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## New Maps of Hell: Postcolonial Utopia and Esther Rochon's *Les Chroniques infernales*<sup>1</sup>



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Kingsley Amis titled his well-known study of the dystopian bent in post-WWII science fiction, *New Maps of Hell* (1960). This expression applies quite literally to Québécois writer Esther Rochon's (b. 1948) multi-volume novel, *Les Chroniques infernales* [The Hell Chronicles] (1995-2002), which envisions a new geography for hell, imagining it as a series of worlds under contract to mete out punishment in manners appropriate to the crimes being expiated there. While its first volume, *Lame* [Blade/The Soul] (1995), begins with an appropriately dystopian vision of the hells, the subsequent books describe their protagonists' efforts first to transform one of the hells into a utopian space, then to aid the indigenous peoples of another hell to develop a more reciprocal relationship with their condemned immigrant souls. *Les Chroniques infernales* concludes in its final volume, *Sorbier* [Mountain Ash] (2000) with the protagonists' visit to paradise, revealing the astonishingly dystopian aspects of heaven.

This essay explicates Rochon's attempt to reverse heaven and hell, demonstrating how it represents a postcolonial utopia as Ralph Pordzik has defined it in *The Quest for Postcolonial Utopia: A Comparative Introduction to the Utopian Novel in the New English Literatures* (2001). I initially examine how the series' visionary protagonist, Rel, transforms the fictional hells into a postcolonial utopia. Then I describe how a particular hell, the land of Sargade, embodies the notion that the true utopia is a work in progress, and not a finished product. And, finally, I reveal how the novel critiques Western notions of heaven in its depiction of the paradise Anid and refuses closure through a utopian vision of apocalypse in its final volume. First, though, I shall briefly

situate Rochon's work within the context of utopian writing from French-Canada/Québec, and *Les Chroniques infernales* in the author's oeuvre.

Scholars like Guy Bouchard (1985; 1988; 1993; 1994; 1995), Jean-Marc Gouanvic (1988; 1985), Sharon Taylor (2002), Jean-Louis Trudel (1995; 2000), and Nicholas Serruys (2008; 2010) have demonstrated the significance of utopia and dystopia in proto-science fictional and contemporary SF texts from French Canada and Québec. Because of the province's unique history of double colonization and the ambivalent position of its historical majority French-speakers as both colonizer and colonized, envisioning a better state of affairs and warning about how bad affairs could get if not changed has played a central role in the Québec imaginary since the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Coinciding exactly with a major francophone drive for self-determination and Québec's subsequent bitter conflicts with federal and other provincial governments to obtain constitutional recognition as a distinct society, the contemporary francophone science-fiction movement in Québec (SFQ) which developed in the 1970s and 1980s has demonstrated a continued engagement with the discourse of utopia/dystopia.

A founding member of SFQ "en tant que mouvement littéraire, en tant que projet collectif, en tant que milieu culturel structuré [as a literary movement, as a collective project, as a structured cultural milieu]"<sup>2</sup> in the words of fellow founder Daniel Sernine (1988: 42), Esther Rochon is also one of its most prolific and most respected writers, peer only to Élisabeth Vonarburg. She has won Québec's Grand Prix de la science-fiction et du fantastique four times, more often than any other writer. At least two doctoral dissertations (Sauble-Otto, 2001; and Taylor, 2002) and an excellent article by Miléna Santoro (1997), examine precisely the utopian/dystopian aspects of Rochon's early work. Because only one of her novels, *The Shell* (1990; trans. of *Coquillage*, 1985), has been translated, however, she remains almost completely unknown in the dominant Anglo-American SF and utopian studies circles. Her first trilogy of novels, which I discuss in detail elsewhere (Ransom, 2009: 66-81;138-48; 195-97), engages in the description of a utopian society, the altruistic land of Catadial, which Rochon explicitly connects to the Buddhist belief in the utopian land of Shambhala.<sup>3</sup> First published in 1985, *L'Espace du diamant* [The Space of the Diamond], nonetheless asserts one of the most significant criticisms of literary utopias: that if they have become perfect and do not change, then they must become stagnant and thereby lose that perfection, a trait often (albeit incorrectly) seen as

definitive of utopia itself.<sup>4</sup> Like the feminist open-ended utopias of Ursula K. Le Guin and Doris Lessing examined by Naomi Jacobs, Rochon's utopian writings "overcome narrative stasis through ambiguity, contradiction, fragmentation, and hetero/*tropia*, which counter the centripetal forces of reason, design and coherence" (Jacobs, 1989: 110-111).

Rochon's utopian discourse reflects the evolution in theories of the literary utopia developed after the publication of Ursula K. Le Guin's—a writer whose work has many affinities with that of Rochon—ambiguous utopia, *The Dispossessed* (1974). Rochon's first trilogy, collectively known as the *Cycle de Vrénalik*, named after the Vrénalik Archipelago, its central fictional geographic location, exhibits the traits of the open-ended utopia outlined by Bülent Somay (1984) and Darko Suvin (1974; 1982) and/or the critical utopia outlined by Tom Moylan (1986; 2000) (Ransom, 2009: 138-48; Taylor, 2002). Her utopian discourse evolves even further in the more recent series, *Les Chroniques infernales*, a mature work published in a Québec that has come to grips with the crushing failure of two Referenda for Sovereignty and which is now often referred to as "post-national" but which, at the same time, has realized most of the cultural goals set for itself in the 1960s as a distinct French-language society. As we shall see in the analysis that follows, Rochon's "new maps of hell" overturn the seemingly natural association of hell as dystopia established by Dennis Rohatyn (1989), thus envisioning a world-turned-upside-down in which hell becomes a utopian paradise and heaven a dystopian hell.

### **Hell as Utopia, Rel's project of reform for the world of the *Anciens enfers***

The first volume of Rochon's *Les Chroniques infernales* introduces its eponymous central female protagonist, *Lame*,<sup>5</sup> who has been condemned to the dystopian world of the hells ruled by Har. His son Rel first appears as an ineffective, yet fascinating hermaphrodite with whom Lame falls in love. In the second volume, *Aboli* [Abolished] (1996), aided by a newcomer named Fax (whose identity is later revealed as that of Taïm Sutherland, the hero of Rochon's Vrénalik Cycle), they undertake together the complete renovation of one of the hells, which they now refer to as, *les anciens enfers*, the former hells. Such was, of course, this world's devastation as a hell that its renewal resembles a project of terraforming and, as they succeed, Rel's reforms expand to the other worlds that constitute the new hells. Before I undertake a more detailed examination of how Rel turns hell into a utopian

space, let us recall the traits of the classic utopia<sup>6</sup> typified for many by More's original text: it exists in a remote, clearly circumscribed geographical space, access to which may be restricted; it describes the socio-political and cultural traits of a society coded as somehow better than that of the reader (some would say even perfect); and, its citizens live harmoniously and communally, with all their physical needs met. This utopian society typically recalls a visionary leader who, most often, founded it by fiat in a distant past.

### **Rel as Visionary Leader**

Rel, explicitly qualified as a "un visionnaire [a visionary]" (S 140; S 198, 199-200), one of "ces réformateurs utopistes [these utopian reformers]" (So 266), clearly fits the bill as a founder of utopias. He represents the "utopian" in its colloquial sense of hopelessly idealistic, as he admits: "[l]ibérer les enfers est une tâche impossible; c'est pourtant la seule qui ait un sens [liberating the hells is an impossible task; but it's the only one that makes sense]" (S 136). Putting an end to millennia of terror, Rel's visionary leadership recalls the classic literary utopia's trope of the founding father. Unlike King Utopos, or even B. F. Skinner's Frazier, the founder of *Walden Two*, both of whom created their utopias and then disappeared in a sense, Rel's vision continues to be open-ended, a position that may constantly "évoluer [evolve]" (O 54). By the end of the first part of *Aboli*, Rel can assert that "[l]es anciens enfers forment un territoire avec son autonomie, ses coutumes, sa joie de vivre [the former hells formed a territory with their own autonomy, customs and lust for life]" (A 76). The better society has been created as in a classic eu-topia; however, progress continues as new challenges must be addressed.

Rochon's depiction of Rel's vision as one that evolves avoids another narrative pitfall of the classic utopia identified by Gary Saul Morson (1981: 83) and Chris Ferns (1999: 4; 13-14): the idea that the utopian society appears in the text as fully formed, created by fiat by a utopian leader at some point in time prior to the beginning of the text's narrative. Rochon breaks with the classic utopia precisely because her hell chronicles recount *the very process of becoming* a utopia and she depicts that process as ongoing and unending, a trait identified with the contemporary, open-ended utopia by Darko Suvin (1982: 83-84) and subsequently with the postcolonial utopia by Ralph Pordzik (2001: 16-20). And while the redevelopment of the former hells reflects many aspects of the classic utopia, it is clear that this is a

society in progress rather than a static site of perfection. Rel's very assertion that from a hellish place of violence and suffering, "[o]n est redevenu un monde normal [we have become a normal world]" (A 22), indicates through its very banality that the former hells are not to be taken for a utopia. Rel's own vision for his land, renounces both a museum-like preservation of the past and a static perfection for the future. While his allies from other worlds—without whose agreement to send their damned elsewhere he could never have achieved his program of radical change:

Auraient bien aimé faire des anciens enfers une sorte de lieu exemplaire, de paradis souterrain à saveur de musée du "plus jamais" [...] [i]l ne tenait pas à y attirer des touristes ou les écoliers des visites guidées. Il voulait assurer une présence au plus profond du monde, mais une présence qui s'affirmerait d'elle-même.

