

## Nouvelles vues

Revue sur les pratiques, les théories et l'histoire du cinéma au Québec



# What is the Libano-Québécois? Representing the Migrant Subject in Québec National Cinema

Amy J. Ransom

Number 22, Fall 2022

Rencontres interculturelles

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1106686ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1106686ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Observatoire du cinéma au Québec

ISSN

2563-1810 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Ransom, A. J. (2022). What is the Libano-Québécois? Representing the Migrant Subject in Québec National Cinema. *Nouvelles vues*, (22), 1–30.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1106686ar>

Article abstract

This article analyzes how a body of twenty-first-century Québécois films featuring Lebanese (or Syrian) protagonists construct the migrant subject in relation to place and gender. It examines how its corpus—Wajdi Mouawad's *Littoral* (2004), Ivan Grbovic's *Romeo Onze* (2011), Samer Najari's *Arwad* (2013) and three films by Maryanne Zéhil, *De ma fenêtre sans maison* (2006), *La vallée des larmes* (2012), and *L'autre côté de novembre* (2016)—portrays male or female protagonists experiencing identity crises as they negotiate the *entre-deux*, the in between, of migrant identities. These films represent what Homi K. Bhabha has called “third space interventions” by (mostly) migrant filmmakers and they seek to combat what has been identified as a “state-sponsored amnesia” about the Lebanese Civil.

© Amy J. Ransom, 2022



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

# What is the Libano-Québécois? Representing the Migrant Subject in Québec National Cinema

Amy J. Ransom

## Abstract

This article analyzes how a body of twenty-first-century Québécois films featuring Lebanese (or Syrian) protagonists construct the migrant subject in relation to place and gender. It examines how its corpus—Wajdi Mouawad's *Littoral* (2004), Ivan Grbovic's *Romeo Onze* (2011), Samer Najari's *Arwad* (2013) and three films by Marianne Zéhil, *De ma fenêtre sans maison* (2006), *La vallée des larmes* (2012), and *L'autre côté de novembre* (2016)—portrays male or female protagonists experiencing identity crises as they negotiate the *entre-deux*, the in between, of migrant identities. These films represent what Homi K. Bhabha has called “third space interventions” by (mostly) migrant filmmakers and they seek to combat what has been identified as a “state-sponsored amnesia” about the Lebanese Civil.

**Keywords:** Quebec cinema, migrant cinema, Lebanese migrants, Marianne Zéhil, Wajdi Mouawad, Ivan Grbovic, Dominique Chila, Samer Najari

Québec national cinema, as critics note, continues to project a homogeneous image of Québécois identity, the vast majority of filmic protagonists being white and francophone.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, since the year 2000, a growing number of films have portrayed the province's migrant condition, presenting Québec's “cultural communities” and their encounters with the Franco-Québécois majority.<sup>2</sup> The Lebanese community holds a privileged position in these representations, as migrant subjects with ties to Lebanon (and neighbouring Syria) are featured in both major productions such as Denis Villeneuve's *Incendies* (2010) and modest, independent ones like Marianne Zéhil's *De ma fenêtre sans maison* (2006). This article examines the way these representations illustrate the marks left by regional violence on the Lebanese community, the strategies (or lack thereof) used by protagonists to adapt to the host province, and how Franco-Québécois protagonists contribute to (or hinder) their integration into the national body. As Third Space interventions of resistance to dominant, homogenizing, colonizing ideologies and aesthetics, the corpus examined here offers mainstream Québec a vision of its purported Others from the position of Self.

This analysis focuses on three aspects of these representations: 1) how these films by primarily migrant directors operate within Homi K. Bhabha's Third Space of postcolonial cultural productions; 2) how their protagonists reflect the identitary *entre-deux* theorized by Régine Robin, an "in-betweenness" that has long preoccupied postcolonial studies; and 3) their engagement with the problem of memory, especially in relation to a Lebanese past, one often relegated to a form of "artificially selected oblivion" or "dismemory".<sup>3</sup> Caught between Lebanon and Syria's troubled past and the *terre d'accueil* of the present and future, these films' migrant protagonists experience subjective and cultural alienation, with gender and sexuality playing a significant role in cinematographic depictions of their varying degrees of adaptation and inadaptation. The male subjects of Wajdi Mouawad's *Littoral* (2004), Ivan Grbovic's *Romeo Onze* (2011), Maryanne Zéhil's *La vallée des larmes* (2012) and Dominique Chila and Samer Najari's *Arwad* (2013) all experience the passage to Québec or back home to Lebanon (or Syria) as a destabilizing journey that renders them Other, while films featuring female migrants, such as Zéhil's *De ma fenêtre sans maison* and *L'autre côté de novembre* (2016), reveal that their apparently successful integration in Québec society comes, nonetheless, with a price.

### **Third Spaces, In-Betweens, and Dismemory: Historical and Theoretical Underpinnings**

In addition to exploring migrant identities, the corpus examined here instructs Québécois viewers about the conditions that protagonists (or their parents) fled and/or address a willed forgetting of a painful past. To varying degrees, these films point to the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) and Syrian Occupation of Lebanon (1990-2005) as the motives for migration. Both are generally viewed in the West as sectarian conflicts between Druze Muslims and Maronite Christians, but more complex factors, including religion, class, political and social ideologies, broader regional conflict and long-standing colonial interests have also contributed to these violent events, which resulted in the exodus of an estimated 800,000 people from Lebanon by 1990.<sup>4</sup> Although not explicitly invoked, France's colonial involvement in the region partially explains the destination of choice of these migrants: French-speaking Québec. By 2001, Canada's population included 144,000 people "of Lebanese origin," half of them foreign born; of these, 49,000 resided in

Québec.<sup>5</sup> High-profile cultural figures, including playwrights Abla Farhoud and Wajdi Mouawad, have brought the *Libano-Québécois* to Québec's collective attention, as has Farhoud's son, Mathieu Farhoud-Dionne, as Chafik of Loco Locass.

Hyphenated labels for migrant identities, such as *Libano-Québécois* or the more general *néo-Québécois*, necessarily imply duality, hybridity or *métissage*.<sup>6</sup> Postcolonial theorists problematize this experience of self as an *entre-deux*, a being "in-between" two worlds, the country of origin and the host nation.<sup>7</sup> Cinematographic representations of migrant subjects of Lebanese (or Syrian) origin living in contemporary Québec reflect this model. Written and directed by (largely) migrant filmmakers, this corpus also reveals aspects of Homi K. Bhabha's notion of "Third Space," which describes cultural productions in the postcolonial context:

The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation, which makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code. Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive by the national tradition of the People.<sup>8</sup>

Viewed within the larger framework of Québec national cinema, but also read as Third Space interventions marked by ambivalence, these films challenge the long-dominant national narrative of a homogeneous French-Canadian history and identity. It is France, and not Canada, which historically wielded a colonial presence in Lebanon; yet, as a *terre d'accueil*, Québec's position shifts from that of a shared heritage of French colonization with Lebanon to one of pseudo-colonial power for Lebanese immigrants.<sup>9</sup> In its presentation of the interaction between present-day Québec and a historical image of Lebanon (and Syria), this corpus explores not only the "in-between" status of the migrant subject, but also projects an image of Québec as a pluralistic society that extends a more or less welcoming hand to new arrivals.<sup>10</sup>

The films studied here ultimately thematize the problem of memory in their direct and indirect engagement with the Lebanese Civil War and subsequent Syrian Occupation. Historians and cultural critics writing about this

difficult period, including its representation in the arts and literature, repeatedly invoke the phenomenon of memory loss and recovery. Norman Saadi Nikro describes Lebanon's official post-war policy as one of "dismemory," while Makram Rabah refers to a "state-sponsored amnesia."<sup>11</sup> In relation to Lebanon's history of war, Sune Haugbolle analyzes "how the fragmented elements of memories are shaped over time, how they influence the way a society views its past and how a political community negotiates what happened and what it meant."<sup>12</sup> This troubled relationship to individual and collective memory further exacerbates the identity crises of these films' migrant protagonists.

