

## Revisiting “Speak White”: A *lieu de mémoire* Lost and Found in Translation

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Article abstract

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# Revisiting “Speak White”: A *lieu de mémoire* Lost and Found in Translation

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## Abstract

This article traces the afterlives of Michèle Lalonde’s 1968 poem “Speak White” to explore how translation contributes to constructing, renewing and transforming it as a *lieu de mémoire* through various transformative processes. The term “translation” here designates a phenomenon that includes but extends beyond the concept of translation as linguistic transfer to encompass different forms of rewriting, adaptation and remediation, foregrounding the generative aspect of the memory site as well as the tension between past and present, between a *lieu de départ* and its reinscription in a new context. Specifically, it focuses on two English translations of “Speak White” that attempt to reconstruct the poem’s subversive diglossia; Marco Micone’s 1989 poem “Speak What,” as a rewriting that takes the form of serious parody; two adaptations produced during the 2012 Quebec Student Strike, “Speak Red” and “Speak rich en tabarnaque”; and the latest incarnation of “Speak White” in Robert Lepage’s *887*, a theatrical production that introduces its own layers of intertemporal, intermedial and interlingual complexity. These recreations of “Speak White” reveal how a *lieu de mémoire* can be simultaneously anchored or re-anchored in the past while also being renewed or rerouted through translation in the present across languages, cultures, media and time.

**Mots-clés :** Speak White, Speak What, 2012 Quebec Student Strike, Robert Lepage, *887*

## Résumé

Cet article retrace les après-vies du poème de Michèle Lalonde « Speak White » (1968) afin d’explorer comment la traduction participe à sa construction, son renouvellement et sa transformation en tant que lieu de mémoire à travers des processus transformateurs divers. Le terme « traduction » désigne ici un phénomène qui inclut, mais dépasse le concept de la traduction comme transfert linguistique pour englober des formes diverses de réécriture, d’adaptation et de remédiation, mettant l’accent sur l’aspect génératif du lieu de mémoire ainsi que sur la tension entre le passé et le présent, entre un lieu de départ et sa reinscription dans un nouveau contexte. Précisément, il se

concentre sur deux traductions en anglais de « Speak White » qui tentent de reconstruire la diglossie subversive du poème; « Speak What » de Marco Micone (1989), une réécriture qui prend la forme d'une parodie sérieuse; deux adaptations produites durant la grève étudiante au Québec en 2012, « Speak Red » et « Speak rich en tabarnaque »; et l'incarnation la plus récente de « Speak White » dans *887* de Robert Lepage, une production théâtrale qui introduit ses propres niveaux de complexité intertemporelle, intermédiaire et interlinguistique. Ces récréations de « Speak White » révèlent comment un lieu de mémoire peut être à la fois ancré ou réancré dans le passé tout en étant également renouvelé ou détourné par la traduction dans le présent à travers les langues, les cultures, les médias et le temps.

**Mots-clés :** Speak White, Speak What, grève étudiante de 2012 au Québec, Robert Lepage, *887*

### **Introduction: *Je me souviens***

When asked in a 2002 interview what Quebec's official motto *Je me souviens* means, Robert Lepage answered that nobody really knows:

Is it the past? Is it a vengeance? Is it Quebec saying "I will remember what has been done to me?" Does it mean, *Je me Souviens* in the sense, "I remember that I am different, I remember my language: I'm in a society where its cultural expression, its first cultural expression which is French, is being forgotten?" So do I have to be reminded that I have to not forget this language? It means many things, *Je me Souviens*. It is about solving the past [...]. So much of Quebec is about remembering.<sup>1</sup> (cited in Dundjerović, 2003, p. 18)

Memory is often valorized where identity is problematized. Vulnerable groups are driven to defend and protect their cultural memory, their *lieux de mémoire*, because, as Pierre Nora writes, "without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away" (1989, p. 12). Michèle Lalonde's poem "Speak White," written in 1968 and performed by the author during the *Nuit de la poésie* in 1970, is a *lieu de mémoire* par excellence, both emblematic of an era and continually generating new forms and interpretations. The Quiet Revolution of the 1960s ushered in unprecedented changes

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1. The use of *Je me souviens* dates to the construction of Quebec's Parliament Building (1877-1886). Architect Eugène-Étienne Taché chose to adorn the main entrance of the building with the coat of arms assigned by Queen Victoria in 1868, to which he added a motto of his own invention (though its origins are disputed). The motto regained prominence in 1978 when the recently elected Parti Québécois government (1976) chose it to replace the *La belle province* slogan on the province's automobile license plates (Deschênes, 2007, n. p.).

on many levels. The wave of political reforms that marked the end of the "Grande Noirceur" associated with the Duplessis regime were followed by a cultural effervescence that celebrated the French-Canadian (thereafter rebaptized "Québécois") language and identity. This cultural movement found a powerful form of expression in performance—poetry, song and theatre, the latter of which Michel Bélair, writing in 1973, described as "one of the driving forces behind Quebec's parallel cultural affirmation and quest for political autonomy" (1973, p. 9; my trans.). Towards the end of the 1960s, the counterculture movement contributed to this revolutionary spirit in appealing to a young generation seeking an alternative way of life and seduced by "the charm of a discourse that seemed new and stimulating in its claim to combine the double aspiration of Marx and Rimbaud: change the world, change your life" (Duchastel, 1986, p. 62; my trans.).