[would really have liked to make the former hells a sort of exemplary site, an underground paradise with the "never again" feeling of a museum (...) he did not want to attract tourists or school children on guided tours. He wanted to ensure a presence of the world's most profound depths, but a presence which would affirm itself on its own.] (A 4-5)

Rel's position invokes both a general postmodern, postcolonial phenomenon and a situation specific to Québec. He does *not* want his reformed hells to become a monument or museum to be toured as a reminder of past horrors in the hope that these will not happen again, in the vein of the Holocaust memorials, the Rwandan memorials of the genocide, or the museum at Hiroshima, because he realizes the inevitable trivialization that ultimately will occur with the touristification of such sites. He also eschews, as did many Québécois, a sort of "folklorisation" of his homeland, in which quaint elements of the past are preserved and displayed superficially. His land should be a living land, no longer a land of the dead.

The meliorative aspect of Rel's program appears clearly in his overall desire to eliminate the principal of suffering as an end in itself. Still, Rel must solve the problem of what to do with all of those condemned because of criminal and neglectful actions during their lives, who must make some sort of retribution. Rel thus sends those in need of redemption to locations which have evolved into higher forms of being-in-the world than that of the power relation. In Rel's new hells progress is ongoing; the various societies involved must constantly evaluate and reform their systems, a process consistent with Peter Fitting's description of the new feminist utopias—those labeled as open-ended by Suvin and others—as "societies in process, straining to come into being and open to change" (1985: 157). Progress is assessed at the individual level as well, since Rochon's Buddhist philosophy enters the fiction, with the concept of the karma acquired in this life influencing the location of one's

rebirth in the next (Powers, 2007: 76; 114; 348).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in *Les Chroniques infernales* assignment of place in the next life is based on whether or not progress has been made in the past: “Le destin nous ramène souvent aux circonstances de nos échecs. Pour qu’on puisse transcender l’erreur [Destiny often brings us back to the circumstances of our failures. So that we can transcend the error]” (So 99).

*Les Anciens enfers as insular society*

Superficially, once they have undergone Rel’s program of moving the hells elsewhere, the *anciens enfers* conform to the classic utopian model. Their geographical space, referred to as “un monde clos [a closed world]” (O 4), appears insular, bounded by a sea and separated from the external worlds above by a cement dome. Access is clearly limited; one can arrive only by dying or by operating secret, technologically sophisticated “porte[s] inter-mondes [inter-world portals]” (A 125). A network of tunnels, one of which leads up to Montréal, provides a third avenue of egress. Indeed, Rel’s kingdom has become so insular that a new arrival shocks Lame. This tall, red-bearded man, given the name Fax because his appearance resembles that of a message sent on the machine of that name, comes from afar with vague recollections of a previous life. Like Raphael Hythloday, Julian West or even William Weston (the protagonists of More’s *Utopia*, Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* and Callenbach’s *Ecotopia*), he is the outsider through whose eyes the reader will discover the utopian society.

For Fax, the former hells represent, literally, paradise. He describes being drawn after death toward the Edenic green emanating from its direction, “Je me suis réveillé, vous savez, et j’ai aperçu du vert, bien éclairé, loin. Que c’est beau ce vert-là! [I woke up, you know, and I saw green, well lit, far away. That green is so beautiful!]” (A 16). It also becomes immediately clear that, rather than a criminal sent here in error (“Je serais un damné, expédié par erreur à l’ancienne adresse des enfers? [Am I a damned soul who has been sent by mistake to the hells’ former address?]” [A 13]), this man is one of the just, “le juste” (A11; So 101), sent to the land still only known as “les anciens enfers,” but now transformed into a utopian paradise: “puisqu’il était au paradis [because he was in heaven]” (A 61).

This insularity gradually unravels, however, as the *anciens enfers* increasingly develop into a viable society. While the former hells represent an enclosed, isolated space, they also remain connected to the outside world, and their boundaries, as well

as their relationship to the surrounding worlds, remain vague and fluid. First, the very plurality of the hells<sup>8</sup> at once undoes the Western, Christian notion of a single Hell, while at the same time recalling Dante's many-leveled Hell in *The Inferno*. Rochon's slippery terminology further undermines a precise geography for the fictional universe of the *Chroniques infernales*. On the one hand, the term "underworld" appears consistently applied to the former hells and its inhabitants, "ceux d'en dessous [the people from below]" (A 8), and its mores are referred to as "[l]es coutumes d'en dessous [the customs down below]" (A 53). The shared consensus world of the reader appears as being above, but also exterior to the former hells; in particular, Montréal figures explicitly in the text, especially in the last volume, *Sorbier*. These "mondes extérieurs [external worlds]" (A 82; O 7), however, may shift in shape, or be "filtered" by the mysterious *juges du destin* [judges of destiny] and are then referred to as the "mondes saugrenus [weird worlds]" (A 63). Furthermore, in the later volumes of the *Chroniques infernales*, the fictional universe of Rochon's Vrénalik cycle also figures among the "real" worlds above, with an ontological status analogous to that of Lame's former home, Montréal.

This strategy of blurring the boundaries between the real and the fictional appears in other postcolonial utopias, according to Ralph Pordzik, in which "[t]raditional constructions of reality are thus destabilized, leaving the reader with a suggestive and beckoning array of alternative interpretations which elude any ultimate certainty" (32). The location and relationship to "reality" of the various worlds, which have now become the new hells and which appear as neighbors to the former hells, remain elusive. This includes the "land of Sargade"—discussed in more detail later—which serves as the "cold hells" after Rel's reconstruction of the *anciens enfers*, and which seems neither to be quite as exterior, outside, or "real" as Montréal and Vrénalik. Other "worlds"—Rochon chooses this term rather than the more overtly science-fictional term "planets"—appearing in the saga include the "limbes de réhabilitation," a limbo of rehabilitation located across the sea from the former hells; Anid, a "paradis" where Rel spent his previous life; as well as a number of other paradises described in the final volume, *Sorbier*.

The indeterminate geography of Rochon's hells reflects the convention of the classic utopia which, to sustain the illusion of verisimilitude while it invented a fictional site, remained vague as to the hidden paradise's exact location on the map. At the same time, this geographic ambiguity undermines the closed, insular quality of

the classic utopia, in which the visitor's arrival appears as a completely unique and isolated event. In the reformed hells, individuals eventually do come and go on a regular basis, and, indeed, the entire third volume, *Ouverture* [Opening/Overture] (1997) explores the idea of finding an opening in order to get out, but also back in again. On another level, this openness (which contrasts perhaps with the world of Vrénalik, for which a drawn map was published) necessarily allows Rel's reforms to bleed out and affect other worlds beyond his own realm of the *anciens enfers*.

By undoing the initial insular quality of the reformed hells through the narration of their opening up and out onto other worlds, Rochon implicitly responds to another frequent criticism of the classic utopia as a closed, ostensibly "perfect" society: that life in utopia would be boring. Since perfection seems necessarily to imply no change or productive, progressive activity, not only would the literary utopia be boring for its characters, it risks being boring for its readers since without change or conflict, it would lack any narrative momentum, as critics like Gary Saul Morson assert (1981: 83). Thus, theorists like Somay (1984), Suvin (1982) and Moylan (1986; 2000) see the literary development of the open-ended utopia as a response to this criticism. What is at stake with this open-endedness is, of course, the issue of closure. In her discussion of feminist theory as utopian thinking, Lucy Sargisson asserts that contemporary feminist utopias precisely eschew both closure and perfection as representing an exclusionary form of thinking, which ultimately "privileges sameness and oneness and favours self over other" (65). For Sargisson:

The conceptualization of a perfect utopia represents a confinement or enclosure. Moreover, this conceptualization, thus understood, represents an apparently inescapable move of exclusion. Once a definition is established, that which lies outside of its boundaries can be read as "not, not included, not that thing defined." (1996: 89)

Although Rochon does not explicitly identify herself as a feminist, as Sharon Taylor observes (2002: 11), the writer adopts the feminist utopia's rejection of perfection and closure as exclusionary strategies that deny the development of difference. Instead, Rochon depicts an imperfect society in process, advocating for the acceptance of difference, traits which Pordzik identifies with the postcolonial utopia (2001: 16, 47).