### **Young Men Caught In-Between: *Littoral* and *Roméo Onze***

Denis Villeneuve's Academy Award-nominated *Incendies*, based on Wajdi Mouawad's 2003 play, brought the Lebanon-Québec connection into the spotlight. In contrast with the significant body of critical and scholarly literature generated by its international release, very little has been published about independent films by migrant filmmakers dealing with the Lebanese Civil War and the subsequent exodus to francophone Québec.<sup>13</sup> Québec's earliest film exploration of the war's impact on Lebanese subjects caught between two worlds was also written and directed by Mouawad, whose parents left Lebanon in 1974 just prior to the outbreak of Civil War, eventually settling in Montréal while he was still a child.<sup>14</sup> With their author described as a "Québécois d'origine libanaise," Mouawad's works negotiate migrant identity in Québec.<sup>15</sup> Adapted from his eponymous 1997 play to film in 2004, *Littoral* depicts the alienated subjectivity of its protagonist, Wahab Chouawri (Steve Laplante), who grew up in Québec and has integrated with apparent success, until his father's death takes him on a journey to Syrian-occupied Lebanon.

Mouawad's decision to cast a Franco-Québécois actor in the lead role underscores Wahab's assimilation as Québécois and erases boundaries between "Self" and "Other." Casting familiar faces in migrant roles encourages identification for the Québécois audience, who might otherwise view the character as "Other."<sup>16</sup> But Wahab also shows other signs of his assimilation through his behaviour. Raised in Montréal by Lebanese aunts and uncles, and with the exception of his "foreign" name, Wahab's speech and appearance do not distinguish him from other Québécois of his generation. He

sleeps naked, is sexually promiscuous, and fails to respect his elders. Wahab's physical link to Québec as his homeland, rather than Lebanon, also appears in his initial desire to bury his father next to his mother, "[a]u cimetière à l'est de Montréal." These physical and ideological differences appear as the family meets to identify his father's body; his elders all talk at once, drowning Wahab in a wave of discourse, but he towers head and shoulders over these petite Mediterraneans.

Wahab appears so completely at home in Québec that Lebanon represents a foreign country to him. His alienation from his Lebanese origins occurs on multiple levels. Already a partial orphan—he never knew his mother who, he was told, died in a car accident—, his father's death completely severs an already tenuous tie. His ignorance derives from the fact that his elders—participating precisely in the Lebanese problem of dismemory—have hidden essential truths from him. His father, Thomas (Gilles Renaud), blamed by his wife's family for her death, lied to Wahab about his own whereabouts, pretending to live in exotic Brazil but really working as a housepainter in Québec's suburbs. Wahab's aunts and uncle also concealed the truth about his mother's death and taught him nothing about Lebanon itself. The discovery of cassette recordings taped by his late father, recounting his parents' love story and its brutal end, as his mother died giving birth to him, inspire his journey to bury his father in the latter's native village of Kfar Rayat.

Wahab's reception in Lebanon underscores his alienation. It reveals his ignorance of the language, geography, and history of his homeland, from which he is completely estranged. He arrives unaware of the realities of Syrian-occupied Lebanon; unable to speak Arabic and unfamiliar with the land's geography, he requires a guide, as would any Westerner. His first adjutant, ambulance driver Massi (Miro Lacasse), fills the role of "native informant," guiding him through his bombed apartment and into the mountains.<sup>17</sup> Their conversation demonstrates Wahab's alienation from his ancestors' culture: "Le Liban pour toi, c'est le tabouleh, le hoummos, le ciel bleu, la mer. [...] Tu sais rien sur le Liban, rien sur le Canada." En route to Kfar Rayat, Wahab is confused by a Syrian roadblock, asking: "On n'est pas encore au Liban? [...] Alors pourquoi il y a des Syriens?" His guide quips: "Tu lis pas vraiment les journaux, toi," underscoring Wahab's ignorance of Middle East politics and his belonging to an apolitical generation of Québécois.





Wahab arrives in Lebanon to bury his father but is completely out of place.

Wahab has as much difficulty explaining his identity to the Lebanese people that he meets as they have understanding him. Checkpoints along the journey signal Wahab's in-betweenness, beginning with his arrival in Beirut, when soldiers request his passport and ask: "Si tu es Libanais, pourquoi pas passeport libanais ?" In another encounter, a Syrian soldier asks: "Vous êtes français ?" Wahab answers: "Oui. Non, Québécois, mais j'suis aussi Libanais. Mes parents aussi, ils sont Libanais, mais—c'est compliqué." In Kfar Rayat, even with an interpreter, Wahab's request is still misunderstood. Learning he is from Canada, villagers deny him access to their cemetery: "Étrangers ! Non !" When Wahab explains that his father was not a foreigner, a second adjutant, Loyal (Isabelle Leblanc), lets him in on the opinion of the community toward his father: "Ton père est un lâche. Il a fui le pays avec son argent." The people of Kfar Rayat see Thomas's departure as a betrayal; they thus suggest burying him in Canada or Syria where there is room for the dead.

When Massi wonders: "Le Canada, c'est grand. Il n'y avait pas de place au Canada pour enterrer ton père ?," Wahab insists: "Je veux pas l'enterrer n'importe où. [...] [L]e village natal de mon père, c'est pas n'importe où." To which Massi replies: "C'est n'importe où ici. Le Liban, c'est le plus n'importe où dans le monde." Mouawad's dialogue signals the invented nature of the nation, both as a political construct of shifting borders and as Benedict

Anderson's "imagined community."<sup>18</sup> But it also invokes the war's erasure through an active forgetting that scholars identify not only among those who have left it, but also among those who remain in it.<sup>19</sup> As a second-generation immigrant, Wahab's ignorance of Lebanon is not actually his fault: it derives from the code of silence surrounding his homeland's violent past, figured by his mother's death, which tears the family apart. The negative impact of elders' repression of the truth thus hurts not just those who leave, but also those who remain behind, as Layal explains: "Nos parents ne nous ont rien dit. Ils ne nous racontent rien. Je leur demande pourquoi il y a eu la guerre. Ils répondent: oubliée. N'y pense pas. À quoi bon? Il n'y a pas eu de guerre. Je leur demande, mais qui tirait sur qui? Ils disent: Personne ne tirait sur personne. C'est fini. Tu as rêvé la guerre, Layal. Tu as rêvé." *Littoral* explores the real-life past and present of the Lebanese homeland through the deformed lens of a longed-for fantasy, a memory lost and finally recovered.

Wahab's identity quest begins as his father's recorded memories magically transport him to the Lebanese seashore. In the film's conclusion, however, Mouawad morphs the convention of the flashback into a fantasy sequence, in which an adult Wahab reunites with his younger parents on the beach. His vision of his parents' (pre-war, pre-migration) happiness inspired his own longing for "home," and however difficult the ordeal may be, Wahab fulfills both his father's dream and his own through a ritual burial at sea. Throughout his picaresque journey, Wahab learns about who he is, embracing Lebanon through genuine friendship with Massi and perhaps love with Layal. Learning the truth about his origins also brings him peace. By listening to his father's (albeit posthumous) voice, traveling to his homeland, learning its geography, and meeting its people, Wahab reconciles with the Lebanese part of himself. His journey of discovery, which includes recovering the disremembered past, brings him pain, but also enhances his humanity; no longer a selfish, spoiled playboy, Wahab grows into manhood. He successfully navigates the *entre-deux*, emerging whole by embracing his identity as a "Libanais du quartier Villeray." As a *Libano-Québécois*, he becomes "both/and" rather than "either/or." The film's title, *Littoral*, finally becomes clear; a literal reference to the shoreline, it also figures a borderland or liminal space where the migrant subject negotiates between two elements, earth and sea, but also between two cultures, the ancestral land and the *terre d'accueil* across the sea. Mouawad's film precisely navigates the Third Space between the dominant



ideology of the colonial metropole (France) or host province (Québec) and that of the homeland (Lebanon), revealing the ideological flaws in both while finding a home for the migrant self in the space in between.

