

Born on the eastern end of the Cosmos

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An intrusive Google Street View glance seemed like a good first second impression of my childhood home, three decades after my family and I left Ville Saint-Laurent for the Great Northern Dream of Cartierville. Surprisingly enough, it had not occurred to me earlier, despite the 15-year existence of said Street View, to sneak a peek at my seminal frame of reference. My inner salmon was not so eager to venture back to its original stream.

My half of the primordial semi-detached houses, the bungalow on the right, is not presenting as red anymore but as emphatically black. The uppermost concrete step leading to the front door holds the vivid memory of my older sibling and her impeccably white and lacy first communion dress, with its matching hat and silky sky-blue ribbon at the waist. It feels like it's been centuries since my father stopped opening pathways to the said front door through meter-high snow with his 1990s snowblower, wearing an epic *capot de chat*¹ around his Mediterranean body, rightfully proud of the life he had made for himself and his family in America. My mother is no longer filming the scene with a high-tech, super heavy and thus super precious VHS camcorder for his four sisters and parents still in 'Om-e Kalsūm's land.

¹ Raccoon coat.

The driveway now hosts an apparently very polluting white Jeep, instead of the familial, even more polluting, typically immigrant white Dodge Caravan my father drove back then. My mother's gracefully chaotic, tenderly cared-for garden patch has been replaced by pavement and a few perfectly round mini bushes, reminding me of the pubic "subway ticket trim" en vogue when I came of age.

Our erstwhile front neighbour, a huge, former National Film Board of Canada complex, still features the same ostentatious, spectral appearance. On Street View, the building is without the immense sign it used to bear, and without any of its former quite confidential human activity. Back in the '90s, my sibling and I were very much aware that some mischievous plans were afoot behind those walls, with very bad guys stealing secret documents while intrepid teenagers were spoiling their devious machinations.

I lived at 100 Houde Street only seven years, barely noticing the awkwardness of my neighborhood. One end of our seemingly typical suburban street is delineated by highway 40, the ugliest and most dangerous urbanist horror in our otherwise wonderful city. A humongous scar in the face of human intelligence. I still can't bear the passive acceptance of its existence by my co-citizens. At the other end of Houde Street are very shady warehouses. Lots of them. One story high for the most part, with a series of large windows always blocked out by blue or green vertical blinds. The kind of blue or green just off enough to never possibly find favour in the eye of anyone with even minimal taste for colour. Nothing new under the manufactural Ville Saint-Laurent sun.

If one ventures a bit west of my former home, they would stumble upon the vast Urgel Bourgie cemetery and complex, after strutting past oversized car dealerships after oversized car dealerships—Lexus, Toyota, Porsche... The only trace of living and breathing human-scale establishments—the old corner store—is long gone. The eastern border of the block is and was the dominion of highway 15. Houde Street is still situated in a cute mini suburb enclaved by the self-destructive dream of the North-American automobile empire.

The current mayor, who was already a central municipal figure in the '90s, recently said that Ville Saint-Laurent invented *vivre ensemble*. I thought he was pushing it a bit, especially for the queers that were still specifically the target of active discrimination and censorship by him and his elected colleagues just a few months ago.² Though it's true that the neighborhood is more than just "multicultural": according to the 2021 recent census, 83.7% of its inhabitants are from a recent immigration background.³ Half of Montréal's Lebanese population lives in the arrondissement, as do many people from China, Morocco, Syria, Egypt and hundreds of other countries or contrasting regions. It always fascinated me how ridiculously oversimplifying such stats were—giving the impression that we were some kind of happy Olympic Games Opening Ceremony crew. The feeling also arose in our schools, where we were annually invited to bring in traditional food and dress in folkloric garb from "our countries" once a year to "celebrate difference." Lots of efforts were then made to avoid talking about any delicate matters—specifically why we were no longer in "our countries," or why our parents instructed us to never talk to that one kid that seemed so nice in class 1B.