The undesirable nature of a perfect, static, unchanging utopia appears clearly in the terms of Fax's tenure in the former hells: as one of the just, rewarded with paradise, he has a right to "une vie intéressante [an interesting life]" (A 31). Indeed, Rochon's key characters confirm the commonplace that the classic utopia is



“ennuyeux [boring]” (O 120), as Lame admits some might find her home in the *anciens enfers*, which has become a utopian land of peaceful corngrowers! Even Rel, its founder, seeks outside stimulus as his favorite activity is to “parler avec ailleurs [talk to elsewhere]” in his impressive communications room (O 121). While Lame finds the former hells beautiful and remains content there, her husband is not. Suffering from a form of burnout, Rel needs rehabilitation therapy to restore energies drained by all the demands made upon him not only in his own realm, but also by the new hells seeking his advice. Through *Ouverture*, as its title suggests, the goal becomes to find an opening, a means of leaving this hell-utopia of his own construction. Reminiscent of the pre-Quiet Revolution<sup>9</sup> artistic movement, Refus Global which asserted the need for Québec to open up to the outside world, the admission appears clearly that an isolated utopia cannot be fulfilling to all and that contact with the outside world is necessary for renewal and to jumpstart inspiration.

#### *Les Enfers as Political Utopia*

As observed elsewhere of the *Cycle de Vrénalik* (Ransom, 2009: 143-45), Rochon appropriates elements of the classic utopia’s description not only of a better or ideal society, but also that of a better-run *state*, an element important to those like Ligeia Gallagher (1964: n.p.) or Glenn Negley and J. Max Patrick (1952: 253) who would see Plato’s *Republic* as one of the first utopian texts. Again and again, the language of politics, policies, and the prerogatives of statecraft pepper the six volumes of the *Chroniques infernales*. Not only do the conclusion of *Lame* and the first section of *Aboli* describe Rel’s seizure of power as a coup d’état and the establishment of a new nation, they do so in dialogue with specific elements of Québec’s political history. Indeed, the “ex-infernaux” are referred to as both a “peuple [people]” and a “nation” (A 3; 4), key terms in arguments for Québec’s sovereignty, particularly as Jacques Brossard—himself the author of a utopian-dystopian multi-volume novel, *L’Oiseau de feu* (1989-1997)—articulates these in relation to the United Nations’ definitions of rightful demands for self-determination in his treatise *L’Accession à la souveraineté et le cas du Québec* (1976). Sarhat Taxiél, a former *sbire* under Har, asserts that even during that autocratic régime, “[l]’enfer était notre patrie [hell was our fatherland]” (S 32). Political imperatives repeatedly impact the lives of individuals: “[d]es considérations diplomatiques” prevented Har from allowing his wife and son (Rel) to return to a happier life in the land of the Sargades (S 38); and, after his reforms, Rel

cannot personally go to the enfers froids “[p]our des raisons politiques [for political reasons]” (O 5).

As the developing nation of the former hells debates the desirability of opening up to the outside worlds in the series’ third volume, *Ouvertures*, various devil’s advocates, so to speak, raise politically-based objections. In concession, Rel offers to take precautions to protect “[l]es gens d’ici” (O 228)—a Québécois-coded expression for “the people from here”—from both the standpoint of “la défense nationale [national defense]” (O 227) and that of public health (“Et puis, ils ont des microbes [And, well, they have germs]” [O 227]). As their leader, however, he remains a policy-maker, but he does so in a manner distinct from that of his father. For example, when he implements a policy (“politique”) to allow the repatriation of the sea-gull like giant birds of the cutting hells to their original homeland of Vrénalik (Or 7), he makes clear that the use of power should occur only “dans un climat de respect mutuel [in a climate of mutual respect]” (Or 16). Some express concern that Rel will now develop his own imperialist project: “aller à la conquête du monde des vivants [to conquer the world of the living]” (S104). He expresses the impossibility of this action: “Mon pouvoir est réel [...]. Par contre, il m’est impossible de pénétrer dans de nouveaux territoires [My power is real (...). On the other hand, it is impossible for me to penetrate into new territories]” (S137). Indeed, his very name and title indicate that while he is king, he is an open-minded one: “Rel [...] c’était un acronyme [...]. Roi à l’esprit libre! [Rel... was an acronym... King with an open/free mind!]” (S 39). Rel’s open mind clearly correlates with the notion of the hells as an open-ended utopia.

#### *Les Anciens Enfers as Better Society*

Another issue of concern that critics such as Fredric Jameson raise when considering the classic utopia is the question of upon what criteria does one base a utopian society (2005: 142-45)? That is, should the better society guarantee justice, freedom, provision for physical needs, happiness? Is the utopian society a just society, a free society, a happy society? In a bizarre manner, hell, as Rochon envisions it in the *Chroniques infernales* represents a utopia, if justice—rather than happiness—is taken as the sole criterion for betterment. For even in the old régime under Har, hell is the only place, it appears, “où règne la justice [where justice reigns]” (A 129). The executioner is perhaps the only happy person in the *enfes froids*, because of his faith in the *juges du destin* (A 205) and his knowledge that he, at least, carries out justice

(A 130). Clearly, the question is much more complex, and Rel articulates his worldview as a:

vision du monde dont je serais l'un des artisans. Un monde juste, sans cruauté et sans superflu; un monde brillant comme un lame; un monde pur, dont les habitants, peu importe leur forme ou leur occupation, posséderaient la droiture; un monde profond enfin, où l'esprit libre s'élancerait dans n'importe quelle direction, tandis que la parole et le corps pourraient suivre sans entraves. Il s'agit du monde où nous sommes vivants, aujourd'hui. [vision of the world of which I would be one of the artisans. A just world, without cruelty or the superfluous; a world as brilliant as a blade, a pure world where its inhabitants, whatever their form or occupation, would possess **righteousness**; finally, a profound world where the free spirit could expand in any direction, while speech and the body could follow without hindrance. I'm talking about the world where we are alive, today.] (S 198)

Justice, rectitude, freedom, all of these inform Rel's vision.

It is important to note here, though, that simply making a better society, or rather improving upon an existing society through reform measures, however, is not viewed as sufficient to the utopian by Ernst Bloch and Karl Mannheim who assert that utopian thought must be revolutionary (Levitas, 1990: 194). Although he frames his vision through a discourse of reform, “engagé dans l'acte de tout transformer [engaged in the act of total transformation]” (S 196), Rel effectuates nothing less than a revolutionary action which forces a paradigm shift on the hells and the worlds around them. In spite of his assertion that “[i]l faut travailler avec la situation telle qu'elle est [one must work with the situation as it is]” (O 61), and the qualification of “[s]a révolution [his revolution]” as “l'absence de révolte [the absence of revolt]” (So 109), Rel's accession to power, explicitly qualified as treason to his father, Har (A 3), represents a coup d'état. Although the coup is legitimated through the appropriate ceremonies, his father, mother and their followers, all burn on a great wheel of fire, as does their capital city: “Arxann entière flambe. Fin d'une époque [All of Arxann is in flames. The end of an era]” (A xiii). Rel ends a régime in which his father “faisait régner la terreur [made terror reign]” with “l'abolition immédiate des enfers sur le territoire [the immediate abolition of the hells on this territory]” an act he qualifies as “[l]e meilleur coup de toute ma vie [the best thing I've done in my whole life]” (O 139). The last expression carries a double entendre in French; a commonplace best rendered in English with the neutral term “thing,” in the original, the term *coup* refers literally to a “blow,” the same word found in *coup d'état*. Rel thus further underscores the significance of his revolutionary act.

## Utopia as a Work in Progress: The Case of the Land of Sargade as the “Cold Hells”

The society typically described in the classic utopia appears as a communal one, a figure that Rochon also employs in her depiction of reforms occurring in the land of the Sargades, who had agreed to accept some of the damned displaced by Rel’s reforms in the *anciens enfers*. However, after the arrival of the damned—depicted as immigrants, with the Sargades described as *autochtones* [autochthonous peoples/natives]—the locals developed a completely segregated lifestyle, avoiding these newcomers at all cost. So serious appears this division, a clear form of apartheid, that at the end of *Aboli*, the judges of destiny issue an ultimatum to the Sargades that “autochtones et damnés devront se connaître et coopérer, c’est tout [the damned and the autochthonous peoples will have to meet and cooperate, that’s it]” (A 202). So great is the utopian impulse in Rochon’s imaginary universe that even when transformed into the cold hells, the utopian hopes that “un autre monde était toujours possible [another world was always possible]” (O 10), and that “c’était un enfer encore améliorable [it was a hell that could still be improved]” (A 155), prevail in the land of Sargade. Indeed, under the aegis of Rel’s daughter, Aube, these two groups evolve a relationship so close and communal that these *enfers froids* may have become an ambiguous utopia, in the way that Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516), as satire, is ambiguous (Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., 2008: 126; Ferns, 1999: 3; Gallagher, 1964: n.p.).