In contrast with *Littoral*, the protagonist of *Roméo Onze*, Rami (Ali Ammar), undertakes no epic journey in search of his origins, but his identity nevertheless appears conflicted. Like Wahab, Rami, a “jeune Montréalais d’origine libanaise,” has apparently integrated into Québec society.<sup>20</sup> His innate dissatisfaction derives more from an individual sense of difference, resulting in the creation of an alternate self, a “double personnalité.”<sup>21</sup> His online alter ego “Roméo 11” signals both what he desires to be—a handsome nobleman and iconic lover from a classic work of English literature—and the fractured nature of his doubled ego—in the mirrored single digits of the number eleven. Grbovic’s 2015 film participates in the Québécois tradition of *cinéma direct* and its recent “renouveau” with its documentary-like aesthetic, sparse dialogue, and numerous long takes depicting daily-life activities.<sup>22</sup> Beyond sequences depicting Rami’s family, Maronite Christian cultural practices and his job in his father’s restaurant, the film shows that the young man specifically seeks out activities typical of a Québécois: riding the metro, wandering through downtown Montréal, strolling through shopping centres and chatting online.

Rami’s internalization of New World values includes expectations of liberty and pursuit of happiness: he longs for the ability to choose his own career path and find love outside family strictures. As André Roy points out, his identity crisis involves the rejection of his father Ziad’s (Joseph Bou Nazar) Old World values: “Rami est [...] tirillé entre deux mondes, celui du poids des traditions et celui d’un avenir imaginé, car virtuel.”<sup>23</sup> A successful restaurateur, Ziad brings from Lebanon the patriarchal prerogative of organizing his children’s destinies without consultation, enrolling his son in business school. Rami, raised in Québec, claims the right to decide his own future, but his indecision about a choice of profession leaves him at loose ends. His sisters’ obvious social and professional successes exacerbate his sense of failure, already triggered by a lack of self-esteem stemming from his obvious physical difference.<sup>24</sup> Only partially derived from his status as a hyphenated, migrant subject, Rami’s inability to flourish results rather from a congenital disability that causes him to have a halting gait.<sup>25</sup>

Rami’s isolation frequently appears self-imposed as he rejects his family’s overtures. His only joy occurs while chatting online as “Roméo11”



Ali's isolation in the crowd appears as he wanders around Montreal, skipping his business classes.

with “Malaury26,” a pretty Lebanese girl according to her profile photo. Unfortunately, Rami learns that she is an invention, a prank devised by former schoolmates. This harsh revelation, coupled with his father's wrath on discovering that he has been skipping business class, triggers something in Rami. His budding self-advocacy, when he, at last, openly defies his father, suggests a tentatively hopeful ending. He also takes an important step toward integrating back into the family, reconciling with his father at his elder sister's “big fat” Lebanese wedding. Although he responds awkwardly to his younger sister's attempt to introduce him to a single girl, the film concludes as Rami walks toward the dance floor to join the crowd, a first step toward acceptance of the Lebanese half of his identity.

André Roy links Rami's migrant identity to his inability to connect: “Rami est d'origine libanaise, donc il est cet Autre, l'étranger, la figure même de l'altérité pour le Québécois.”<sup>26</sup> I argue, rather, that *Roméo Onze* marks an important milestone for Québec migrant film in its movement away from this cliché. Although not of Lebanese origin, Grbovic subverts received ideas about *néo-Québécois* and naturalizes their presence on the territory, offering a Third Space cultural intervention with his film. Certainly, the Lebanese family depicted in his film has successfully integrated by adopting Québec's primary cultural value, the French language. However, Grbovic also subverts

this aspect of national culture by filming predominantly in Lebanese Arabic, the language spoken at home by every member of the family except the younger daughter, who speaks unaccented, idiomatic Québécois French. Furthermore, by foregrounding the family's Christian practices, *Roméo Onze* subverts the received image of "Arabs" as Muslim. As French-speaking North Americans and as "Christian Arabs," Lebanese Maronites share a paradoxical identity status with Québécois.<sup>27</sup> Finally, in contrast to *Littoral*, *Roméo Onze* is cast almost completely with Lebanese actors. Of the eleven characters significant enough to be named (as opposed to those listed by function, like "serveur") in its closing credits, only two are Franco-Québécois.

*Roméo Onze*, then, is as much about normalizing the Maronite community in Montréal as a whole as it is about a single individual's adaptation to an enriched identity that is *both* "Libano-" *and* "Québécois." Its concluding wedding celebration, featuring culturally specific practices such as raising the bride and groom above everyone's heads, popular and traditional Lebanese music, dancing and food underscores the communal scope of its message. Sidelining direct discourse about migrant identity or *Québécois de souche* prejudices, *Roméo Onze* naturalizes cultural difference as an integral part of Montréal reality. Additionally, Rami's unhappiness as an *individual* links him to the trope of the *loser québécois* widely found in Québec national cinema.<sup>28</sup> In contrast to the Franco-Québécois Louis in Simon Lavoie and Mathieu Denis's *Laurentie* (2011), whose self-isolation and alienation from community becomes irreparable, Rami's eventual move to join the community leads to a possible future for him. Despite its occasionally desperate tone, *Roméo Onze* is ultimately a generous film in its depiction of Montréal as a *terre d'accueil*. *La vallée des larmes* and *Arwad* mirror this image of Québec as a welcoming host, figured in synecdoche as an individual woman; but their respective depictions of first-generation immigrants from Palestine and Syria, nations inextricably linked to the Lebanese Civil War, end tragically, revealing the migrant subject's difficulty to adapt despite the warm welcome he receives.<sup>29</sup>

### **Middle Eastern Men and Québécoise Women in the Third Space: *La vallée des larmes* and *Arwad***

In contrast to *Littoral*'s and *Roméo Onze*'s depictions of integrated young *Libano-Québécois*, *La vallée des larmes* and *Arwad* feature adult protagonists

respectively raised in Lebanon and Syria for whom departure from the homeland remains more bitter than sweet. These films foreground the host nation's role in the process of integration through Franco-Québécoise figures of welcome, positing a situation of contact *between* Others that blurs the boundaries between Self and Other.

Beirut-born Maryanne Zéhil settled in Québec in 1997 and has since made four fiction features depicting immigration from Lebanon to Québec, including *La face cachée du baklava* (2020). Her second film, *La vallée des larmes*, addresses the question of memory and the need to recount traumatic past events through the device of an anonymous memoir delivered to Marie (Nathalie Coupal), an attractive middle-aged editor for a Montréal publishing house devoted to human rights issues. Marie educates herself (and viewers with her) about the complexity of the Lebanese Civil War as she discovers its author, a painter named "Joseph" (Joseph Antaki). His narrative recounts the story of a Palestinian Muslim family living in Lebanon's Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, which, in 1982, became victim of a massacre organized by the largely Christian Lebanese Forces, actively or passively aided by an elite Israeli unit.<sup>30</sup> Although Marie fails to help Joseph integrate into Québec society, his story sends her on a journey of self-discovery. Whereas *Littoral* evacuates its sectarian coding of the Lebanese Civil War, *La vallée des larmes* underscores how conflicts in the greater Middle East spilled over onto Lebanese soil, leaving a bloody mark. It directly confronts dismemory, offering a counter-discourse told from a Palestinian perspective.

A witness, victim and participant in that violence, Joseph reveals in his manuscript a double identity, assumed long before his arrival in Québec. Spared from the massacre by sheer coincidence, Joseph, named Ali at the time, had to hide his Muslim identity behind his assumed Christian name. *La vallée des larmes* reenacts through flashback the traumatic events that led to Joseph's split identity, also revealing the damage done to young egos by sectarian indoctrination. Even prior to the massacre, as a Palestinian refugee displaced by the *Nakba* (disaster), young Ali (Ziad Karam) dreamt of being a hero: "J'ai commencé à me rêver, moi, Ali, en héros. Un chevalier blanc qui serait né pour accomplir une mission – celle de sauver son peuple de l'errance." Later, his mother groomed him for a darker destiny: to avenge his male relatives murdered in Sabra and Shatila. His manuscript serves as a confession, as he admits that he has emigrated to Canada to fulfill his assigned

mission and systematically assassinate Lebanese migrants linked to the massacre, transporting his violent past to the New World.