This paper traces the afterlives of "Speak White" to explore how translation contributes to constructing, renewing and transforming it as a *lieu de mémoire* through various transformative processes. The term "translation" here designates a phenomenon that includes but extends beyond the concept of translation as linguistic transfer to encompass different forms of rewriting, adaptation and remediation, foregrounding the generative aspect of the memory site as well as the tension between past and present, between a *lieu de départ* and its reinscription in a new context. Specifically, I will consider two English translations of "Speak White" that attempt to reconstruct the poem's subversive diglossia; Marco Micone's 1989 poem "Speak What," as a rewriting that takes the form of "serious parody"; two adaptations produced during the 2012 Quebec Student Strike, "Speak Red" and "Speak rich en tabarnaque," and the latest incarnation of "Speak White" in Robert Lepage's *887*, a piece that introduces its own layers of intertemporal, intermedial and interlingual complexity.

### Sites, Frames and Networks of Memory

Nora introduced the concept of *lieux de mémoire* to account for what he saw as a rupture with history. He described *lieux de mémoire* as being both immediately available to concrete sensory experience but also susceptible to the most abstract elaboration. They are, at once, material, symbolic and functional, insofar as even a material site, like an archive, only becomes a *lieu de mémoire* when the imagination has invested it with symbolic meaning. But if the main purpose of a

memory site is to block the work of forgetting, Nora also insists on the idea that *lieux de mémoire* “only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications” (1989, p. 19). A *lieu de mémoire* is both a site of excess closed upon itself, but also forever open to the full range of its possible significations—an object *mise en abyme* (*ibid.*, p. 20).

Though the multi-volume project *Lieux de mémoire* directed by Nora (1984-1992) has been criticized for its nostalgic bent and, especially, its exclusive focus on national history,<sup>2</sup> the concept itself, the idea that memory sites are not only open to continual reiterations but also constructed and reconstructed through them, remains pertinent. This dynamic, generative dimension of *lieux de mémoire* is not incompatible with current approaches in memory studies that seek to go beyond what Astrid Erll refers to as the “container-culture” model. As Erll observes, the container model is not only “ideologically suspect” but also “epistemologically flawed,” because it fails to account for a range of mnemonic phenomena whose main frameworks of cultural memory are not defined by territory, ethnicity or nationality—there are also social classes, generations, religious communities, subcultures, global diasporas and *lieux de mémoire* arising from travel, trade, war, and colonialism (2011, p. 8). Erll proposes the term “travelling memory” to describe “the incessant wandering of carriers, media, contents, forms, and practices of memory, their continual ‘travels’ and ongoing transformations through time and space, across social, linguistic and political borders” (*ibid.* p. 11).

This shift in focus gives rise to apparently diverging concepts of cultural memory—site- and source-based memory (roots), on the one hand, versus travelling, transcultural and transmedial memory (routes), on the other.<sup>3</sup> But taken together, these two strands suggest a multitude of “re-” and “trans”-membering possibilities that are arguably part of the same complex phenomenon, one that can be best described as *translational*. Translation, like memory, entails both meaning-preserving and meaning-making. Translation, like

2. Michael Rothberg, for example, critiques the project’s linear narrative of historical progress, its “nostalgic plotting of loss, reduction of Frenchness to the Hexagon, and, especially, its elision of France’s long and complex colonial and postcolonial history” (2010, p. 6).

3. On “roots” and “routes,” see Clifford (1997).

memory, can seek to be "faithful" to an originating source but it also implies movement, change and sometimes conflict. A translational perspective indeed highlights how Nora's *lieu de mémoire*, much like Walter Benjamin's "afterlife," is based on a dynamic of continuity through transformation: "Translation passes through continua of transformation, not abstract ideas of identity or similarity" (1999, p. 70).<sup>4</sup>

Social and medial frameworks also play a crucial role in these re- and trans-membering processes. Maurice Halbwachs' (1925) concept of collective memory was based on the idea that all individual memory has a collective, social dimension. Individual memory is shaped through "social frameworks" (*cadres de mémoire*): "It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize and localize their memories" (Halbwachs, 1992 [1925], p. 28). Jan Assmann (2008) and Aleida Assmann (2008), for their part, emphasize the cultural dimension of collective memory. Cultural memory is "exteriorized, objectified, and stored away in symbolic forms, that, unlike the sounds of words or the sight of gestures, are stable and situation-transcendent" (J. Assmann, 2008, p. 111). However, even in these formalized, enduring forms, the past is not "preserved" but rather is *cast* in symbols through myths, writings, performances, and continually "illuminating a changing present" (*ibid.* p. 113). Cultural memory, in other words, is mediated, emerging at the junction between the individual and the collective, between culture understood as "a subjective category of meanings contained in people's minds" and culture conceived as a repertoire of "publicly available symbols objectified in society" (Olick, 1999, p. 336).

*Lieux de mémoire* considered as translational phenomena encompass all of these layers of complexity, along with the various transformational processes that they engender. As we will see in the case of "Speak White," a memory site can be both a source and a resource, reinvested and transformed, lost and found in translation.