As postcolonial utopia, *Aboli*’s depiction of the new cold hells in the *pays de Sargade* as less successful than other worlds’ implementation of Rel’s reforms can be read universally as allegory for the colonial-postcolonial situation. It also functions specifically as national allegory, if one reads the Sargades—who have historically remained in their homeland, tending to eschew either immigration or emigration/exile (Or 12)—as a figure for contemporary Québec. On one level, the damned first resemble the urban homeless endemic to Montréal, in spite of its harsh winter, conditions mirrored in Sargade’s newly arctic climate. On another, the colonial allegory depicts the arrival of the damned as similar to that of underprivileged, Third-World immigrants, with the Sargades viewing their own society as a First-World model: “[v]isiblement, ces gens-là se prenaient pour des flambeaux de civilisation [those people visibly took themselves for the torchbearers of civilization]” (A 105). As in “real” world host nations, an endemic, anti-immigrant prejudice develops in the

period prior to Rel's reforms; this deeply ingrained anti-hell form of racism leads to fears on the part of the autochthonous Sargades that their agreement to accept the damned will negatively impact the nation's level of civilization. Even a relatively liberal speaker fears that if his fellow Sargades embrace the presence of the hells on their territory, rather than try to repress and ignore it, "on sera moins civilisés [we will be less civilized]" (A 166). Indeed, before the interventions of Lame and later Aube, the *pays de Sargade* as new *enfes froids* resembles nothing less than an apartheid society, so deep is the division between the native Sargades, the immigrant damned, and the *sbires* [henchmen] and robots who have arrived from the former hells to take care of the latter (A 132).

Rochon's postcolonial discourse does not treat this issue, though, in a simplistic manner. Reflective of the polyvalence of the postcolonial allegory, which, in the words of Marie Vautier "disallows an us/them critique" (1998: 214), it reverses the poles of South African apartheid (or even the segregation of the US pre-integration South). Rather than an immigrant minority which separates itself from a ghettoized indigenous people, as the indigenous minority, the Sargades seek to isolate themselves from the immigrant majority of the damned, as the exterior of their modern apartment buildings become "colonisées par des glaces vivantes et douloureuses [colonized by living, suffering ice cubes]" (A 168). The climate of the formerly temperate land of Sargade transformed into the new *cold* hells clearly likens it to the northern climates of Québec, for which cold, snow, and ice have become geo-cultural signifiers of its own specificity. *Aboli* describes the Sargades as "les autochtones froids [the cold natives]" (A 79), exhibiting an affective coldness which actually likens them to the freezing damned whom they shelter in exchange for certain material benefits, but whom they refuse to accept and integrate into their society. While their ancestors had agreed to the terms of Rel's contract, contemporary Sargades come to see their presence as an "outrage" (A 103), doing their best to ignore completely the existence of the damned, literally shutting themselves up inside their buildings.

This isolation represents a coping mechanism. With the coming of the hells, the Sargades underwent a major system change which occurred so rapidly that they have not had time to adapt to it. In spite of the reality of dramatic difference all around them—the loss of their clear blue sky, constant cold and hordes of damned souls clustered on every exterior surface (A 112-114) —they have remained the same in

fundamental ways. Not only is the Sargade homeland now “un monde muré contre l’extérieur [a world walled off from the exterior]” (A 105), this insular society has also become alienated from, dispossessed of its own territory. When Lame invites Séril Daha to travel outside the compound of buildings, he reveals that he doesn’t have a good map and doesn’t really know it; paradoxically, “cela demeurait étranger aux autochtones [it remained foreign to the natives]” (A 119-120). To obtain a decent map, they have to consult the guest worker *sbires* [henchmen/ executioners], functionaries charged with meting out the punishment of the damned. When the Sargades sought refuge from the newcomers inside its buildings, they effectively ceded the world outside to them. While on the one hand, Rochon’s ambiguous mapping of the fictional universe of the hells reflects what Graham Huggan identifies as “a [postcolonial] resistance to the notion of cartographic enclosure and to the imposed cultural limits that notion implies,” Rochon’s precise use of the map trope—in particular, its loss and recuperation—participates in what Huggan identifies in other Canadian and Australian writers as “a desire [...] not merely to decentralize, but also to reterritorialize, their increasingly multiform cultures” (1995: 408).

This situation in the land of the Sargades recalls Québec’s ambiguous status as a non-nation or as a self-proclaimed nation that is not a state, as well as of the Franco-Québécois as both colonizer (of New France) and colonized (by the English after the Conquest of 1760). Séril Daha, a liberal Sargade who eventually becomes a revolutionary advocate for the damned, asserts that as a limbo—its status prior to the installation of the *enfes froids*—it was not a “real” world (A 147), implying that now it is even worse with the assertion that “[d]ehors, c’est l’enfer [outside, it’s hell]” (A 118). With the relativism typical of the postcolonial subject, Lame sees it as “vrai [true]” (A 165), expressing her sense of belonging as a hellion: “Je viens de l’enfer. Dehors, c’est mon pays [I come from hell. Outside, it’s my land]” (A 118). If we recall her origins in life as a Montréaler and the Québec specific coding of the phrase “mon pays,” the title of a very popular song by post-Quiet Revolution era singer-song writer Gilles Vigneault which foregrounds the province’s wintry climate, the allegorical equation of the Sargades to Franco-Quebeckers appears clearly. Like the *Québécois de souche* [old stock Québécois], as ethnic French-Canadians are often referred to, the Sargades fear losing their national heritage (A 167), receive television programming in translation (A 112), and use snowmobiles to get around outside the bounds of the city’s public transportation system (A 120, 122).

Rel sends his daughter Aube, aided by another character, Tchi, to mediate the deteriorating situation between the Sargades and the frozen damned. They argue that times have changed and so, too, must the Sargades. Aube asserts that “ces autochtones si brilliants [...] ils utilisaient tous nos cadeaux pour s’isoler davantage et tisser des liens factices avec des mondes extérieurs qui n’ont rien à fiche de savoir qui ils sont [these brilliant natives (...) used all of our gifts to further isolate themselves and to create artificial connections to the worlds outside who don’t give a damn about who they are]” (A 201). She thus lays bare their pretensions of making connections to the exterior worlds, echoing a nationalist Québec’s efforts at creating direct alliances with France and elsewhere, establishing a foreign policy of its own apart from Canada’s in order to affirm its case for statehood (see Bastien, 2007). Tchi simply states that the Sargades must let go of their nostalgia, pastiching the tropes of Québécois nationalist discourse and its invocation of the ancestral home: “Le fameux pays de leurs ancêtres n’existe plus. Ils sont aux enfers froids, et depuis un bout de temps [The famous land of their ancestors doesn’t exist any more. They have been the cold hells for a while now]” (A 206). Similarly, as French-Canadians have expressed futile longing for New France and the era of their ancestors, eulogized in Philippe Aubert de Gaspé, père’s novel, *Les Anciens Canadiens* (1863), they, too, must face the reality of that loss and adapt to new conditions.

Some, like Lame and Séril Daha, the Sargade artist whose worldview she helps to radicalize, desire change. Change will not come, however, without resistance from some quarters. Because of his sympathy for the guest-worker *sbires* (A 128), Séril Daha receives threats from conservatives in his society (A 158). Ultimately murdered for his role in raising consciousness among his people about the plight of the damned, Daha also expresses sympathy for those who have attacked him. Refusing to name his assailants, he simply explains that they are victims, too:

parmi ceux qui souffraient le plus de voir des enfers sur leur territoire [...] plutôt des petites gens pour qui le ciel bleu, ça compte. [...] Victimes de leur absence d’imagination et de leur entêtement, mais victimes quand même.

[among those who suffered most to see the hells moved onto their territory (...), mostly little people for whom the [now absent] blue sky counts for something. (...) Victims of their own lack of imagination and their stubbornness, but victims all the same.] (A 176).

Rochon addresses her own compatriots here, like Séril Daha, she understands the difficulty of accepting change, while at the same time she advocates for accommodation through her depiction of the pitifully abject damned who eventually

come to appear human, intelligent, capable of mercy, and, eventually, of self-affirming action (A 178-179).

Indeed, Rel's ideology, at such odds with that of his father, has been informed by the fact that as an infant, he was saved by a damned soul in the original cold hells (A 182), revealing the damned's ability to transcend the stupor typical of their state.

Evidence of sentience recurs after Daha's assassination, as the damned assemble around him, gazing with pity upon his body lying in Lamé's arms. When the *sbire* Sarhat Taxiél refuses her exhortation to act, to force the Sargades to improve the conditions of this subaltern class dwelling in their land, the damned themselves finally act (A 182). After Daha's death, they distribute and consume every last ounce of his flesh, every drop of blood from his body. This act of communion results in an epiphany, as the damned waken from their usual torpor to express "leur joie de ne plus avoir les yeux bouchés par la neige [their joy at no longer having their eyes plugged with snow]" (A 103) and descend *en masse* upon the city (A 184-87).

Seeing the approaching hordes of the damned, the Sargades fear violence, and Sarhat Taxiél qualifies this spectacle as "horrible" (A 188). In contrast, his former colleague Tchi, now an inhabitant of the *anciens enfers* with Lamé and Rel and thus a participant in the utopian project, describes it as "réjouissant [joyous]" (A 188). The damned do not harm the Sargades, but the latter can no longer repress or ignore their existence, as clusters of damned souls now occupy city buildings and follow the Sargades wherever they go. The damned merely observe, since "[l]es gens font ce qu'ils veulent mais avec un millier de témoins [people do what they want, but with a thousand witnesses]" (A 190). Their omnipresence, though, functions as a collective conscience and faced with this non-violent, but impossible to ignore, demand for recognition, the Sargades must accept change.