The hard truth is that we were catapulted into this hyperactive industrial city at the north-western limit of Montréal⁴ with our own complex cultural and religious relationships intact, and without miraculously forgetting our hundreds- or even thousands-of-years-old intertwined His-, Her- and Theirstory. No tools for "vivre ensemble" or to help us deal with the psychological challenges of our traumas were available, whether we were Sephardic or Ashkenazi Jews, Falung Gong practitioners, Hindus, Buddhists, Egyptian Copts, Syrian Orthodox or Maronite Christians—whether we were anti-proselytist الموحدون (Al-Muwaḥḥidūn⁵) or knocking-at-your-door-every-other-Saturday-morning Jehovah's Witnesses.

Ethno-religious background was everything—and so the atheists, agnostics and queers like me were certainly somewhere in the mix but proactively masking themselves, invisible. Every

² <https://www.lapresse.ca/arts/chroniques/2022-07-05/qui-a-peur-de-barbada.php>

³ First or second generation. Census: <https://bit.ly/3tl0SDG>

⁴ In the '90s, Saint-Laurent was still an independent city, and the second most important industrial city in Québec (<https://numerique.banq.qc.ca/patrimoine/details/52327/2261708>).

⁵ People of Monotheism in English – also referred to as Druze, though the latter term is not used by the Al-Muwaḥḥidūn people to describe themselves.

family had its tragic migrational story, and every living room was an enclave of its own. At least that was my understanding of the situation, being the eldest “son” of the eldest “son” in a Coptic-Catholic household. Most people seemed to have fled purges, or at least clogged futures, which made them responsible for the perennality of their specific denominational truth. It was a lot of hard truths for one neighborhood. And it was a mathematical impossibility for all those truths to be concurrently true. My mother being one of the very few white francophone people on the block, with her hardcore rural Québécois Catholicism in a society where Catholicism was in exponential decline, was quite in keeping with the Ville Saint-Laurent zeitgeist.

So here I am, back after 30 years in Ville Saint-Laurent, as an artist in residency at the public library. I’ve already been around for six months, writing about complex identities, meeting all kinds of wonderful humans, and temporarily inscribing my Egypto-Québécois queer body back where it came from. But my residency is ending on Friday and one of the aims of my stay was to explore how it would feel to walk by 100 Houde Street again. I have mostly sad and violent memories of my childhood, but I’m trying to build something new out of its very small happy bits, to cherish them, address my internalized racism within my old neighborhood, and connect threads of good together. I’m unsure why my instincts keep pushing me further backwards in my spatio-temporal grip on life, but I’ve learned to follow their lead.

As a first step, I crossed the city by bike, pedalling from my beloved Plateau to Ville Saint-Laurent, experiencing the geography through my calves and quadriceps. Biking north on my dearest REV—Réseau express vélo, a brand-new paradise for cyclists—until the cute, half-secret and too short Piste des Carrières, entering the Parc-Ex no person’s land, following Graham Street through the very bougie and old-money Town of Mount Royal, passing under highway 40, and finally getting to Vieux-Saint-Laurent. I was welcomed by the old, impressive Cégep Saint-Laurent, where my grandfather taught in the 1940s. He was then a Sainte-Croix brother, and the Cégep was still Collège Saint-Laurent, established Anno Domini 1847.

Going back and forth along that same route about three times a week for six months got my back burners working hard. I didn't really recognize the neighborhood. There's a nice third-wave coffee shop, Bilboquet ice cream, vegan food, and still mostly people from immigration background, but not the same communities as in the '90s. At the time, I hadn't noticed the presence of so many people from Asian backgrounds, but it is well documented that they arrived in Ville Saint-Laurent quite at the same time as SWANA⁶ people. How did I miss half of the neighborhood growing up here?

Near the public library, there's an Arabic bookstore and a shop called Alexandria Boutique—the latter mostly selling Islamic veils and dresses with fitting and glamorous colours. Definitely not the Alexandria of my family mythology: when they left Egypt, only the more extreme religious people would wear headscarves. I wonder how *this* Alexandrian queen would be welcomed in that Alexandrian shop. When I visited Alexandria last year, my first visit in thirty years, I wanted to buy a glittering “woman” galabeya, but I was too afraid it would disclose my transidentity. Could shopping for a “woman” galabeya at Alexandria Boutique be a nice Saint-Laurent moment in 2022⁷?