### **Speak White: *Quelle langue?***

As Lise Gauvin has observed, the "language question" has traversed Quebec's history and literature with exemplary consistency, as no other issue has. "Speak White" was written and first performed at a moment when Quebec's "*surconscience linguistique*," as she calls

4. See also Benjamin (2000 [1923]).

it, was at a peak, informed by an awareness of language as a space of friction and fiction, an object of anxiety and doubt, but also a privileged laboratory, open to endless possibilities (Gauvin, 2001, p. 17). The Parti pris writers, for example, saw the degradation of the French language as inseparable from the economic and cultural domination of the French-Canadian people. French Canadians were told to “Speak White,” to speak English, the language of the master, the language of the boss.

It is in this context that Michèle Lalonde’s poem was written and performed, first during one of the events of the *Poèmes et chansons de la résistance*, in 1968, and then recited by Lalonde during the infamous *Nuit de la poésie* of 1970. On the night of March 27, 1970, more than 4000 people lined up outside *L’Église du Gesù* on Bleury Street in Montreal to hear poets of all ages and regions of Quebec. As Pascal Brissette has observed, this event, often described as “la grande messe,” was also an unprecedented encounter with a public that far outnumbered the traditional readership of Quebec poetry (2014, p. 55). Jean-Claude Labrecque and Jean-Pierre Masse filmed the event for the National Film Board of Canada. Among the artists present were Gaston Miron, Claude Gauvreau, Nicole Brossard, Paul Chamberland, Michel Garneau, and many others.

The poem’s title references not only the racist expression but also other works of the period that drew comparisons between the French-Canadian experience and that of other oppressed peoples, the most obvious being Pierre Vallières’ *Nègres blancs d’Amérique* (1968). As Lalonde remarked in an interview at the time, “[l]a langue ici est l’équivalent de la couleur pour le noir américain. La langue française, c’est notre couleur noire!” (cited in Mezei, 1998, p. 234). Lalonde’s reading of “Speak White” was one of the evening’s most memorable moments. It touched what was, and still is, that sensitive cord—Gauvin’s “*surconscience linguistique*.” An injunction against economic and political oppression and humiliation, the denigration of the French language, and the imposition of the Anglo-Saxon language and culture, “Speak White” delivered a message that resonated and has since become emblematic of the period.

Two English translations of “Speak White” were published in 1970, one by D.G Jones in the bilingual poetry journal *Ellipse* and the other by Ben-Zion Shek. Both juxtapose French and English versions. The act of translating any work into the colonizer’s language is problematic from the outset. But Lalonde’s use of code-

switching to subvert the colonizer's language further complicates the translation of this poem into English. Below, we see how the presence of English in the original is represented in the translations:

Table 1. Two English translations of "Speak White"

Speak White	Speak White trans. D. G Jones	Speak White trans. Ben-Zion Shek
speak white tell us that God is a great big shot and that we're paid to trust him speak white parlez-nous production, profits et pourcentages speak white c'est une langue riche pour acheter mais pour se vendre mais pour se vendre à perte d'âme mais pour se vendre	<b>Speak white</b> <b>tell us that God is a great</b> <b>big shot</b> <b>and that we're paid to trust</b> <b>him</b> <b>speak white</b> speak to us of production, profits and percentages <b>speak white</b> it's a rich language for buying but for selling oneself but for selling one's soul  but for selling oneself	<i>Speak white</i> <i>tell us that God is a great</i> <i>big shot</i> <i>and that we're paid to trust</i> <i>him</i> <i>speak white</i> talk production profits and percentages <i>speak white</i> yours is a rich tongue for buying but as for selling oneself but as for selling one's life blood but as for selling oneself

In Jones' translation, English is indicated in bold, whereas Shek uses italics. The use of code-switching increases as the poem progresses, culminating in the final two stanzas, with the original poem switching again to French in the last two lines. The presence of English in the French text also includes references to British history and literature, and American and British place names and monuments—Shakespeare, Milton, Keats, Wall Street, and so on. References to business and money often appear in English: "get down to brass tacks," "tell us that God is a great big shot and that we're paid to trust him," "speak white," "big deal," "speak white as on Wall Street, white as in Watts" (Hayward, 1994, p. 175).

The code-switching reproduces the unequal relations between French and English, what both Ben-Zion Shek (1977) and Sherry Simon (1994) have characterized as a literary diglossia (Mezei, 1998, p. 235). Lalonde's "Speak White" is emblematic of this dynamic. But English is not an intrusion here. The poem appropriates the English language and Anglo-Saxon *lieux de mémoire* to dethrone them (*ibid.*, p. 236). It is worth noting that Canadian-English references are absent from the poem (*ibid.*, p. 245; Gauvin, 1995, p. 20). As Kathy Mezei has observed, the British and Ameri-



can cultural references emphasize their foreignness in the Québécois context: Lalonde's strategic use of English is intended to construct borders rather than bridges (1998, p. 238). Yet, as D.G. Jones explained in an interview with Mezei, he translated "Speak White" because he identified with the poem's sense of frustration, estrangement and angry impotence (*ibid.*, p. 239). Thus while the English versions fail to reproduce the poem's subversive diglossia, they reconstruct "Speak White" as a *lieu de mémoire* in relation to the broader context of civil rights protests and movements of the period. As Mezei notes, Lalonde's poem "articulated in another language the protests of a generation fighting the Vietnam War, social conformity and American cultural and economic imperialism" (*ibid.*).