Indeed, the new cold hells eventually become a model of how different groups in a pluralistic society can live together in peace and harmony: the Sargades "avaient fini par accepter de voir en eux [les damnés] des partenaires plutôt que des intrus, adaptant leur mode de vie en conséquence, ce qui semblait diminuer leur aigreur au profit de leur ingéniosité [In the end, they accepted seeing them (the damned) as partners rather than intruders, adapting their way of life in consequence, which also seemed to diminish their bitterness to the benefit of their ingeniousness]" (S 59). As an open-ended, postcolonial utopia, Rochon's hells thus outline the process of accommodation required in contemporary Québec if the heritage of racism implied in



ethnic nationalism<sup>10</sup> is to be overcome and instead an attitude of accommodation embraced, like that proposed by the 2008 Bouchard-Taylor Report for the province's Consultation Commission on Accommodation Practices Related to Cultural Differences.

After the Sargades have learned to live harmoniously with the damned, the image of Séril Daha, the man who triggered the radical change leading to their integration, undergoes a revisionist makeover. This “âme révolutionnaire [revolutionary soul]” (A 138), condemned during his lifetime, then seen as “un martyr national [a national martyr]” (S 149) by progressives soon after his death, eventually becomes the Sargades' “héros national [national hero]” (O 25). Once again, change for the better occurs through a revolutionary paradigm shift, “un changement de gouvernement [a change of government]” (A 214), like that effectuated by Rel to end Har's régime, as his daughter Aube assumes power in the *pays des Sargades*. While Lame fears that the Sargades, whose “fibre patriotique [est] assez développée [patriotic fiber (is) well developed]” (S 60), will see this as an affront, since “[l]es autochtones ont une tradition de démocratie [the natives have a tradition of democracy]” (A 206), this intervention instead restores justice and reverses the dystopian situation. And yet, this correction toward eu-topia remains only temporary in Rochon's ambiguous postcolonial utopia.

While scholars typically credit Ursula K. Le Guin with coining this term in the subtitle of *The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia* (see, for example, the essays in Davis and Stillman, 2005), the Utopian society described by Thomas More in *Utopia* does not necessarily represent what More himself would find eu-topian, that is better than his own. As critics from J. H. Hexter (1952: 174) to Fredric Jameson (2005: 32-33) have observed, the original literary model of utopia performs a critical function, reflecting upon the author's contemporary world as much as, or even more so, than representing his vision of an ideal society. Likewise, in *Ouverture* (a volume whose very title rejects the concept of the closed, perfected utopia), although a revolution has occurred, and Rel's platform of altruism has been carried out to the fullest by his daughter Aube, the prevailing living conditions in the land of the Sargades would certainly not appear as “better” to the reader living in the shared consensus world of the author.

At this juncture, the Sargades have now overcompensated in the measures they have taken to integrate the damned. They have completely remodeled their once

closed-in buildings, creating fully communal living spaces. Inside each apartment, space has been cleared to accommodate the clusters of the adoring, but needy souls that hover around each individual Sargade. For example, formerly galley-style, individual cooking areas have been opened up to provide such space, so that “les damnés observaient les étapes de la préparation du repas au lieu de vivre l’angoisse d’être séparés de leurs autochtones. [...] Tout se faisait en public, que ce soit aller aux toilettes, faire l’amour ou même peindre [the damned observed the stages of preparing meals instead of living the agony of separation from their natives. Everything was done in public, from going to the toilet, to making love or even painting]” (O 27).

The tone of the narrator’s description remains positive and this communal lifestyle imitates the Buddhist ideal of negating the individual and his or her needs and desires in favor of altruistic impulses including the communal life of the renunciate (King, 2009: 15-16; Ling, 1979: 49-59; Powers, 2007: 38, 295-98). Furthermore, the situation presents itself as beneficial to both groups involved: “[l]es uns comme les autres avaient commis des fautes, pour se retrouver coude à coude, solidaires, ce qui tenait du miracle [both had committed errors in order to find each other, elbow-to-elbow, in solidarity, which was something like a miracle]” (O 31). Nonetheless, Rochon’s use of hyperbole in the depiction of the communal, nearly symbiotic life of the Sargades with the damned satirizes the absurdity of some forms of communal living found in the earnest literary utopia, reflecting an irony reminiscent of More’s own.

Although great progress has occurred in many of the reformed hells, the class/race conflict has not been fully resolved between the different groups who must coexist within the context of the often violent justice system of the hells. For example, in the “enfers du pal” (hells of impalement), in which the naked damned have been impaled upon wooden pikes, the locals offer them water, read to them, play music, and “murmuraient des encouragements personnels [murmured personal encouragement]” (O 48) to ease their suffering. The *autochtones* (the people native to the land before the arrival of the damned) have thus come to care for the immigrant damned. They now, however, consider the *sbires* (henchmen/executioners who are essentially guest workers who have moved here from the *anciens enfers*) who must impale new arrivals and ensure that the damned continue to suffer (for such is the justice of their penalty), as “êtres de second classe [second class beings]” (O 51).

Thus, even in the reformed climate of mercy and understanding, new forms of prejudice develop.

Indeed, in the context of a hell in which some individuals do care for others (as opposed to what prevailed under Rel's father where *all* either suffered immensely or meted out violent torture), the *sbires* themselves have come to feel brutalized by their tasks. They resemble nothing so much as colonizers who have read Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* (1955) and have realized that the alienating, brutalizing effect of their violence affects not only the damned, but themselves as well. Rel—who, having successfully turned hell into heaven in the *anciens enfers*, continues to function as a visionary leader in his new role as a consultant, listening to the various complaints and finding solutions—proposes that the two groups in the hells of impalement alternate duties in tours of two years each. As he does so, he points out two things. One, he asserts that although the two groups differ genetically, they are really similar:

Les sbires, pour la plupart, sont descendants de gens de mon pays, sbires là-bas quand l'enfer y résidait. Donc sbires et autochtones sont d'origine différente, soit. Par contre, vous êtes tous adultes responsables et polyvalents. Chacun pourrait faire deux ans la bonne âme et deux ans le sbire, alternant ainsi jusqu'à la retraite.

[The henchmen, for the most part, descend from people from my land (the former hells) who were henchmen when hell existed there. Therefore, henchmen and natives are different; so be it. However, you are all responsible, multi-talented adults. Everyone could do two years as a good soul and two years as a henchman, alternating thus until retirement.] (O53)

In this fashion, Rel parries in advance any essentialist, racist arguments about the henchmen's natural violence. However, the leader remains sensitive to the abject nature of the violence necessary to serve justice upon the damned, admitting that “[l]e travail que vous faites [...] est indigne d'un être vivant qui se respecte [the work that you do (...) is not dignified for a self-respecting living being]” (O 54). He therefore offers the henchmen an out, the second option of returning to their “pays d'origine [homeland],” the *anciens enfers*, to become corn farmers (O 55).

Over time, undeniable progress has been made in all of the eight new hells, revealed during a tour conducted by Rel and Lame in *Ouverture*. Above all, in these worlds that used to be a literal hell, an ethic develops which espouses the need to treat all, human and animal alike, with dignity and respect. Again and again, across the six volumes of the *Chroniques infernales*, Rochon demonstrates that utopia is never perfect and that it always remains open-ended, in process. The impermanent nature of the hells, worlds subject to the cycle of life and death, appears clearly in this homage paid to Rel and his revolutionary action:

Celui qui avait été le dernier roi des enfers, juste le temps qu'il faut pour les abolir sur son territoire, refusant de renouveler les contrats qui gèrent l'horreur, utilisant toute la puissance de sa volonté de nouveau souverain pour porter un coup fatal à des millénaires de terreur. [He who was the last king of the hells, with just enough time to abolish them on his territory, refusing to renew the contracts that manage horror, using all the power of his will as a new sovereign to strike a fatal blow to millennia of terror.] (O 173)

Rel's assignment does not, however, simply end with revolutionizing the way of life both in the former hells and in the new worlds to which their functions have been re-assigned. He learns that he has been charged by the judges of destiny to go beyond the merely revolutionary and enter the realm of the millennial, planning the end of the worlds of hell.

