured and downsized in an effort to accommodate changes in promotion and market demand, Cargo’s reputation among musicmakers was compromised, leading to a perception among local (and non-local) musicmakers that it was unable to adequately support local and national musical needs. Cargo declared bankruptcy in December, 1997, leaving a number of bands and labels mired in legal hassles in their quest to recoup 7-inches, LPs and CDs that had been abandoned at pressing plants. The effect its closing had on independent music production was significant: Cargo was a major supplier of advance capital for independent labels in Montréal as well as in the rest of Canada, allowing a number of them to pursue and direct their resources towards a variety of musical projects simultaneously. When Cargo collapsed, the capital disappeared, as did any affiliated label’s ability to concentrate on a number of current or future musical projects.
- 18 The myth of two solitudes was the tongue-in-cheek inspiration for a franco/anglo punk/indie compilation of the same name: *2 Solitudes* (En Guard Records, 1992).
- 19 Personal interview with author 05/12/98.
- 20 See Holly Stevens, ed. 1981, no. 494. The poem itself can be found in *Wallace Stevens: The Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1982), 339–345.
- 21 *Globe and Mail*, C11.
- 22 See Bourdieu, 1992; Gruen, 1966, respectively.

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