### **Speak What: *Parlons-nous***

Marco Micone's 1989 rewriting of the poem as "Speak What" introduces a very different dynamic. Shocked by the adoption of Bill 178, an amendment of the French Language Charter prohibiting the use of languages other than French on public signs, Micone decided to write a text that would be "mi-politique mi-littéraire" (cited in Gauvin, 1995, p. 22). While the use of code-switching is much less present in Micone's poem, the ambiguous interplay between the "nous" and the "vous" already at work in "Speak White" is amplified. At the outset, it would appear that Lalonde's "vous" refers to Anglo-Saxons, while "nous" refers to the French-speaking Québécois people. But further into the poem, the identity of "vous" is extended to include other imperial powers and colonizers around the world, and the "nous" comes to represent all colonized and oppressed peoples. As Annette Hayward has observed, although the poem's earlier references to the working class, empires, and strikes foreshadow this deictic shift, it transforms the poem's anti-English nationalist discourse into an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist one, reflecting, according to Hayward, an ideological shift already taking place in 1960s Quebec that Lalonde's "Speak White" perhaps actively contributed to (1994, p. 177).

Micone revisits the poem from an immigrant's perspective. His "vous" refers to French-speaking Québécois as the new masters and bosses, whereas immigrants take the place of the "nous," the exploited underclass. The sixth stanzas of "Speak White," Micone's

“Speak What,” and the latter’s English translation, are presented in Table 2 below. We note in the last two lines here in “Speak What” the only use of English in Micone’s poem, apart from the refrain of the title:

Table 2. “Speak White” compared with “Speak What”

Speak White	Speak What	Speak What, trans. D. Winkler
et de la Grande Société un peu plus fort alors speak white haussez vos voix de contremâitres nous sommes un peu durs d’oreille nous vivons trop près des machines et n’entendons que notre souffle au-dessus des outils	Comment parlez-vous dans vos salons huppés vous souvenez-vous du vacarme des usines and of the voice des contremâitres you sound like them more and more	how do you talk in your chic salons do you remember the factory din and the foremans’ voices <i>you sound like them more                      and more</i>

French Quebeckers now speak in the voice of the bosses. The singular shift to English draws attention to the line “you sound like them more and more.” Does the use of English here imply that the French Québécois bosses are literally speaking English, or are they simply speaking the language of power?

The excerpt presented in Table 3 (next page) includes the deictic shift noted by Hayward. We see in Lalonde’s lines on the left that the colonizers speak the language of Shakespeare and Longfellow but they also speak a pure and atrociously white French in Vietnam and Congo: Micone’s rewriting brings this distant French colonialism home to Quebec, inviting the Québécois to impose their French language, not a problem, he seems to imply. But the “nous,” the immigrants of Quebec, are here, and “nous” (we) can tell you stories about war and torture and poverty. The final stanza acknowledges collectively shared memories of suffering and humiliation, rather than setting them in opposition and competition: “nous sommes cent peuples venus de loin pour vous dire que vous n’êtes pas seuls” [“we are a hundred peoples come from afar to tell you that you are not alone”] (Micone, 2001, p. 15; 2008, p. 85).

Table 3. “Speak White” compared with “Speak What”

Speak White	Speak What	Speak What, trans. D. Winkler
dans la langue douce de Shakespeare avec l’accent de Longfellow parlez un français pur et atrocement blanc comme au Viêt-Nam au Congo parlez un allemand impeccable une étoile jaune entre les dents parlez russe, parlez rappel à l’ordre, parlez répression speak white c’est une langue universelle nous sommes nés pour la comprendre avec ses mots lacrymogènes avec ses mots matraques	Délestez-vous de la haire et du cilice imposez-nous votre langue nous vous raconterons la guerre, la torture et la misère nous dirons notre trépas avec vos mots pour que vous ne mourriez pas et vous parlerons avec notre verbe bâtard et nos accents fêlés du Cambodge et du Salvador du Chili et de la Roumanie de la Molise et du Péloponèse jusqu’à notre dernier regard	enough of hair shirts and traitors thrust your language upon us we will speak to you of poverty, war and torture, we will translate our deaths into your words so that you will not die and we will talk to you in our bastard language with our fractured accents of Cambodia and El Salvador of Chili and Romania of the Molise and the Peloponnese for as long as our eyes can see

Though a number of critics, including Lalonde, denounced Micone’s rewriting as a plagiarism if not an outright act of aggression, Lise Gauvin, Pierre Nepveu and others interpreted it as an homage to Quebec literature. As Gauvin writes:

La meilleur hommage que l’on puisse rendre à un texte n’est-il pas de s’en inspirer, sous forme de pastiche ou de parodie? Le texte qui sert de point de départ, s’il est assez fort, ne peut que sortir grandi de l’aventure. (1995, p. 22)