Anyways, thirty years on, it's refugees from the Muslim majorities of the now-almost-Christian-free countries of my ancestors that are fleeing the same assholes (or their sons) my family fled from the '70s through to the '90s. Muslim immigration is the neighborhood's new face. New waves of refugees ending up in the same neighborhood, and with the same immigration issues as the enemies of their parents, and of the parents of their parents. Everyone in one big melting pot, with all their complex backgrounds and enclavements.

I realize I'm projecting the vociferating voice of my father on innocent bystanders: I can't remember him talking about anything else, during my childhood, than “evil Muslims torturing

⁶ South-West Asia and North Africa. A decolonial term coined by militant diasporic people coming from those countries commonly referred to as “Arab” without consideration for the linguistic, religious and ethnographic diversity of said countries. Egypt is seldom included in SWANA for complex reasons, but I'll permit myself, as a diasporic Egyptian person, to include it here in light of the context of this text.

⁷ I finally went a few days later, but it appeared to be a shop selling mostly Turkish goods. The two men working there actively ignored my presence during the twenty minutes I spent in their store, and I felt quite at ease reciprocating their attitude. The nice moment happened at the Middle-East bookstore, where a welcoming old woman helped me find children books in colloquial Egyptian while celebrating the amazing multiculturalism of Alexandria, capital of good taste and refinement according to her.

Copts and destroying their churches.” I also project on their children’s smiles and laughter an echo of my own taboo intergenerational traumas and their inevitable corollary defence mechanisms—namely fear, mistrust and blunt racism.

But maybe they will be resilient enough to avoid a trajectory such as my family’s own, and deeply connect to the present, working hard on that amazing project, the *vivre ensemble*, that should never be the preserve of political vultures.

A common challenge emerged amidst our post-2001 ostracization at the hands of the majority, who saw “us” as one unified Machiavellian entity. The dreaded Arabs invading “them” from “Islamistan.”⁸ Whether we were all Arab or not, evidently: the “majority” mostly ignored the fact that very few of the singled-out “Arab” community, in particular the members of those communities living in Ville Saint-Laurent, were actually Arabs. To the eyes of many all over the planet at the beginning of the 21st century, all of us originating from anywhere between Western Sahara and Pakistan were a single, collectively dangerous nuisance. We were terrorists or terrorists-in-waiting, lazy or too-hard-working job stealers, wife-beaters or zealots, we had amazing food or disturbingly smelly spices—depending on the passing needs of various political actors.

Some visitors from that outside world would come over on Sunday afternoons to talk about our courageous parents, survivors of war all happily living together; they would take pictures and, most importantly, have SO MUCH AMAZING FOOD. Hurrah for Andalos and the Cheaib family success story! But please shush with that Damour or Karantina massacre backstory while I’m digesting my decadent baklava... It kills the mood...

For instance, let us remember this infamous tweet, amongst many others, by the Editor-in-Chief of *Le Droit*, a respected Ottawa–Gatineau newspaper:

⁸ “Musulmanie” was often referred to as a country in the awkwardly unpleasant—to say the least—Québec-wide debates around the “reasonable accommodations” towards religious minorities that peaked, from my point of view, in 2007 with the infamous “code of conduct for immigrants” of smalltown Hérouxville forbidding “killing women by stoning [them] on the public place or by burning them alive, burning them with acid, excising them, infibulating them and treating them as slaves.” (my translation)
<http://collections.banq.qc.ca/ark:/52327/bs2772394>



marie-claude lortie 
@mclortie

...