### **The End of the World as We Know It: Rel as Planner of the Apocalypse**

A millennial vision, the notion that the existing order must be completely destroyed before the new can be installed, represents a pivotal element in some utopian thought (see for example, Fortunati, 1993; Kumar, 1991: 6-11). Rel's vision and charge reflects this millenarian spirit as Rochon's utopia will be as open-ended as possible, concluding with the ultimate ellipsis, the end of the world. Indeed, his very task will be that of "le planificateur de la fin du monde [planner of the end of the world]" (So 72). Having succeeded in his project of reforming the hells so that a number of these societies may be labeled as utopian, at least in their vision and conception as altruistic societies, the *juges du destin* charge Rel to develop a plan for the end of the world in the fifth volume, *Or* [Gold/So] (1999) (Or 193). Ordered to "effectuer les simulations et les calculs relatifs à la fin du monde [effectuate the simulations and calculations relative to the end of the world]" (So 41), Rel nonetheless develops his program with a utopian horizon in mind. His notion that "[i]l fallait permettre à chaque monde de mûrir, pour donner à ses habitants tout son potentiel de lieu d'épanouissement de la sagesse, avant qu'il ne soit détruit [it was necessary to allow each world to mature, in order to give its inhabitants all the potential of a space for the development of wisdom before its destruction]" (So 4) aims for nothing less than the attainment of nirvana,<sup>11</sup> a utopian state of transcendence. Just as Ernst Bloch equates the "principle of hope" to the utopian, so Rel's plan for the end of the world appears as "une vision funèbre mais majestueuse, et non dénuée d'espoir [a funereal, but majestic vision, not bereft of hope]" (So 180). The end of existence, the millenarian apocalypse, presents itself here as an ultimate liberation in keeping with Rochon's Buddhist philosophy, which seeks to shed all ties

to this world and seek nirvana (Or 209-210). As the narrative comes full circle at the end of *Sorbier*, reaching the “fin de règne [end of the reign]” of Rel (So 324), it asserts that true “liberté [freedom]” (So 331) is yet to come. As she addresses the question of paradise, in keeping with the postcolonial, which interrogates the Western master narratives (Vautier: 1998, 25), Rochon performs nothing less than a major critique of the concept of “paradise”/utopia as it is known in the Western—Jewish and Christian—traditions in the final chapters of *Sorbier*.

*Heaven as Hell: The Critique of Anid*

The reader first learned of the existence of “paradis [paradises]” in the system of worlds developed across the *Chroniques infernales in Secrets* [Secrets] (1998), when Rel revealed that he had spent a previous life in a world known as Anid (S 18). Categorized as a paradise, happiness and altruism form its basis: “Un monde incroyablement riche en possibilités, fait pour qu’on y soit heureux, et qu’on fasse rayonner le bien et le bonheur le plus loin possible [A world incredibly rich in possibilities, made for happiness, so that one could radiate goodness and happiness as far as possible]” (So 87). In the cycle’s last volume, *Sorbier*, Rel appears near death, exhausted by his revolutionary and consultational efforts in the former and the present hells. His companions Lame and Fax/Taïm Sutherland accompany him on a search for refuge since he has since been banished from the hells as a result of his overly zealous, utopian plan for the end of the world. At this juncture, a rogue judge of destiny, one who disagrees with his colleagues’ sentencing Rel to banishment, takes the prince of the former hells and his entourage on a tour of various paradises in search of a habitable world.

This device allows Rochon’s characters to interrogate the notion of paradise itself, again engaging the question: “Upon what basis should a utopia be founded?” As with the hells, “[i]l y a des paradis pour tous les goûts [there are paradises for all tastes]” (A 28). Some of these mirror the land of Cokaygne, a “paradis primitif, où on se vautre dans les plaisirs en attendant d’être forcé de redescendre vers le Malheur [primitive paradise where one wallows in pleasure waiting to be forced to return to unhappiness]” (So 346).<sup>12</sup> Others, where one “jouit d’omniscience, de puissance, de bonheur et de toutes sortes d’autres bidules amusants [enjoys omniscience, power, happiness and all other sorts of amusing baubles]” (So 308), focus on the mental and spiritual. Rochon’s satire of descriptions of contemporary consumer culture as utopia

appears in *Lame*'s dismissal of this image of utopia as frivolous, superficial shams. For her, a true paradise is one where she can be "utile [useful]" (So 351). Already in *Lame*, the redemptive value of work appeared clearly, as her tasks allowed the *Chroniques*' heroine to resist the fate of most of those condemned to the *enfes mous*, that of giving in to all sensory impulses and becoming a complete and literal larva.

In addition to *Anid*, the text specifically names only two other paradises: *Catadial* and *Shambhala*. As *Sorbier* knits together the two fictional universes of Rochon's SFQ sagas into one complex whole, *Catadial*, the utopian land of the *Vrénalik Cycle*, reappears (So 298). This nation had helped the *Asven* settle in a new homeland in exchange for the then living *Taïm Sutherland*'s assistance in opening itself up to the world. With his help, it left the unhealthy isolation of the classic (but inauthentic in Rochon's view) utopia, a prerequisite to its fulfillment of an altruistic mission of helping other lands, achieving the status of an authentic attempt at utopia, "un pays qui allait bien [...] ce paradis. Chacun y avait sa place. Les talents pouvaient s'y épanouir. Une partie de l'énergie de chacun était délibérément consacrée au bien être de tous [a land where things went well (...) this paradise. Each had his or her place there. Talent could flourish. Part of the energy of each was deliberately consecrated to the well-being of all]" (So 283-284). In addition to the reference to her own imaginary universe, Rochon invokes the real-world legend of Tibetan Buddhism's paradise, *Shambhala*, by equating it with *Catadial*. Indeed, *Lame* states that "[l]e *Catadial* [...] s'appelle *Shambhala* dans le monde d'où vous venez [Catadial is called *Shambhala* in the world that you come from]" (So 353). In this manner, however, she further undermines the boundaries between legend and reality, a tactic associated with the postcolonial utopia, whose relationship to mimetic realism remains ambiguous, according to *Pordzik* (2001: 16-17).

What occurs in *Anid*, however, represents Rochon's most scathing critique of the classic utopia as stuffy, pompous, and ultimately discriminatory, a stance reflective of *Sargisson*'s evaluation of closure in the literary utopia as a measure taken to exclude difference (63-65). Upon their arrival, *Rel*, *Lame*, *Fax* (accompanied by the spirits of two Sorcerers from the *Vrénalik* novels, the *Dreamer Shaskath* and *Ivendra*<sup>13</sup>), appear initially impressed by this paradise, which—as their guide *Zyine* explains—is "une université céleste, un lieu de formation, d'où nos diplômés partent accomplir divers travaux [a heavenly university, a site of education, which our graduates leave to accomplish various works]" (So 346). While this sort of school for angels at first

appears to align with Rochon's vision of a Blochian utopia of work and self-fulfillment, its entrance standards belie its asserted "souci d'égalitarisme [concern for equality]" (So 346). When Lame expresses the desire to take courses here, she is told "[l]es cours qu'on offre ici, il n'est pas évident que vous puissiez les suivre [it's not necessarily obvious that you could take the classes offered here]" (So 349).

In particular, Rel's former mentor Vayinn, reveals his scorn for all of the members of their group: he mocks the sorcerer Ivendra's desire to merge with Rel (who has been revealed to be none other than the model for the Asven Ocean-god Hatzlén of the *Vrénalik* novels; So 348); he disrespects the judges of destiny, disparaging their lack of decorum as being "[t]rop stridents, si vous voyez ce que je veux dire [too noisy, if you know what I mean]" (So 349); and when Lame reveals her origins as a former *damnée*, his laconic "Je vois [I see]" (So 351) implies the prejudices he holds against her kind. Subsequently, Vayinn particularly singles out Lame for discrimination. Offended, she presses him for answers: "Sommes-nous vraiment inférieurs? [Are we really inferior?]" (So 350). He responds: "Tout dépend de vos aptitudes [It all depends on your aptitudes]" (So 350). She accuses: "Ou de votre bon vouloir? Ou de notre pouvoir de négociation? [Or on your good will? Or on our skills as negotiators?]" (So 350). This exchange, like so much of the *Chroniques infernales*, as we have seen, reflects the socio-historical context in which it was written; it invokes a lingering rancor resulting from the failure of negotiations<sup>14</sup> surrounding the repatriation of Canada's constitution from Great Britain in the 1980s and early 1990s, and Québec's request for recognition as a "distinct society" within it.

The character of Vayinn plays devil's advocate, of a sort, as he puts into play a discourse that questions Lame's multicultural, postcolonial outlook, an outlook reflective of Rochon's own. Representative of the conservative Westerner, intent on preserving privilege and the status quo by controlling the canon and educational programs, he reveals his own racism at the same time. Full of contempt for a race he sees as no more than vermin ("[l]es infernaux, à ses yeux n'étaient peut-être que des microbes [those from hell, in his eyes, were perhaps nothing more than germs]" [So 360]), Vayinn lambasts Lame for her lack of "vénération pour vos ancêtres ou vos maîtres [veneration for your ancestors or your masters]" (So 364). This attack also codes him as representative of the old-guard ethnic French-Canadians who wish to preserve the traditions of the ancestors, like Lionel Groulx, who entitled his

historiographical landmark, *Notre Maître le Passé* [Our Master, The Past] (3 vols; 1924-1944). Vayinn despises her eclectic philosophy and culture:

Vous vous imaginez que Montréal, c'est la patrie de créatures sulfureuses telle que Baudelaire ou Lovecraft. Vous êtes incapable de faire la différence entre un simple poème ou un conte, et un véritable énoncé philosophique sur la nature du monde. Vous mêlez tout! En plus, vous utilisez votre interprétation du bouddhisme pour justifier votre peu d'intégration sociale. [You think that Montreal is the home of such sulphuric creatures as Baudelaire or Lovecraft. You are incapable of seeing the difference between a simple poem or a story, and a real philosophical statement on the nature of the world. You mix everything up! What's more, you use your interpretation of Buddhism to justify your social deficiencies.] (So 365)

In this passage, Rochon scrutinizes her own literary and philosophical underpinnings, either recalling or imagining the type of criticism that would have been leveled at her work by members of a conservative Québécois intellectual élite. The influence on her work by the iconic American horror writer, H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937), appears clearly in works such as *La Rivière des morts* (2008) and “Les Murs d’Inquanok [The Walls of Inquanok]” (2004) which pay explicit homage to the master from Providence. She couples such pulp inspiration with a love of France’s greatest nineteenth-century French poet, Charles Baudelaire. Poems from his landmark work, *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), are both cited directly and paid implicit homage throughout the *Chroniques infernales*, but particularly in its final volume *Sorbier*, which reprints “L’Homme et la mer” (1857) in epigraph and to which Lame refers explicitly (21-22; 68; 228; 267-68). Rochon explicitly mentions the poet in her acknowledgments (415). Finally, the attack on Buddhism and her quiet, unassuming, probably timid personality appears to directly target the series’ author as much as its female protagonist. Under such scrutiny, Lame wonders outright, “où ils étaient, en fait. Au paradis ou ailleurs? [where they were, anyway. In paradise or somewhere else?]” (So 360).