She interprets the “what” in “Speak What” as referring not to “which language,” but rather “what are we talking about?” or even, “let’s talk” (*ibid.*, p. 23). She also maintains that describing “Speak What” as a plagiarism is patently absurd, that no one could possibly imagine Micone not intending his poem to be read as a direct reference to Lalonde’s. Gauvin characterizes Micone’s poem rather as a hypertext that takes the form of a “serious parody” following Gérard Genette, who defines parody as a transposition:

le fait de chanter à côté, donc de chanter faux, ou dans une autre voix, en contre chant – en contrepoint, ou encore de chanter dans un autre ton : déformer, donc ou *transposer* une mélodie. (2003 [1982], p. 20)

Both "Speak White" and "Speak What" also function as manifestos. While "Speak White" targets two groups, the group to mobilize and the group to attack, Micone's "Speak What" brings these groups together, as we see in the last stanza, noted above. As Jeanne Demers and Line McMurray have observed, a key element of the manifesto genre is derivation and reiteration. "Le véritable manifeste," they write, "paraît rarement en solitaire, il est le plus souvent marqué par un phénomène de réitération" (Demers and McMurray, 1986, p. 12). "Speak What" translates "Speak White" through parody and transposition, and reconstructs it as a memory site through reiteration. With "Speak What," Micone does not simply appropriate "Speak White" to use it as a premise for a new work. "Speak What" is constructed in dialogue with "Speak White" and is thus a perfect example of a creative appropriation whose "restaging and re-enacting depends on the audience's prior knowledge of the source" and thus "acquires its status precisely because of the visible presence of the source within it" (Maitland, 2017, p. 117). "Speak What" is an invitation to dialogue and an invitation to return to a *lieu de mémoire*, to a past that is a source of Québécois affirmation, but that excludes, from Micone's point of view at the time of writing, the immigrant experience in Quebec. It thus reconstitutes but also translates this memory site over time and across cultural difference. As confrontational as it is, "Speak What" seeks to build bridges rather than borders.

### **Speak Rich Over our Dead Bodies**

More recently, two adaptations of "Speak White" were produced and performed during the 2012 Student Strike in Quebec—"Speak Red" by Catherine Côté-Ostiguy and "Speak rich en tabarnaque" by Marie-Christine Lemieux-Couture. The strike began as a student protest against post-secondary education tuition hikes. By the end of March there were 300,000 students on strike, and tens of thousands out in the streets. It evolved into a broader civil movement with the passing of Bill 78, which restricted public assembly. As one of the student spokespersons, Gabriel Nadeau-Dubois, observed at the time, "[t]en years of accumulated anger against the Charest government spilled out into the streets" (2012, n. p.), and tens of thousands of students and citizens were soon "casseroling"<sup>5</sup> every night. The movement also

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5. Within a few days, "*casseroler*" and "casseroling" became commonly used verbs in both French and English (e.g. "*J'ai cassé hier soir*"/"I went casseroling last night"), as citizens spontaneously took to the streets banging pots and pans to protest the new restrictive Bill.

spawned a proliferation of creative endeavours. Students mobilized to produce posters, art, installations, blogs, comics strips, films, music, and translation collectives, among many other initiatives.

Within this highly charged and volatile atmosphere, the re-writings and remediations of “Speak White” served as powerful vehicles for mobilizing collective memory and for decrying “the destruction of Quebec’s social-democratic heritage” (*ibid.*). They also served to highlight the original poem’s themes of economic and political oppression, thus anchoring their critique of the Charest government’s neo-liberal policies within a historical context. While both student adaptations make use of code-switching, they foreground social and economic issues over linguistic and cultural ones. As we see in Table 4 below, the poem “Speak Red” closely adheres to the structure of “Speak White,” while “Speak rich” deviates from the original model formally, but still invokes a number of its references and themes.

**Table 4. “Speak White”/“Speak Red”/“Speak rich en tabarnaque”**

<b>Speak White</b>	<b>Speak Red</b>	<b>Speak rich en tabarnaque</b>
speak white parlez de choses et d’autres parlez-nous de la Grande Charte ou du monument à Lincoln du charme gris de la Tamise de l’eau rose du Potomac parlez-nous de vos traditions nous sommes un peuple peu brillant mais fort capable d’apprécier toute l’importance des crumpets ou du Boston Tea Party	speak red Parlons d’éducation et de justice sociale parlons du rapport Parent ou de la Révolution tranquille des luttes de nos prédécesseurs pour des acquis aujourd’hui balayés Parlons de la déroute de notre gouvernement nous sommes une génération sacrifiée mais avide de savoir et d’une société plus juste où l’éducation n’est pas un luxe	Speak rich en tabarnaque As if we don’t know about how you lead a financial crisis Dites Fitch, Moody’s, Standard & Poor’s Pour calmer notre tension du désespoir Faites-nous croire que nous payons la dette de notre solidarité Quand nous écopons des frais de 25 ans de libéralisme corrompu Speak rich over our dead bodies Because nous sommes 99% à crever de faim