Zéhil skillfully withholds information, which makes the viewers feel sympathy for Joseph; only the memoir's final instalment reveals and explains his crimes. A loyal son, he could not violate his mother's will; he therefore completed the killings, not in a spirit of vengeance but rather from a sense of filial duty. Although conflicted, since he had to abandon his wife and children in Lebanon, Joseph cannot overcome the burden of his Palestinian indoctrination. He thus decides to intervene, stopping the cycle of violence by killing himself. Aware that there is no redemption for him, he rejects the transformative potential of a new migrant identity in Québec, but not before seeking atonement by writing his memoir. As he explains, "je ne peux pas vous dire toute la vérité. [...] Écrire, le simple fait d'écrire. Ça m'enlève un poids." He and Marie agree that "l'écriture porte une transcendance." Like *Littoral*, *La vallée des larmes* combats the selective memory associated with the Lebanese Civil War by scholars like Haugbolle and Rabah, as Joseph/Ali asserts: "Au Liban, on a oublié les massacres. [...] Les Libanais n'ont pas de mémoire." But it also warns against a remembering that fosters hate, as Joseph woefully insists to Marie: "Les Palestiniens ne l'oublieront jamais."

Furthermore, through the topoi of remembering and forgetting, Zéhil establishes a parallel between two otherwise different cultures in which Ali and Marie respectively were raised. Joseph describes Islamic society as matriarchal, invoking the hyena: "C'est la femelle qui domine le mâle au contraire de la plupart des animaux. Le mâle doit se soumettre à elle s'il veut se faire accepter dans le groupe. Chez moi aussi, les hommes doivent se soumettre aux femmes. [...] Les femmes sont les gardiennes de la tradition et des règles. Sans la rigidité des femmes, la société évoluerait." This description triggers a *prise de conscience* in Marie, as she attributes Québec society with a similar structure: "Ma mère décidait de tout. Mon père donnait jamais son avis." Although official power structures in these cultures are, in fact, more clearly patriarchal, Zéhil blurs the difference between the two. Like Joseph, Marie was also coerced by her mother when a teenager: forced to have an abortion to avoid the negative consequences of the *on dit* in still conservative Québec, Marie's backstory puts privileged Westerners' domestic "tragedies" into perspective in relation to those suffered in the war-torn Middle East.<sup>31</sup> It also shows



how, in both cultures, parental control leads children to (self-)destructive acts. Despite the unequal power relation between the professional Franco-Québécoise and the immigrant house painter, the (platonic) intimacy that develops between Marie and Joseph suggests not an encounter between (a Franco-Québécoise) Self and (a migrant) Other, but rather that of two Others. *La vallée des larmes*, like *Roméo Onze*, thus subverts the dominant paradigm in Québécois cinema of the French-Canadian *regard sur l'autre*, as Joseph teaches Marie to look critically at herself and her society.

Similarly, as a Third Space intervention, Zéhil's film directly targets a latent hypocrisy in politically correct Québec through sequences that establish a "before and after" image of Marie. Prior to meeting Joseph, she fetishizes the migrant males she meets, indulging in an Orientalist promiscuity. As her awareness grows through a more authentic contact with Joseph, Marie confronts her boss (and ex-lover), Gilles (Henri Chassé), who expresses reluctance to publish the memoir, invoking post-9/11 prejudices: "Ça intéressera personne à mon avis. [...] C'est un sujet trop mélodramatique et... trop Arabe." Marie proposes a different image of twenty-first-century Québécois as citizens of the world: "Parce qu'il faut être directement impliqué dans un conflit pour s'y intéresser ? Non, il y a plein de gens qui veulent s'instruire, qui veulent s'informer, qui veulent faire partie des intérêts planétaires. Et ces gens-là, dans notre société, c'est des laissés pour compte !" Marie serves as a witness who, by bringing a forgotten story back to light, does her part to end the cycle of violence, but her transformation is not complete until she journeys to Joseph/Ali's former home.

While visiting the ostensibly peaceful mountain village of Aashtarout in the present day, Marie sees firsthand the scars left by sectarian violence. Noticing memorial photographs on the city's walls, she learns that the men in the photographs (Joseph's victims) were all murdered in Canada. When Marie (disingenuously) asks why Joseph's photo is not there, too, her guide is evasive, revealing local prejudices by noting: "Il n'est pas d'ici" and "Ce sont des Palestiniens." The fact that the men now memorialized as martyrs were actually the perpetrators of the Sabra and Shatila massacre reveals the extent to which the community has engaged in the act of dismemory, selectively choosing what to remember and what to forget. Marie then gives Joseph's manuscript to Sœur Gabrielle (Leyla Hakim), the nun who had sheltered Ali and his mother. Her initial insistence that she did not know that the men



Joseph had killed were implicated in the massacre once again suggests how a majority culture can effectively erase evidence of violence perpetrated to maintain power and territory. Sœur Gabrielle explains that many emigrated to Canada and Australia “pour oublier les souvenirs.” Not only do these migrants’ departures contribute to Lebanon’s dismemory of the war, but the nun admits that “moi aussi, j’ai été frappée d’amnésie.” Finally, Marie gently confronts Ali’s mother in the Sabra and Shatila camps; in an attempt to understand the motivation behind the transformation of her son into a killer, Marie asks her: “Qu’est-ce que vous avez gagné ?” The woman responds: “Ma dignité.”

Returning home to Montréal, Marie discovers Joseph’s final chapter, mailed just before his suicide, revealing his final wish:

[P]ar mon suicide, mère, je veux mettre fin au cycle de la haine. Mes enfants n’auront pas à venger ma mort. Ni ne seront pas tués par vengeance. [...] Qu’ont-ils fait, eux, pour hériter de notre malheur ? [...] J’ose enfin leur dire de se lever et de briser la chaîne que vous nous avez léguée. Nous avons une autre façon d’accéder à nos rêves et nous voulons surtout préserver nos enfants du bain de sang.

Thus, Joseph fulfills his duty toward his mother, but he also urges for change. Having learned the lesson Joseph sought to teach, Marie releases her own resentment toward her mother, placing flowers on her tomb, a gesture that underscores the film’s message of remembering the truth, but also working toward reconciliation. *La vallée des larmes*, then, is as much about depicting the damage done to selves unable to leave behind the violence that results when territory and identity are too closely linked as it is about the possibility of healing when that violence is revealed, recognized and pardoned. Although Joseph can only find expiation in death, the Québécoise who genuinely seeks to understand the Other finds comfort and reconciles with her own past.

Written by Samer Najari and co-directed with Dominique Chila, *Arwad* depicts a Syrian immigrant who, despite a similarly generous welcome of a Québécoise, cannot find peace in his *entre-deux* identity. Notwithstanding its normalization of the “Arab” male as a participant in Québécois society, its conclusion suggests the (im)possibility of a hyphenated, *Syrio-Québécois*,

migrant subject. French colonial interventions and Lebanon's Civil War linked Syria's destiny to Lebanon's, and writer Najari's migrant origins further link his film to the present corpus. Born in Russia to a Syrian father and Lebanese mother, he emigrated to Canada in 1994, studying film at Concordia and then in France.<sup>32</sup> *Arwad* eschews discussions of politics and religion, focusing instead on the purely human and familial dimensions of its migrant protagonist's ultimate failure to adapt to his host society.

In many ways, Ali Soleiman (Ramzi Choukair) has successfully integrated Québec, has he got married and is now raising his children there. However, as in *Littoral*, a parent's death triggers an identity crisis in the protagonist, who returns to the Syrian island of Arwad, bringing with him a Québécoise mistress, Marie (Fanny Mallette). Willfully swimming at night in dangerous currents, he drowns, and his wife Gabrielle (Julie McClemens) must repatriate his body to Québec. Despite the earlier efforts of the two Franco-Québécoises to help him find home and ease in Canada (depicted in flashback), like his *Libano-Québécois* counterparts, Syrian-born Ali's return to the homeland fails to resolve his identity crisis. Like his Palestinian namesake in *La vallée des larmes*, he ultimately self-destructs. Flashbacks to an earlier period show Ali embraced by his wife's Franco-Québécois family, but a seemingly anodyne anecdote reveals his dis-ease as a migrant subject in Québec. At his memorial service, Gabrielle recounts that when she introduced Ali to her family, he wore a heavy sweater, but then sat next to the fire. Sweating uncomfortably, he nonetheless refused to change places or remove the sweater. Her assessment exposes Ali's existential discomfort: "Il me disait qu'il allait bien, mais je savais qu'il ne se sentait pas bien." Additional flashbacks reveal his growing dissatisfaction, projected onto his marriage; his wife's professional responsibilities exacerbate marital tensions, as do their shared care of his dying mother (Dalal Ata).