Left to reflect upon the “violence de ce qu’ils venaient de vivre [violence of what they had just experienced]” (So 368), Lame contrasts Vayinn’s self-righteous elitism with the surrounding peaceful productivity of the Anid countryside. In the end, Rochon’s satire backtracks somewhat as Vayinn’s assistant Zyine makes amends with Lame, and Vayinn alone bears the onus of this violence, representing the corruption entailed in the exercise of absolute power. Vayinn’s prejudicial discourse, “Nous avons tout de même un certain standing, vous savez [we have a certain standing to uphold, you know]” (So 351), is attributed to him alone, not to all of Anid.



The novel's resolution, which obliquely reveals Vayinn's corruption<sup>15</sup> and establishes Rel in his place, resembles the Voltairean principle of the *paradis terrestre*,<sup>16</sup> the earthly paradise, as Rel pronounces: "C'est un paradis à ma mesure, un lieu d'apprentissage, où l'on apprend comment mener une existence valable [It is a paradise built to my measure, a site of apprenticeship where one learns how to live a valid existence]" (So 392). The Blochian value of work and the progressive nature of the critical utopia combine here for the ambiguous open ending posited by Suvin (1982). Lame's lampoon of the stereotypical image of heaven adds fuel to Rochon's bonfire of the classic utopia and contributes to this ambiguity:

Le ciel [...]. Je m'attendais à être plongé dans des états d'esprit transcendants, entouré d'une beauté parfaite, au-delà de ce que l'esprit peut concevoir, pour jouir d'une incomparable félicité. D'un coup, j'aurais dépassé ma mesquinerie pour toucher au sublime. [Heaven (...). I was expecting to be plunged into transcendent states of mind, surrounded by a perfect beauty, beyond what the mind could conceive, to enjoy an incomparable happiness. In one moment, I would have overcome my pettiness to touch the sublime.] (So 392)

Ironically, Rochon's fantasy novel exposes the "fantasy" elements of the Western/Christian conception of heaven/paradise/utopia—the perfect world into which one suddenly enters to have fulfillment granted. Lame then outlines the "realistic" ways to arrive in paradise, a means which requires, though, use of one's subjective, internal, imaginary resources. The idea of an objective paradise with an external reality (like that of God's heaven in Christian doctrine) is a myth; the only way to reach paradise is through the inner journey—an attitude of that aspect of Buddhist teaching which asserts that Shambhala can only be attained through meditation (Bernbaum, 1983: 205-06). Lame realizes that:

la beauté, la perfection, la transcendance, apparaissent en fonction de l'état d'esprit désintéressé qui ne les recherche même pas, et se manifestent en rapport avec lui, sans qu'il soit nécessaire de leur créer un environnement protégé, puisqu'il s'agit d'une expérience personnelle, qui dépend du degré d'ouverture que chaque conscience entretient avec tout le reste. Ce qu'il s'agit de faire, c'est de créer des incitatifs.  
[beauty, perfection, transcendence, appear as a function of the disinterested state of mind which doesn't even seek them, and which manifest themselves in relation to it, without it being necessary to create a protected environment for them because it's a question of a personal experience, which depends on the degree of openness that each consciousness carries on with the rest. What you have to do, is to create incentives.] (So 392-93)

Still, in keeping with the open-endedness, Rel asks Lame: "Avoue que quelque chose t'ennuie ici [Admit that something bores/annoys you here]" (So 393). She admits that this paradise, with all of its mythical wonders, "tout ce clinquant [all this glitter]" (So 393)—as ever, Rochon knows not to take her fantasy too seriously<sup>17</sup> adding such self-referential and self-deprecatory comments—does not, for Lame, fit

with Rel's image as a prince of darkness. In the end, a sense of harmony appears necessary, the *gouffre* of the pit in balance with the paradise.

### *Cultiver son jardin*

Finally, recalling Voltaire's conclusion to *Candide* (1759) and the famous refrain of what one should do in the best of all possible worlds, "we must go and work in the garden" (Voltaire, 1947: 144) Lame moves into Vayinn's house of horrors<sup>18</sup> (once those, of course, have been moved out) and cultivates a garden featuring all of the plants of her Montréal. In a prime location she includes, a *sorbier* [rowan tree or mountain ash], Taïm Sutherland's totem tree. Vayinn's former assistant and their guide through this "flawed utopia" (Sargent, 2003: 225), Zyine, now revealed to be a force of good, reinforces the Marxist tendencies of Rochon's utopian thought. She asserts that "Anid, c'est pour les mordus du paradoxe et des méthodes sophistiqués pour être au service des êtres [Anid is for those bitten by the bug of the paradox and sophisticated methods for serving others]" (So 398); the original phrase "au service de," is immediately decoded by the reader of French as indicating a literary movement's Marxian goals, such as Surrealism and its offshoot Situationism. Being simply "at the service of" other beings, the ultimate goal is to live altruistically, unselfishly, detached, but decidedly to LIVE, and not just to be happy in the superficial illusion of fulfillment provided by the Cokaygne of the senses or the mind. As Lame says to Rel: "tu voulais tant que les gens deviennent vivants [you wanted so much for people to become alive]" (So 395), a theme also found in Rochon's short story "Devenir vivant [To Become Alive]" (1988), which provides the back story for Rel's stay in Anid, explaining how he got his acronymic name ("Roi à l'Esprit Libre [Open Minded King]), as well as describing Vayinn and Zyine earlier in their lives.

The refrain "la fin du monde [the end of the world]" (Or 29) begins to appear frequently in the series's penultimate volume, *Or*, after Rel and Lame notice cracks in the concrete dome above the reformed hells. Rel realizes that "[c]es fissures dans la voûte étaient liées aux tensions géocosmiques du commencement de la fin du monde [...]. C'était la première fois qu'il voyait un signe concret de l'usure accélérée de l'univers [these fissures in the vault were linked to the geocosmic tensions caused by the beginning of the end of the world (...). It was the first time he saw a concrete sign of the accelerated wearing down of the universe]" (Or 30). Rel then retreats to

Vrénalik to elaborate his plan; his desire to maximize the utopian effects even of a plan for the end of the world earns him the displeasure of the Judges of Destiny. As author of the apocalypse, Rel nonetheless designs a program through which as many worlds as possible will experience a Golden Age prior to extinction (378). He explains to Vayinn that “quand tout va mal, chacun a accès au meilleur de lui-même. [...] dans l'imminence de la fin des temps, les gens éprouveraient un sentiment d'urgence suffisant pour prendre leur société au sérieux [when everything goes badly, each individual has access to the best of himself. (...) in the imminence of the end of time, people would feel a sense of urgency sufficient to take their society seriously]” (So 378-79).

After having achieved the best of all possible ends of the world, *Sorbier's* final pages leave the reader only with a state of affairs that predicts or augurs the happy ending, the nirvanic union, set forth in Rel's plan:

Tout cela présageait du reste [...] pour que la fin du monde ne soit pas qu'une histoire de souffrance, de mort et de chaos, mais quelque chose de plus, comme un hymne, pour que l'injustice ne demeure pas impunie, mais soit reconnue dans ses débordements et se fonde comme de la cire, comme un corps douloureux se transforme en lumière profonde.

[This all presaged the rest (...) so that the end of the world would not be a story of just suffering, of death and chaos, but something more, like a hymn, so that injustice would not go unpunished, but be recognized in its excesses and melt like wax, like a suffering corpse transforms into profound light.] (So 413)

Rochon's open-ended utopia thus ends with a profoundly poetic invocation of the millennial destruction of the universe. In keeping with the open-ended utopia she has written this fictional universe of Vrénalik/ *les enfers* remains open as her most recent novel, *La Rivière des morts* (2007), also participates indirectly in this imagined community.

It is perhaps not coincidental that *Sorbier*, published in the year 2000, appeared at the début of a new millennium, as Fredric Jameson observes in his recent intervention on the topic of utopia, *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), “the increasingly popular visions of total destruction and of the extinction of life on earth” (199). *Les Chroniques infernales* participates in the general apocalyptic concerns of the turn of the millennium, and in the postcolonial utopia's desire to undo Western imperial civilization. It also reflects the very specific realities of a particular, postcolonial, postnational society, that of Québec, with its heroine from Montréal and her direct engagement of Canada's predominantly French-speaking province's colonial and postcolonial history (see Ransom, 2009: 163-67), as well as its allegorization of

Québec society in the episode on the land of the Sargades as the new cold hells, discussed above.