The references to the rapport Parent and the Révolution tranquille in “Speak Red” are particularly relevant, as they serve as reminders of the reforms that Jean Lesage’s Liberal government implemented to make education accessible to the francophone majority at the time that “Speak White” was written—in stark

contrast to the Liberal government's policies in 2012. The use of English also serves, as in the original poem, to highlight the influence of American imperialism, here with reference to the American credit-rating agencies Fitch, Moody's, and Standard and Poor's, the red square of the student movement symbolizing being "carrément dans la rouge." So we read, in English: "As if we don't know about how you lead a financial crisis" and "Speak rich over our dead bodies" (Lemieux-Couture, 2012, n. p.). And again, the following line: "Give us an American dream" (*ibid.*). Both "Speak Red" and "Speak rich" also reproduce the shifting modes of address used in "Speak White." While "vous" refers in the opening stanzas to the government, to corporate interests, it is later used as a rallying call to address the students. The final lines of "Speak Red" echo "Speak White": "nous savons que nous ne sommes pas seuls" (Côté-Ostiguy, n. p.), whereas "Speak rich" ends with "Commencez-vous à comprendre que vous êtes seuls?" (Lemieux-Couture, n. p.). The "vous" in "Speak rich" clearly refers to the Charest government, while the "nous" in "Speak Red" represents the students. This "nous," however, remains ambiguous. Indeed, the "nous" in all of the poems considered here, including Lalonde's "Speak White" and its English translations, is a "nous" that eventually transcends linguistic and ethnic borders. It is a "nous" bound in its opposition to economic, political and cultural imperialism. The rewritings and remediations of "Speak White" during the 2012 student strike both renew and reroute the originating text, highlighting a rupture with the past but also an effort to reclaim it.

### 887: Translating Memory, Staging Difference

Robert Lepage's 887 is a theatrical production about memory and forgetting that makes "Speak White" a central motif. Though the choice to use this poem came at the end of the creative process (Lepage and Fouquet, 2018, p. 53), it serves as a kind of resource and "continuity object" for the piece.<sup>6</sup> In the play, Lepage is invited to

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6. The "resource," a part of Anna and Lawrence Halprin's RSVP (resources, score, valuation, performance) methodology, is central to Lepage's creative process. For Lepage, "a resource is 'an individual provocation rich in meaning,' a trigger inspiring the actor-author to create his or her own material, revealing a personal side of themselves and sharing it with the group [...]. This playing with resources [rather than developing ideas] requires a childlike, spontaneous approach to a creative process" (Dundjerović, 2007, p. 76). The resource can serve as a diegetic connector, a "continuity object" employed, as in film, for the seamless unfolding of the story (Albacan, 2016, pp. 206-207).

recite the poem for a 2010 event commemorating the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *La Nuit de la poésie* of 1970. He finds himself unable to memorize the words of the poem by heart, but the exercise plunges him into the past, into this period of his life between 1960 and 1970, and its interwoven individual and collective memories. The number 887 represents the address on Murray Street in Quebec City where he grew up. The apartment block itself was the original resource for the piece (*ibid.*). Like the poem, it is a touchstone, a means for constructing a piece of theatre, but also for reconstructing his memory of personal experiences associated with the building itself, the family and neighbour relationships that unfold within it, and, more broadly, events of the period that would in retrospect become important historical moments: the visit of the Queen of England in 1959, Charles de Gaulle's "Vive le Québec libre" speech in 1967, the reading of the FLQ Manifesto on Radio-Canada in 1970, and so on.

Playing himself, solo on stage, Lepage incarnates two main roles—the "real" Robert Lepage, who addresses the audience directly as the narrator of anecdotes, stories and events, and the "fictive" Robert Lepage, who speaks and interacts with other characters (present only in the audience's imagination) in various acted scenes. In the first case, Lepage makes use of the "memory palace" technique, based on remembering events, people, and so on, by associating them with places and spaces that are easily recalled to mind. His verbal narration is accompanied by the various ways that he physically manipulates and transforms different scenographic elements, often models of varying scales, which allow him to illustrate the story, all the while implicating us, the spectators, in the memory-reconstruction process. When incarnating his more fictionally presented character, it is the Robert Lepage who is trying to memorize the poem for the event, which he manages eventually to do. Lepage recites "Speak White" in its entirety in the last scene of the piece in front of the fictional audience of the commemorative event, the audience that we now come to embody.

The direct-address scenes are not always clearly demarcated from the acted scenes. Nor is it really clear, in the end, which Robert Lepage seems more "real" and which, more "fictive." This is because the piece, through his performance and the various media engaged, continually shifts between transparency and opacity, between effects of illusory immediacy that draw us in and modes of hypermediacy that remind us of the mediation process and create

distance. This dynamic has been described as "hypermediality." As Jean-Marc Larrue explains:

The concept of theatrical hypermediality, which goes well beyond that of hypermediacy as propounded by Bolter and Grusin (2000), seems to be particularly appealing insofar as it not only does not raise the question of representation but also, bearing in mind the "window" metaphor evoked above [representation is not a window onto the world but "windowed" itself], the concept of hypermediality does not make it necessary to choose between looking at and looking through. Even better, it even accommodates both actions simultaneously, which perfectly suits contemporary theatrical practices! (2016, n. p.)