Ali's beloved mother symbolizes the importance of remembering the past. She also represents the migrant subject's attachment to the homeland, which prevents him from fully integrating. From her deathbed, the maternal voice interpellates Ali, (re)calling him back to Syria as she recounts a memory from her youth about her wishing to attend a ball and dance the tango, which was presumably an impossible desire in a conservative Arab family. Her tale of immigration suggests hardship, but also freedom, as she was allowed to dance in Québec. The arrival of Ali's elder daughter, Laïla (Yasmine Antabli),

introduces the issue of migrancy across three generations, contrasting Ali's inability to integrate with his daughters' status as fully Québécoises. Later, a grief-stricken exchange reveals his alienation: as he sobs and as Laila comforts him, he explains in Arabic—a language she doesn't understand—why he decided to speak only French to her. A stubborn child, she refused to answer when called in Arabic; fearing he would lose her if he didn't adapt to *her* reality as Québécoise, he never spoke to her in Arabic again.

Seemingly as an antidote to his unhappiness, but more likely from a self-destructive impulse, Ali begins an extra-marital affair with Marie prior to his mother's passing and paradoxically brings her—a symbol of his own unaccepted *québécoisité*—along on his journey “home.” Their arrival on the island of Arwad reveals the paradoxical identities of both the Syrio- and the Franco-Québécois, as Ali's conversations with Syrians play out one set of cultural stereotypes and those with Marie another. When Ali explains in Arabic to an older man (Muustapha Akouri) that they are visiting from Canada, he asks about Marie: “She speaks Canadian?” His error underscores Canada's status as a settler colony with no national language of its own and Ali's reply that his companion speaks French further signals the nation's political complexity. His Syrian interlocutor cannot understand the apparent paradox



Ali (Ramzi Choukair) returns to the island of his birth with a culturally naïve Franco-québécoise mistress, Marie (Fanny Mallette).

of an individual who is both French *and* Canadian. The Third Space filmmakers subvert the usual poles of Self and Other in Québec national cinema, estranging Franco-Québécois identity by rendering it inscrutably Other to the Arab Self.

Further Syrian-centered misunderstandings occur as Ali chats with a local waiter (Aymen Kolmohamed), who asks if Canada is near Australia, another destination for Lebanese emigrants. Since the Syrian mail is unreliable, he hopes Ali can deliver a letter to an uncle there.<sup>33</sup> Ali responds to the waiter's query about possible migration with a question of his own: "Aren't you happy here?", to which the waiter retorts: "If it's so great here, why did you go?" Ali replies: "It's not that simple." *Arwad* never explains precisely why Ali and his mother left Syria, but his response points to the complexity of a life in exile; he may have had good reasons for leaving home, yet he still longs to return. When he does, however, he finds that he has become a stranger there. Unfortunately, Ali never understands that his home and his family are no longer on Arwad, and that Québec has now become his true home, as Gabrielle's memorial speech indicates.

Gabrielle has clearly reflected on Ali's final actions: "Je pense qu'il voulait juste prouver qu'il était toujours un enfant d'Arwad. Mais c'était complètement faux. Ali était plus d'Arwad. Il était d'ici, de Montréal, de sa famille, de son terrain de foot. Mais cela, il ne l'a jamais compris." Not only does her eulogy acknowledge the in-between nature of migrant subjectivity, it also evokes Sara Ahmed's exploration of identity as a question of orientation in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006). Whereas "orientation is about making the strange familiar," Ali's return to Arwad has made the familiar strange.<sup>34</sup> Caught between the Old World and the New, Ali suffers a form of disorientation; indeed, pulled by the sea's currents, he literally loses his way and drowns. Gabrielle understands her husband's existential suffering, his inability to navigate the tidal waters of the in-between space of migrant identity: "Ali n'est plus Syrien – on le lui rappelle constamment durant son séjour à Arwad –, mais il ne se sent pas non plus complètement Québécois."<sup>35</sup> It is not, then, that Ali did not belong in Québec; he just *did not realize that he belonged*.

Gabrielle's insistence on her husband's belonging in Québec is an assessment based not on an essentialized geography of birth, but rather on a human geography of relationality to people and places. In contrast with Gabrielle's

generosity of spirit and understanding, *Arwad*'s "other woman," Marie, represents the provincial who reveals ingrained prejudices lying beneath a thin veneer of official accommodation and/or an Orientalist curiosity about the Other. *Arwad* sets in opposition two forms of the host province's possible reception of the migrant subject into two distinct female characters. Seemingly paralyzed by her inability to speak Arabic on Arwad, Marie frequently waits alone in their hotel room for Ali to guide her; she typifies the Québécoise surprised by difference, taking her own received ideas as facts. When tea is served at breakfast, Marie finds it too hot; she asks Ali: "Comment tu fais?" His response, although given jokingly, reveals her childishness: "J'ai une technique. Si c'est trop chaud, j'attends avant de boire." Later, when he teases her that meals, and mice, are included in the \$20 per night hotel rate, she contradicts him: "C'est connu – les souris savent pas nager." Her insistence that there couldn't possibly be mice on an island, a condescending denial of the native son's knowledge of the land, reveals her ingrained Occidentalism. Similarly, her insistence on needing a bikini in order to go swimming provides another example of cultural confusion, illuminating Marie's strange blend as a Québécoise of Western sophistication coupled with provincial ignorance. When Ali suggests they go skinny dipping after dark, she asks: "Sérieux ?" Unconscious of the contradictions in her own cultural conventions—she can swim in a revealing bikini but can't imagine swimming nude—Marie also signals her preconceptions about what is permitted and forbidden in a predominantly Muslim nation.

Film critics in Québec relate Ali's behaviour to his migrant status: "Solitaire, isolé et éloigné de ses racines, le Néo-Québécois semble éprouver de la difficulté à se positionner entre sa terre natale et Montréal, ville d'adoption."<sup>36</sup> While I agree with this assessment, I also situate *Arwad* with *Roméo 11* as presenting protagonists who happens to be migrants, but who also resemble yet another iteration of the *québécois loser* figure found in twenty-first-century Québec national cinema. Ali's bouts of depression and his self-exclusion at social gatherings invoke similar behaviours in Franco-Québécois "men in pain," like the protagonists of *Nos êtres chers* (Anne Émond, 2015) or Paul Doucet's characters in *Early Winter* (Michael Rowe, 2015) and *La garde* (Sylvain Archambault, 2014).<sup>37</sup> Ali's inability to integrate into Québec society despite the warmth of the welcome he receives suggests that *Arwad* considers its protagonist not so much as an "Other," but rather



as yet another variety of the alienated Québécois male. In its simultaneous embrace and violation of national film conventions, *Arwad* is a Third Space text that reveals the contradictions in Québec's official ideology of accommodation (Gabrielle's attitude), which cannot completely erase longstanding prejudices about difference (Marie's). In *Arwad* and *La vallée des larmes*, the Québécoise characters are thus as essential to the narrative as the migrant males that they depict. But what about the migrant female character?