In the end, Rochon's quasi-mystical vision of utopia appears most in line with that of Ernst Bloch.<sup>19</sup> In *The Spirit of Utopia* (1918, 1923) and *The Principle of Hope* (1952-1959), as well as a number of essays collected by Jack Zipes under the title *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature* (1988), Bloch affirms the revolutionary role of the arts in humanity's ability to project alternate possibilities of reality, a principle he called *Vor-Schein* "anticipatory illumination" (Zipes, 1988: xvii). Furthermore, Bloch represents an important, early proponent of the open-ended nature of utopia (Geoghegan, 1996: 40; Hurbon, 1974: 54). Not only does the general project of Rochon reflect the idea that science fiction (often called *anticipation* in French) can anticipate a new, better reality, we see in Rel's vision several more concrete Blochian principles at work, including the philosopher's "personal ethics of the *aufrechter Gang*, the upright gait" (Zipes, 1988: xxvii), along with the generally Marxian values of the right to unalienated labor and the role of collective agency as a prerequisite to individual fulfillment (Zipes, 1988: xx). As Rel asserts already in the first volume of the *Chroniques infernales*, "If everyone conducted himself with rectitude, the hells would, perhaps, disappear" ("Si chacun se conduisait avec droiture, les enfers disparaîtrait peut-être;" L 46). Following the role of art described by Bloch as pre-appearances of the utopian, Esther Rochon uses her science-fiction writing as:

*a laboratory and also a feast of implemented possibilities* [...] whereby the implementation and the result occur in the manner of founded appearance, namely of a worldly perfected pre-appearance. In great art, exaggeration and fantasizing are most visibly applied to tendential consistency and concrete utopia. Though whether the call for perfection [...] becomes practical even only to a small extent and does not merely remain in aesthetic pre-appearance is something which is not decided in poetry, but in society. (Bloch, 1986: I, 216; original emphasis).

The postcolonial utopia envisioned in the six volumes of *Les Chroniques infernales* critiques the notion of perfection often perceived as inherent in the classic Western literary utopia, and reverses and revises Western notions of heaven and hell, in part through the application of Buddhist notions of these. In the end, this fantasy world offers a deformed, yet still clear, vision of the possibilities for Québec to learn from its past oppression in order to develop new systems of recognition and accommodation in order to serve as a model of a better pluralistic, postnational society for others.

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## Notes

1 A slightly abridged version of the first section of this essay was presented at the Society for Utopian Studies conference held at Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA, October 20-23, 2011. I allude to the following analysis in *Science Fiction from Québec: A Postcolonial Study* (Ransom, 2009: 152), but only now do I develop it fully here.

2 All translations from the French are my own; translations of novel titles that are not italicized indicate that the work in question has not been published in translation. Citations from the various volumes of *Les Chroniques infernales* will refer to the following abbreviations, presented in order of publication, L = *Lame*; A = *Aboli*; O = *Ouverture*, S = *Secrets*, Or = *Or*, So = *Sorbier*.

3 Shambhala is "a mythical kingdom hidden behind snow peaks somewhere north of Tibet", from which "according to prophecy, a future King of Shambhala will come out with a great army to destroy the forces of evil and bring in a golden age" (Bernbaum, 1980: 4). Textual and verbal accounts describe Shambhala as a utopian land of enlightenment and physical plenty hidden from the rest of the world in a manner similar to the fictional Shangri-la of James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* (Bernbaum, 1980: 3). Different traditions view it variously as an *actual*, mappable location hidden in the mountains, or as a *figurative* image, a metaphor for enlightenment, a location reached through meditation (Bernbaum, 1980: 205-06).

4 See for example, the Wikipedia definition of utopia as "an ideal community or society possessing a perfect socio-politico-legal system" ("Utopia"), or *The American Heritage Dictionary's* definition of More's island as "a seat of perfection in moral, social, and political life" (1975: 1411).

5 It should be noted that her name is pronounced with a short a, and not like the English word "lame." Rochon offers an interesting play on words here, invoking the obvious allegory with her heroine's name referring to *l'âme* (the soul), but also to her ultimate strength, her critical force as *lame* (the blade of a knife).

6 By the "classic utopia," I refer to what Peter Fitting also terms "the older, systematic, planned utopias" (1985: 157), that appeared prior to the perceived evolution of the literary genre into the more "open-ended," "ambiguous," or "critical" utopias which began to appear in feminist utopian novels in the 1970s. Judith Shklar uses the term "classical utopia" to refer to a similar form of literary utopia, but she already begins to see its decline "almost two hundred years ago" in the nineteenth-century utopias like those of Bellamy (1965: 270).

7 It is also worth noting that, like Rel, legend says of Siddhartha Gautama that in "one of the Buddha's past incarnations [...] he was born in the most torturous hell" (Powers, 2007: 36).

8 These include the *enfers mous* (the soft hells, in which the cycle opens in the first novel, *Lame*), the *enfers tranchants* (sharp hells), the *enfers à pils* (piked hells—which feature impalement like that perpetrated by the medieval Wallachian champion of Christianity and model for the fictional Dracula, Vlad the Impaler), the *enfers chauds* (hot hells), and even the *enfers plastiques* (plastic hells).

9 This phrase refers to a period of great social, political and economic change in Québec, technically coinciding with the 1960-1966 term of provincial premier Jean Lesage and his Liberal party's program of reforms, which sought to liberate Québec from federalist hegemony in the political arena, anglophone hegemony in the cultural arena, and the Catholic Church—which largely controlled the educational, social services and health systems—in the social arena. Many young technocrats and government officials involved in Lesage's programs eventually left the Liberal party to opt for a more nationalist, even sovereigntist platform during the rest of the decade. These include René Lévesque, engineer of the first Referendum on Sovereignty-Association in 1980.

10 Then provincial prime minister and head of the sovereigntist Parti Québécois, Jacques Parizeau's oft-cited quotation blaming "le vote ethnique" (the ethnic—as in not French-Canadian—vote) for the failure of the 1995 Referendum on Sovereignty represents a most obvious example of this heritage that Québec nationalists, the provincial government, and the PQ itself have consistently worked to counter as early as the 1980s.

11 In Buddhist thought, nirvana represents the spiritual goal for all practitioners, though few will attain it. Sallie B. King defines it as "enlightenment and wisdom" (2009: 15), freedom from the illusion of *samsara* and the bootless desires of *dukkha* (2009: 15-17).

12 Although most visions of Cokaygne, like Bruegel's painting or the American folk song "The Big Rock Candy Mountain," depict only the sensual pleasures of this make-believe world, Rochon's qualification of these pleasures as fleeting remains in keeping with Harry Levin's observation that "the Middle English poem on the Land of Cockaigne is an ironic satire on the idleness, the luxury, and the lechery of the monastic establishment" (1966: 310).

13 The former uttered the original curse that imprisoned the Asven people on their Archipelago because of the *hubris* of their imperialistic leader; four hundred years later, Ivendra led Taïm Sutherland to find the statue of the Ocean God which, once broken, freed the Asven from their curse, allowing them to leave for the mainland, enter the flow of time, and eventually re-settle in the new homeland offered them by Catadial. (See Rochon, *L'Aigle des profondeurs* [2002], *Le Rêveur dans la Citadelle* [1998], *L'Archipel noir* [1999] and *L'Espace du diamant* [1990 ; rev. as *La Dragonne de l'Aurore* [2009]).

14 And probably explicitly references a Jean Dion story which allegorizes this moment titled "Base de négociation" (1992) (see Baker, 1994; Ransom, 2000).

15 Not only did Vayinn bribe the Judges of Destiny so that in *Ouverture* Lame would wrongly be kidnapped by the ants and turned into their larval home (So 383), after his exposure "d'instruments de torture et de livres de magie noire, du jamais vu sur Anid [instruments of torture and black magic books, never seen on Anid]" and "quelques pauvres victimes [a few poor victims]" (So 410) were found in his home.

16 Harry Levin views the conclusion of Voltaire's *Candide*—to which we refer below—as an expression of "the continuance of Adam's pursuit" (1966: 312), the creation of an earthly paradise in the Garden of Eden. Voltaire referred on several occasions to the notion of the *paradis terrestre*, not only in his description of Holland in a 1722 letter (*apud* Van Sypetyyn, 1726), but most notably in the oft-cited *mot*, "Le paradis terrestre est où je suis" ("The earthly paradise is where I am;" Voltaire, 1736).

17 This sense of humor also appears in the teachings of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche (1984: 32), one of Rochon's acknowledged "masters" (*Sorbier* 416).

18 See note 15.

19 A brief discussion of the Blochian aspects of Rochon's work was first presented by me as "Anticipatory Illumination in Science-Fiction Sagas from Québec," at the Scholarly Colloquium in conjunction with Anticipation: World Convention of Science Fiction held in Montréal, August 6-10, 2009.