Indeed, Lepage in narrative mode, though addressing us directly, at times takes a stance that seems more like that of a history professor (or neuroscientist, when explaining how memory works in the brain), and, other times, he slips into poetry. These shifting registers create distancing effects, though we as spectators are still sharing the "same" space and still feel we are in the presence of the "real" Robert Lepage. During the "acted" scenes, we have the illusory experience of being a fly on the wall of Lepage's private life, looking not "at" but "through" to "another" space (*inside* his current apartment, not *outside* the scaled-down apartment block of his childhood memory). However, due to the moving sets (that Lepage moves himself), the imaginary characters that we have to invent, and the imaginary dialogues that we have to fill in, the illusion of immediacy continually breaks down. The permeable fourth wall becomes evident within the first few minutes of the performance, as Denys Arcand explains in his preface:

Dans 887, on a l'impression qu'il n'y a pas de décalage entre Robert et son personnage. Nous sommes avec lui, dans sa cuisine, avec ce pauvre Fred de Radio-Canada. Nous sommes avec lui aussi quand il entre sur scène, au début, pour nous demander, en toute simplicité, d'éteindre nos portables, et qu'insidieusement, par un glissement de virtuose, il enclenche la magie du spectacle. (2016, p. 7)

The resulting hypermediality creates a theatrical event that depends on "the performativity of all concerned (actors, artists and spectators) [and] the concomitant primacy of the experiential over the representational" (Larrue, 2016, n. p.). Lepage's various processes of memory reconstruction directly implicate us, as he sorts and sifts through personal and collective memories of the period, which are not hierarchized in the moment, and as he attempts to memorize the poem. As audience members and spectators, we thus take part in



this memory reconstruction, in this intermedial and intertemporal translation of “Speak White.” Performance, media and technology are seamlessly integrated to create what is ultimately an intimate experience, regardless of what type of reality—here/there, actual/pretend, past/present—we are supposed to be taking part in. As Lepage has remarked:

At the beginning of theatre, centuries ago, the actor spoke with the spectator in front of the fire. Fire is a natural element, but its use marks the beginning of technology and at the same time the beginning of theatre: afterward, all the various uses of fire became painting, cinema, video. Fire was replaced by technology, it supplies electricity, but people still come to the theatre to sit down around the fire. (cited in Monteverdi, 2003, p. 6)

### *La prise de parole en français*

From its opening in Toronto in 2015<sup>7</sup> and continuing into 2018, *887* has been touring the world to acclaim. As in Lepage’s previous work, translation is thus a recurring preoccupation, both on and off the stage. In Amsterdam, *887* was performed in English with Dutch surtitles; in Barcelona, it was performed in French with Catalan surtitles. It is sometimes performed exclusively in French (Montreal, Quebec City, La Rochelle, Le Havre) or exclusively in English (Denmark, Norway). The National Arts Centre in Ottawa has staged French-only and English-only productions. For English audiences, it is often performed in both French and English with English surtitles. The choice of performance language and use or not of surtitles undoubtedly depends on many factors, but the bilingual versions are notable. Clearly the use of surtitles is not, in these cases, a communicative necessity—the piece could just as easily, perhaps more easily—be performed entirely in English, without the introduction of surtitles (which are sometimes distracting). The choice to perform part in French, including, of course, the performance of “Speak White,” likely has more to do with the *presencing* of French on the stage.<sup>8</sup> As renowned Quebec theatre translator Linda Gaboriau has

7. *887*, World Premiere, St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts, Toronto, July 14, 2015.

8. Michael Cronin proposes the term “presencing” to refer to “forms of presence that do not involve actual spatial or corporeal displacement, but that bring someone or something into the field of attention of others at another point in space and/or time,” adding that “we can conceive of translation itself as a form of presencing, a making present in one language of what has been absent because it was initially expressed or formulated in another” (2016, pp. 104-105).

remarked, the greatest challenge in translating Québécois playwrights is their preoccupation with language, the constant awareness of the importance of speaking French:

In all Quebec theatre, there is an omnipresent, invisible character and that is the Québécois language. The presence of that spoken language, whatever level the playwright might have chosen, is a statement in itself. A statement of cultural survival, aspiration and communion. Quebec audiences are aware of this dimension and consciously involved in this experience of hearing Québécois on stage. This dimension of theatrical language is impossible to capture in translation. This is one of the reasons why I've chosen not to dilute the so-called wordiness of some Quebec texts, the love of holding forth, that Quebec playwrights often allow their characters to indulge in. It is an indirect way of communicating the importance that Québécois playwrights give to the "*prise de parole en français*" [...]. (1995, p. 86)

I attended two performances of *887*, one in Montreal, performed in French, the other in Toronto, performed in French and English with English surtitles.<sup>9</sup> In the Toronto version, the switching between French and English directly mirrors, with few exceptions, Lepage's shifting modes of address and presentation: when addressing the audience, he speaks English; when "in character," in dialogue with other characters, he speaks in a vernacular Québécois French. Though the English surtitles are well integrated into the set, they are indeed (I tried following them at times) a distraction. As an element that works in tandem with the piece's intermediality, this could have two contradictory effects for an audience member who understands English only (which I experienced vicariously by trying to follow the surtitles). On the one hand, it makes the "acted" scenes, the scenes during which we are "looking through" to a Robert Lepage who no longer shares our ontological space, more distant, which the presence of the French language, its otherness, amplifies. The non-French speaker thus has access to the illusion, but is simultaneously blocked, hindered in understanding the conversations taking place. One wonders, for example, how English speakers fill in the imaginary lines of dialogue of the imaginary character "Fred de Radio-Canada." This nonetheless recreates an authentic experience of hearing a language that is not understood and trying to understand what is hap-