**Transcultural Women: *De ma fenêtre sans maison*  
et *L'autre côté de novembre***

*De ma fenêtre sans maison* refers to a family home in the village of Mtein that lies in ruins, waiting to be rebuilt, a metaphor for the broken mother/daughter relationship that Maryanne Zéhil's first feature film explores. With direct references to the Lebanese Civil War, but also focused on Lebanon's conservative culture and suffocation of women and individual rights, a prologue depicts its female protagonist, Sana Touma (Louise Portal), abandoning both Beirut and her four-year old child in 1989. In the present day, "une avocate très connue à Montréal," Sana has completely integrated into Québec society, but invites her now adult daughter, Dounia (Renée Thomas), to visit after her father's death. Sana's life in Montréal is that of any privileged urban professional, living in the trendy Plateau Mont-Royal. Her only Lebanese friend, Hoda (Hélène Mercier), leads a troubled life of marital abuse and possible alcoholism, but Hoda astutely signals not only the extent of Sana's assimilation, but also her emotional detachment: "Elle est pire que les Québécois. Ça vit seule, ça sort seule." Sana nonetheless maintains an active sexual relationship in mid-life with the government official Denis (Jean-François Blanchard). In *De ma fenêtre sans maison*, sexual liberation figures the West's and Québec's individual freedoms, contrasting Sana's fulfilment with Arab societies' sexual repression. Her brother Akram (Walid El Alayli) closets his homosexuality in Lebanon, and her daughter Dounia displays a prude's judgmentalism coupled with prurient curiosity. A linguistic gap underscores the cultural gap that divides the characters, revealed through French-educated Dounia's inability to understand the Québécois vernacular term for a significant other, "mon chum."

Dounia describes her mother's lifestyle as foreign, highlighting Sana's integration to Québec society and difference from other Lebanese migrants



depicted in the film. Their attitudes and subaltern occupations contrast with Sana's, as does their longing for the homeland that she wants to forget; for example, Hoda nostalgically views photos from 1982, "pendant l'invasion israélienne." She advises her friends not to criticize the Québécois, "les gens d'ici," in Sana's presence because she might "[les] mettre à la porte." Indeed, Sana objects when someone insists that he or she "retournerai[t] à Beyrouth si les Syriens et les Juifs n'occupaient pas [leur] pays." She corrects her visitor: "Tu veux dire les Israéliens?" and forbids Dounia from telling a "Jewish" joke.

Such ethnic and religious prejudices cut both ways, however. Although for the most part, *De ma fenêtre sans maison* favours Sana's adopted values, those of contemporary Québec, over those of conservative Lebanon, not all Québécois display an equal degree of accommodation. Zéhil reveals the contradictions between official ideology and individual attitudes in Québec through the ignorance of Dounia's new friend Sylvie (Mariloup Wolfe). Noticing Dounia's scar from "la guerre," she asks: "Quelle guerre?" and must be told (along with audience members): "La guerre du Liban." Furthermore, Sylvie fails to remember her new friend's "exotic" name and thinks in stereotypes. When Dounia complains about the cold, she quips: "Les immigrés disent tous ça." Even Sana must admit that all welcomes are not equal when, seeing her mother help a Spanish-speaking immigrant threatened with deportation, Dounia asks: "Je croyais que le Canada était un pays d'accueil." Sana clarifies: "Il l'est, mais pas toujours." Finally, when Sana's Anglophone Canadian friend Barbara (Catherine Colvey) reveals her ignorance about "les Arabes," mother and daughter address the complex question of Lebanese identity. Dounia confronts her mother for welcoming Barbara, a person who insulted her people, into her home, but Sana retorts "les Arabes ne sont pas mon peuple." Dounia then sarcastically invokes one of her nation's attempts to create a distinct imagined community for itself by asking: "Et c'est qui ton peuple? ... Les Phéniciens?"<sup>38</sup>

Throughout her daughter's visit, Sana expresses ambivalence about her presence, unable to explain to Dounia why she invited her: "Je ne sais pas trop [...]. On va essayer de tirer le mieux de ces trois semaines sans trop remuer le passé." In a prologue flashback to her departure, Sana explains to her young daughter that she has to leave Lebanon to survive: "Maman doit partir au Canada. Sinon, elle ne pourra plus respirer." Once she has turned the page,

Sana almost literally never looks back. When Dounia confronts her, Sana insists that she has not forgotten—“je n’ai rien oublié, Dounia”—but nonetheless wishes to silence a painful Lebanese past: “Tout ça est loin, Dounia. Le passé est fini, [...] enterré. Tout ce que j’ai à t’offrir, c’est aujourd’hui. Et demain.” Sana, like the parents of other Lebanese protagonists, partakes in the cultural phenomenon of dismemory. Sana nonetheless expresses her desire to rebuild her relationship with Dounia despite the cultural and emotional gap between them. This gap, which frequently seems insurmountable, has become so wide that it requires a transformational journey for the two women to finally understand each other better.

Sana’s seemingly complete assimilation reveals how the migrant experience changes a subject, making a return “home” seem impossible. At the same time, Sana admits the *entre-deux* nature of her migrant identity. Telling Dounia that she left Lebanon because “[i]l n’y avait pas de place pour moi, là-bas,” her daughter asks: “Et ici ?” Sana then also admits: “Non plus. Ici il y a beaucoup d’espace.” Differentiating between finding her “place” and the freedom afforded by lots of “space,” Sana reveals that she is not as comfortable as she seems. Her departure has left a void, the window without a home of the film’s title that only an attempted return can fill. The occasion arises when, not



Sana and Dounia (Renée Thomas) reconcile, as Sana finally tells her daughter about her lost past, guiding her through the titular “window without a house.”

long after Dounia's return to Lebanon, her grandmother and Sana's mother, Téta (Leyla Hakim), dies. Like Joseph/Ali's mother in *La vallée des larmes*, Téta symbolizes the transmission of conservative Arab values through her insistence that Dounia conform to the oral tradition of Zahra, which forces her to reject her true love and marry out of duty. Like her own daughter in this respect, Sana resents her mother's rigidity, declaring that her heart was made of stone. Dounia disproves this assumption, showing Sana a room full of photos, her grandmother's shrine to the lost daughter whose departure she never understood. Sana then visits the ruined family home with her daughter, offering her not only the priceless gift of her memories there, but also giving it to Dounia to rebuild. Zéhil thus again affirms the healing power of truthful memory, revealing how Sana's dismemory fostered resentment.

The film concludes with a demonstration of both women's growth as they exchange physical spaces: Dounia arrives in Montréal to spend time on her own, while her mother sits on a beach in Beirut. Simply enjoying this place, Sana chats with an elderly man who mentions his son, also an immigrant but to Australia, whom he has not seen in seven years. Resigned, he admits: "On finit par s'habituer à tout, même à l'humiliation, la misère, le chaos [...]. Je suis triste parce que rien ne changera dans ce pays et ceux qu'on aime sont partis." His speech invokes, of course, the famous line from Louis Hémon's *Maria Chapdelaine* (1913), whose protagonist, like Zahra, married for duty and not for love. *De ma fenêtre sans maison* closes on a parallel between the two nations that otherwise appear so different throughout the film, echoing a topos also seen in Zéhil's *La vallée des larmes*.

Zéhil's third film, *L'autre côté de novembre*, imagines parallel lives for a single female protagonist. It engages *Libano-Québécois* identity by externalizing a double, projecting the Lebanese Self as something that haunts the migrant Québécoise (and vice versa). Like Sana in *De ma fenêtre sans maison*, Léa (Arsinée Khanjian) emigrated from Lebanon in the 1970s and is now a successful neurosurgeon. Codifying her complete integration, her circle of friends features familiar Québécois actors: Louise (Pascale Bussières), Bernard (Marc Labrèche) and Michel (David La Haye). Léa first experiences troubling hallucinations while jogging, believing a young woman is following her along the trail; seeking an explanation, she consults a colleague (Donald Pilon). Through his diagnosis of a medical condition causing memory loss, possibly early onset Alzheimer's, Zéhil explicitly invokes the problem of



Léa (Arsinée Kanjian, center) who emigrates is successfully integrated into Québécois society, surrounded by friends (Sophie Bourgeois, David LaHaye, Marc Labrèche, Pascale Bussières).

Lebanon's collective amnesia. Léa's impossible relationship with time, which paradoxically combines a compulsive repetition of a past scenario with memory loss, resembles the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).<sup>39</sup>

Sequences in contemporary Montréal alternate with depictions of Léa's alter ego, Layla, in Lebanon, eventually suggesting that the film's narrative follows two possible life trajectories for the same young woman. One successfully emigrated to Canada to become Léa, while the other, who kept the name Layla, was unable to migrate when the opportunity presented itself. Instead, she accepted a marriage arranged by her parents and became a mother. Now middle-aged, she is a successful designer and seamstress in a mountain village. A prologue, set in 1974 Aïn el Maten, reveals that Layla/Léa's destinies are also intertwined with that of her friend, Samira (Béatrice Moukhaiber), who plays a key role on the fateful November day, evoked in the film's title, when Layla's and Léa's storylines diverge.