L'arrivée de réfugiés signifie l'arrivée de beaucoup de savoirs, incluant... la cuisine ! Hâte aux nouveaux restos syriens. #épiceriesaussi

8:49 AM · 10 nov. 2015 · Twitter for iPad

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This crass insensitivity upsets me, of course, but it mostly makes me wonder if it would have been at all possible to those from Ville Saint-Laurent and those from other communities to grasp the immense gap between each other's realities. How impossible it could seem for us to imagine what was going on in a house in Hochelaga, and vice versa. The white francophone majority seemed incredibly abstract when I was living in Ville Saint-Laurent—or later in Cartierville, on the literal fringe of Ville Saint-Laurent. We knew they spoke French. We thought we knew that they hated Canada and drank a lot of beer. But we had no real idea what these people looked like, how they lived, what they were going through, how they suffered at the hand of their own majority, the English Canadians. And frankly, we didn't have much mental space to think about it. My mother was theoretically part of the francophone majority, but she was mostly working the night shifts at the emergency room of the now-decommissioned Saint-Laurent hospital, and being a zombie by day, while my father was working sixty hours a week at his dental office, and twenty to thirty on the real estate empire he was dreaming up to fulfill his version of the American dream. So it was pretty much Canal Famille, YTV and the church who raised my four siblings and me, and taught us all we knew about the rest of the world, including our perception of the emblematic Hochelaga neighborhood.

Going back and forth on my bike from Le Plateau Mont-Royal to my art residency at the bibliothèque du Vieux-Saint-Laurent, I get lots of time to reflect, pedaling and pedaling and increasing my awareness of the local history of Ville Saint-Laurent, the complexity of it all. As I sit on the floor of the library's mezzanine, where my temporary artist's studio is, and deep dive into archives and city documents, the geek in me is thrilled to learn that the specific part of Ville Saint-Laurent where I come from is officially known as "The Cosmos." All its homes

⁹ "The arrival of refugees signifies the arrival of a lot of knowledge, including... cooking ! Looking forward to the new Syrian restaurants. #grocerystoretoo." Translation by yours truly.

were built almost overnight between 1949 and 1955, in accordance with the Canadian dream of one Constantinos P. Couropoulos, a civil engineer and builder. I thus spent the first years of my life on the far east border of the Cosmos. I'm loving how that information enriches my personal mythology. Though it brings a question to mind: could anyone from outside our Cosmos—might it be our cousins by the Richelieu River or those by the Mediterranean Sea—imagine the kind of people we were, the life we had?

During another day at the library, I was made aware of a more bewildering information: only 0.27% of the neighborhood's population is Indigenous. 280 people out of 102,104.¹⁰ It's an uncomfortable, important reminder that I'm not only a migrant but also a settler. I don't know what to do with the complexity of that information, how to make use of it in a meaningful way.

As I mull these threads of thought, I realize that my parents never brought us to the public library. They didn't trust any kind of public institution. They felt safer in as much autarky as possible. I think they liked the fact that our Cosmos was an enclave of enclaves, with almost no shared spaces, except for a bleak, small park where we were never allowed to go. I'm not sure where my mother's part in that perspective originated, but talking with other children of political immigrants (there's quite a bunch of us all over the city!), I realized that distrust towards the common, towards the system—be it a hospital, a public library or the police—is visceral, instinctive, an axiom underlying our system of thoughts, whether consciously or not. So it's no surprise that I didn't recognize my neighborhood at the public library: the likes of my family, 2022 Saint-Laurent edition, are still a generation or two away from trusting the system enough to borrow a book. Like we once were.

So today I Google-mapped the distance from the library to 100 Houde Street. 24 little minutes on foot. I hadn't imagined that my old enclave was so close to the lively downtown of Vieux-Saint-Laurent where I just spent six months. I tried to deflect the moment of my visit to 100

¹⁰ "Census Profile, 2021 Census, Statistics Canada." www12.statcan.gc.ca, www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&SearchText=Saint%2DLaurent&DGUIDlist=2013A000424068&GENDERlist=1.

Houde with my usual strategies: I finally got an idea for how to finish a sound painting I'd been working on—but then I finished it quickly and that was that. I had a meeting with the new director of the library to plan an exhibition—but she was very open and efficient, so everything was settled in a couple of minutes. I started a beautiful discussion with two employees of the library at lunch, hoping it would get in the way of my visit. But it didn't.

Now was the time to circle back to my original stream.



À l'est du Cosmos (ville Saint-Laurent)

Excerpt from the visual musical score *Tiroirs bonbons pastels* I composed during my residency at the bibliothèque du Vieux-Saint-Laurent.

Mixed techniques on cardboard; 203.2 x 304.8 cm.