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9. *887*, Théâtre du nouveau monde, Montreal, April 2016; *887*, Bluma Appel Theatre, Toronto, April 2017.

pening all the same. On the other hand, the presence of the surtitles distracts from being immersed in the fiction and brings us back to or keeps us on the surface, where we are constantly aware of the mediation. The bilingual performance, the code-switching, thus provides a very effective translation of “Speak White” in recreating the poem’s disorienting diglossia. It taps into a kind of official bilingual, bicultural memory by suggesting a “need” for translation and difference in perspectives: Toronto audiences, generally, are not likely to share with Montreal audiences the same collective memory of the October Crisis, for example. The presence of both languages on stage is thus a way to “remember French” (“I remember that I am different, I remember my language”) (Lepage, cited in Dundjerović, 2003, p. 18) and also re-imagine (translate) the memory sites of the Quiet Revolution as they might be remembered in English Canada—as something taking place in an “other” language and somewhere else. As Jane Koustas has observed, the “two solitudes,” though perhaps a tired cliché, is still very much a part of the Canadian cultural imagination (2016, pp. 5-6).

## Conclusion

As Erll and Rigney argue, it is through medial processes that meanings and memories enter and circulate within the public arena and “become collective” (2012, p. 2; italics in the original). Media of all sorts—spoken language, books, photos, films, and so on—shape experience and memory, both as instruments for sense-making (mediating between the individual and the world) and as agents of networking (mediating between individuals and groups) (*ibid.*, p. 1). Bolter and Grusin’s concept of “remediation” adds a third factor—“the mediation of mediation” (1999, p. 55). Indeed, *lieux de mémoire* trigger individual memories that depend on prior knowledge of memory sites through exposure to their previous mediations. (Erll, 2012, pp. 110-111). But just as sites of memory do not remember by themselves (Rothberg, 2010, p. 8), ideas, practices and memory do not circulate by themselves. An idea or practice “requires a force to fetch it, seize upon it for its own motives, move it, and often transform it” (Latour, cited in Gal, 2015, p. 231). This entails going beyond asking “what is the meaning of a phenomenon—the symbol, the text, the action, the *other*—to asking what these things mean *to me*” (Maitland, 2017, p. 138; italics in the original). It entails, in other words, translation. As Sarah Maitland observes:

Difference is everywhere and we must reach outwards to engage with it, in an attempt to encapsulate that which we do not know within terms that we *do*. This outward-facing gesture of incorporation transforms the objects of translation irrevocably. But it also has the effect of causing us to question who we are and what it means to understand along the way [...]. (2017, pp. 27-28)

The recreations of "Speak White" discussed in this paper reveal how a *lieu de mémoire* can be simultaneously anchored or re-anchored in the past while also being renewed or rerouted through translation in the present—across languages, cultures, media and time. Cultural memory emerges at the intersection of subjective experience and objectively shared external forms, *lieux de mémoire* that are material, functional and symbolic, but that are constituted through the very fact of their recreation, reiteration, and transformation. These can be described as "re-" and "trans"-membering processes that are inherently *translational*, based on a dynamic of continuity through transformation.

In revisiting "Speak White" as a *lieu de mémoire*, as a generative site of new interpretations, the English translations of "Speak White," Marco Micone's "Speak What," the students' "Speak Red" and "Speak rich," and Robert Lepage's *887*, elicit a reflection on the relation between the past and the present, on memory and forgetting, and, especially in Lepage's case, on the refusal to forget to not be deprived of life, to not be deprived of meaning. In *887*, Lepage confronts what is lost in memory and translation in order to identify what can be found. Like Borges' character Pierre Menard,<sup>10</sup> Lepage is finally able to recite Lalonde's poem by creating it anew,

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10. In setting out to rewrite Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Pierre Menard's goal "was never a mechanical transcription of the original; he had no intention of *copying* it. His admirable ambition was to produce a number of pages which coincided—word for word and line for line—with those of Miguel de Cervantes" (Borges, 1998 [1939], p. 91; italics in the original). To do so, he decided that rather than learning Spanish, returning to Catholicism, fighting against Moors and Turks, forgetting the history of Europe from 1602 to 1918—becoming Cervantes—it would be far more challenging and interesting to continue being Pierre Menard and come to the Quixote "*through the experiences of Pierre Menard*" (*ibid.*; italics in the original). The story's narrator concludes that while the Cervantes text and the Menard text are verbally identical, "the second is almost infinitely richer" (*ibid.*, p. 94). As George Steiner has commented, "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote" is arguably "the most acute, most concentrated commentary anyone has offered on the business of translation" (1998 [1975], p. 73).

“word for word and line for line” (Borges, 1998 [1939], p. 91). And, like Menard, he does not achieve this by projecting himself into the past and becoming the author. Instead, he translates it across time, through the lens of his own personal experience, so he can re-enact it as Robert Lepage, a man “composing” with his past to become a subject rather than an object of history.

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