Convinced that she has seen Samira in a hospital hallway (although possibly suffering a hallucination), present-day Léa attempts to trace her long lost

friend's whereabouts. She soon meets a dead end: no records exist after a 1976 police report of domestic abuse. Like Léa, present-day Layla has uncontrollable memories of 1974 when she and Samira were separated. In contrast with Léa's elegant appearance and comfortable Western lifestyle, Layla—played by a nearly unrecognizable Kazanjian without make-up, her hair in a bun—wears conservative clothes and faces financial and family problems. Whereas Léa escaped the Civil War (her 1974 departure precedes the outbreak of open hostilities), Layla's present-day compatriots reveal Lebanon's ongoing struggle to recover, reciting proverb-like assertions such as "This damned country is stuck in the stone age," "A girl is less desirable than disease in this country" and "When money's involved the dead can rise again."

*L'autre côté de novembre* addresses economic inequality's role in exacerbating sectarian differences, also revealing that all women, rich and poor alike, are prone to victimization in Lebanon's traditionalist, patriarchal society.<sup>40</sup> For example, Samira's presence in 1976 Montréal reflects wealthy families' exodus to avoid the war's destruction of life and assets, but it also shows that her affluence cannot protect her from a violent husband. In the present day, Layla's son Brahim (Mike Ayvazian), representing a generation of post-war young men ruined by the conflict's moral vagaries, sexually abuses an impoverished girl. Furthermore, the middle-class Maronite Layla suffers the scorn of her wealthy patroness who storms in from Beirut and berates her as a "peasant," a heavily coded insult when uttered by a Druze.<sup>41</sup> This climactic scene, however, triggers a crisis that allows Layla to renew family ties (although she has banished her son), leading to the revelation that she is, somehow, the same Layla seen in Léa's hallucinations. Prevented from emigrating by her fiancé, Youssef (Bshara Atallah), she agrees to marry him, but sets conditions that prevent her from sharing Samira's fate. In this alternate existence, instead of emigrating to Montréal, Samira commits suicide to escape her abusive marriage.

*L'autre côté de novembre* is clearly a feminist condemnation of the damage that traditional Lebanese values cause for generations of women and families. By splitting a single character into two separate identities, one a migrant *Libano-Québécoise*, the other remaining in Lebanon, Zéhil also explores the different possibilities offered to women in each society. Although Léa appears unproblematically assimilated in contemporary Québec, her Lebanese background nonetheless haunts her. In addition to visions of her younger self and



of Samira, she awakes from a dream to see a sheeted, ghostly figure, which turns out to be a white lab coat on a hanger. Furthermore, Samira's fate in Montréal underscores how the homeland's violence follows migrants to their host territory. Although she escaped war-torn Lebanon, Samira remains a prisoner in her Saint-Lambert home, and—like so many victims of the Civil War in Lebanon—she ultimately “disappears.” Léa's situation thus allegorizes that of the migrant Lebanese who have successfully assimilated by forgetting the painful aspects of the homeland—participating in the collective dismemory of the war—while also suggesting the eventual pernicious after-effects of this repressed memory.

*L'autre côté de novembre* feels no compulsion to “explain” the paradox of its protagonist's double life. Both Léa and Layla appear as fully “real;” but only Layla explicitly addresses the possibility of an alternate reality in which she *did* migrate to Canada, telling her daughter: “You might not have been born, you know.” Although this awareness suggests that she might be the “real” Layla, the film's final sequence leaves the question of which of these women is the authentic subject hanging in the balance. As Léa, once again jogging in Montréal, has a glimpse of her younger self, the camera reveals twenty-year-old Layla looking first to a version of her older self, Léa, and then to the other, Layla. Zéhil thus refuses to identify the “right” course of action for her protagonist, underscoring the very “in-betweenness” of migrant identity. Léa/Layla remain caught between two possibilities. Like the other films in the corpus studied here, Zéhil's work reflects aspects of Bhabha's Third Space of cultural productions, as it subverts dominant social ideologies and conventions in Québec national cinema. Not only does a large portion of the dialogue occur in Lebanese Arabic, its *mise en scène* of two parallel existences transcends Québec's documentarian tradition.

What, then, is the *Libano-Québécois(e)*? The films examined here propose multiple answers in their representations of protagonists who have made—or saw forced upon them—different life choices. Zéhil's feminist films suggest, although not unproblematically, that women can only find individual fulfillment in the West: her *Libano-Québécoise* protagonists, Sana and Léa, appear fully integrated into the host society, a fact perhaps aided by their higher levels of education, comfortable economic situations and rejection of sectarian rivalries in the modern secular society. They also belong to a “less visible” minority in relation to Montréal's other cultural communities, although the



films largely elide questions of race. Despite the extent of their success in Québec, the women portrayed in Zéhil's films remain haunted by a Lebanese past that they cannot completely overcome: Sana sacrificed her daughter and Léa is haunted by Samira's "ghost."

Migrant men experience greater difficulty in resolving the split inherent to their hyphenated, hybrid identity. Of course, the Palestinian Muslim protagonist of Zéhil's *La vallée des larmes* assumes (for his own survival) a false identity as a Christian in Lebanon and arrives in Québec with no intention of integration. There is no place for the type of violence that he brings on Canadian soil, it would seem, and so he remains doomed despite Marie's hospitality. His case illustrates Sherry Simon's assertion that "[l]a proximité des cultures n'est certes pas une condition suffisante à l'hybridation. Là où vit la violence politique, l'hybridité n'a pas droit de cité. Là où règne l'intégrisme, elle fait mieux de se cacher."<sup>42</sup> Although Ali the Syrian ostensibly embraces Québec's hospitality, marrying and founding a family with Gabrielle, he, too, appears unable to leave the baggage of his homeland behind. Existentially disoriented, he returns to it a stranger, and isn't able to return to Québec.

The younger generation of *Libano-Québécois* represented in *Littoral* and *Roméo Onze* fully adapts to its parents' adopted home, making it its own, but nonetheless suffers from alienation because of the hybrid identities thrust upon it. Wahab, in *Littoral*, resembles any other unhyphenated Québécois youth; his journey to his father's homeland, however, leads him to embrace his hybrid identity as *Libano-Québécois*, despite the pain that goes with it. In *Roméo Onze*, Rami rejects his parents' values and wants to live like any other young Québécois, adopting a non-Arabic name for his idealized online alter ego. But his difference derives as much from individual personality traits and physical disability as from his migrant identity; Grbovic's film suggests that this young male *Libano-Québécois*'s alienation mirrors that of many other Franco-Québécois. That his family is Lebanese appears only incidental, compounding perhaps his sense of isolation, but not definitive of it. To become whole, he must embrace the community offered to him.

The range of *Libano-Québécois* subjectivities represented in this corpus sheds light on the array of possibilities for migrant identities in Québec. Although some end tragically (ultimately commenting on the lingering after-effects of the Lebanese Civil War even on those who have escaped it), taken as a whole, these films celebrate migrant identities as non-monolithic. And,

although that Self may remain divided (or even literally doubled), in a reflection of the “in-between” theorized by Robin, Bhabha and others, those who survive the identity quests these films depict emerge as whole despite their multiplicity. As Third Space interventions, they resist the paradigms of colonialism, sometimes negotiating painful postcolonial realities and acknowledging that not all will survive, as the heritage of colonial violence continues to leave victims in its wake.

### Author Biography

Amy J. Ransom is professor of French at Central Michigan University and editor of the scholarly journal *Québec Studies*. She has published widely on Québec’s popular culture, including the books *Science Fiction from Québec: A Postcolonial Study* (McFarland, 2009) and *Hockey PQ: Canada’s Game in Quebec’s Popular Culture* (University of Toronto Press, 2014). In addition, her articles on Haitian-Canadian writers Gérard Étienne, Dany Laferrière, and Stanley Péan have appeared in journals and edited volumes. She is currently working on a book-length project on the historical imagination in twenty-first century Québécois film.

### Notes

1. Michel Coulombe, “Les anglophones et les immigrants dans le cinéma québécois: un cinéma blanc, blanc, blanc?,” *Ciné-Bulles* 28.4 (2010): 34-37.
2. Indeed, several critics insist that the rapport with the “Other” has become a dominant theme in Québec national cinema. See Gérald Grugeau, “Montréal métissée: la diversité culturelle à l’écran,” *24 images* 177 (2016): 32-35; Marie-Claude Loiselle, “De l’Autre amoureux à l’Autre manquant,” *24 images* 166 (2014): 33-39 ; and Claire Valade, “Sortir du terroir pour voir le monde,” *Séquences* 252 (2008): 32-33.
3. Regarding Third Space postcolonial cultural productions, see Homi K. Bhabha, *Locating Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 2004 [1994]), 54. Regarding Régine Robin’s notion of *entre-deux*, see Régine Robin, *Kafka* (Paris: Belfond, 1989) and Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998), 173. Regarding Lebanon’s memory of the war, see Sune Haugbølle, *War and Memory in Lebanon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 19 and Norman Saadi Nikro, *The Fragmenting Force of Memory: Self, Literary Style, and Civil War in Lebanon* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 1.
4. See Fawwaz Tarabulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition* (London: Pluto Press, 2012); Makram Rabah, *Conflict on Mount Lebanon: the Druze, the Maronites, and Collective Memory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020) and Daniel Byman and Kenneth Michael Pollack, *Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), 139.

5. Statistics Canada, "The Lebanese Community in Canada" (2007), [www.statcan.gc.ca](http://www.statcan.gc.ca) (consulted on 15 January 2022).
6. See Françoise Lionnet, "Logiques métisses: Cultural Appropriation and Postcolonial Representations," in *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers*, Mary Jean Green *et al.*, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 321-343; and Sherry Simon, *Hybridité culturelle* (Montréal: Île de la tortue/Les Élementaires-Une Encyclopédie vivante, 1999).
7. Robin, *Kafka*, 10; Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 177.
8. Bhabha, *Locating Culture*, 54.
9. See Tarabulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 37, 49-50, 54-55, 75, 89-90.
10. Until the 2019 Bill 21, Act on the Laicity of the State (see <http://legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/showdoc/cs/L-0.3>, consulted on 15 January 2022), the official policy of the Government of Québec appeared to be one of accommodation, but ideology, attitudes and belief are not necessarily determined by policy.
11. Saadi Nikro, *The Fragmenting Force of Memory*, 1; Rabah, *Conflict on Mount Lebanon*, 299.
12. Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon*, 2.
13. On *Incendies*'s reception, see, for example: Erin Hurley, "What Consolation: *Incendies* on Stage and Screen," *Alt.theatre: Cultural Diversity and the Stage* 8.3 (March 2011): 23-28; Claudia Kotte, "Zero Degrees of Separation: Post-Exilic Return in Denis Villeneuve's *Incendies*," in *Cinematic Homecomings: Exile and Return in Transnational Cinema*, Rebecca Prime, ed. (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 287-302; Esther Pelletier and Irène Roy, "*Incendies*: Évoquer pour susciter l'imaginaire et montrer plutôt que dire," *Nouvelles Études Francophones* 30.2 (2015): 111-128; Thomas Richard, "Mémoire de guerre et de résistance dans les films libanais," *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 18.5 (2014): 505-513. The latter analyzes *Incendies* along with films produced in Lebanon and Israel. Apart from a sparse collection of film reviews, I only found Denis Bachand's perceptive analysis of *Littoral* among scholarly sources about independent films. See Denis Bachand, "Le prisme identitaire du cinéma québécois. Figures paternelles et interculturalité dans *Mémoires affectives* et *Littoral*," *Cinémas* 19.1 (2008): 57-73.
14. Pierre L'Hérault, "De Wajdi... à Wahab," *Jeu* 111 (2004): 97.
15. André Roy, "Mystère des origines: *Littoral* de Wajdi Mouawad," *Séquences* 234 (2004): 38.
16. This casting move may have resulted from certain practicalities, but remained problematic for film audiences; see Olivia Choplin, "Staging the Psyche: Representing the 'Other Scene' in the Theater of Michel Tremblay, Marie N'Diaye and Wajdi Mouawad", PhD dissertation (Atlanta: Emory University, 2009): 169-172.
17. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Towards a History of the Vanishing Present* (Oxford: Harvard University Press, 1999).
18. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).
19. See Haugbolle, *War and Memory in Lebanon*; Rabah, *Conflict on Mount Lebanon*; Saadi Nikro, *The Fragmenting Force of Memory*.
20. Mathieu Séguin-Tétrault, "Les amours imaginaires: *Roméo Onze*," *Séquences* 278 (2012): 53.
21. Stéphane Defoy, "Fausse identité: *Roméo Onze* de Ivan Grbovic," *Ciné-Bulles* 30.2 (2013): 23.
22. Pierre-Alexandre Fradet, *Philosopher à travers le cinéma québécois* (Paris: Hermann, 2018), 22-24.

23. André Roy, "Entre deux mondes: Roméo Onze d'Ivan Grbovic," *24 images* 157 (2012): 47.
24. His younger sister Sabine (Sanda Bourenane) lives her life like any other *finissante*, although she employs ruses to do so (for example, convincing her father that Rami chaperones her on outings and then ditching him). His older sister Nada (Caline Habib) is a successful business-woman engaged to the handsome Bassam (Ziad Ghanem).
25. In an interview, Grbovic asserts that he specifically sought to avoid the topics of war and racism typical of migrant films, yet also ascribes Rami's "quête identitaire" in part, at least, to the denial of his Lebanese identity. See Stéphane Defoy, "Entretien: Ivan Grbovic," *Ciné-Bulles* 30.2 (2012): 19.
26. Roy, "Entre deux mondes."
27. This label, however, has also been contested and at various moments in their history Maronites have sought to distinguish themselves from Arab identity, most notably attempting to establish themselves as the descendants of the Phoenicians. See Rabah, *Conflict on Mount Lebanon*, 53-54 and Tarabulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 93-94.
28. Jocelyn Létourneau, "Mythistoires de losers: Introduction au roman historique des Québécois," *Histoire sociale/Social History* (2006): 157-180.
29. For a discussion of Derrida's hospitality theory in relation to immigration, see Ashwiny Kistnareddy, "Elsewhere Home: Hospitality, Affect, and Language in Ying Chen's *Lettres Chinoises* and Kim Thúy's *Vi*," *Québec Studies* 71 (Spring/Summer 2021): 91-110.
30. Tarabulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, 224. See also the CBC documentary *Exile without End: Palestinians in Lebanon* (2011).
31. Marie's story also belies the myth of the Quiet Revolution as an instantaneous moment of modernization.
32. See Samer Najari's biography on the IFFR website, <https://iffri.com/en/persons/samer-najari> (consulted on 15 January 2022).
33. *Arwad* frequently pays homage to *Littoral*; this sequence invokes a significant exchange between Wahab and Massi and parents dancing is an important motif in both films. Indeed, *Arwad* concludes—as had *Littoral*—with a magical realist reunion between mother and son dancing together.
34. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 11.
35. Grugeau refers to the film's creation as an "entre-deux poreux, vacillant entre l'ici et l'ailleurs". See Gérard Grugeau, "Je rentre à la maison : *Arwad* de Samer Najari et Dominique Chila," *24 images* 174 (2015): 47. Also see Marie-Hélène Mello, "Fracture multiple: *Arwad*," *Ciné-Bulles* 32.1 (2014): 13.
36. Mello, "Fracture multiple," 12.
37. See Amy J. Ransom, "Men in Pain: Home, Nostalgia, and Masculinity in Twenty-First Century Québec Film," in *A Cinema of Pain: Essays on Quebec's Nostalgic Screen*, Liz Czach and André Loiselle, eds. (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2019), 125-146.
38. See note 27.
39. See, for example, Kalí Tal, *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) or Laurie Vickroy, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002).
40. See Rabah, *Conflict on Mount Lebanon*; Tarabulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*.

41. Rabah, *Conflict on Mount Lebanon*, 46.
42. Simon, *L'hybridité culturelle*, 25.