

in as comparisons, such as the case of Nigeria explored by Chika Okeke-Agulu.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, this discussion begs a comparison to other forms of “socialist postcolonialism,” such as the networks of anti-colonial artistic exchange that proliferated within the Soviet bloc at about the same time. Still, the problem of integrating national stories into greater, transnational narratives is a key challenge in the field today—a challenge that *Nonaligned Modernism* takes head-on. With its emphasis on larger socio-political forces and the institutional structures they engendered, the book offers a thorough, well-researched cultural history of a country that still deserves a more prominent place in the art histories of modernism, “global” or otherwise. ¶

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1. For an overview of the issue, see David Chioni Moore, “Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique,” *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (2001): 111–28.

2. Chika Okeke-Agulu, *Postcolonial Modernism: Art and Decolonization in Twentieth-Century Nigeria* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

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François-Marc Gagnon  
**Jean Paul Riopelle and  
the Automatiste Movement**

trans. Donald Winkler  
Montreal and Kingston: McGill-  
Queen’s University Press, 2020

212 pp. 90 illus.  
\$ 49.95 (hardcover) ISBN 9780228001157

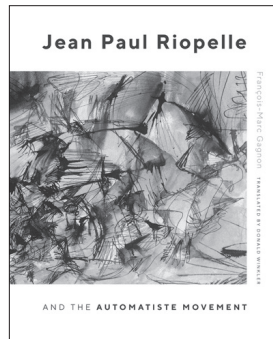
Ray Ellenwood

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First of all, let me declare my complete lack of social distancing. All those involved in the writing and editing of this book, from the author and translator through to individuals thanked by the publisher for help with editing after François-Marc

Gagnon’s death in March 2019, are long-time friends of mine. When I first began my own research for a book on the Automatists in the late 1970s, Gagnon was already a well-established authority on Borduas and the movement. He was extraordinarily generous in making available his extensive files of newspaper clippings and other documents; and he was consistently, over the years, a great source of information and encouragement to me and many other scholars. In the mid-1980s, Gilles Lapointe was working as a graduate researcher with André-G. Bourassa on the writings of Borduas. I met him then, and we have often collaborated since. Lapointe has established himself as the most important successor to Gagnon, and it is no surprise that McGill-Queen’s asked him to see this book through the press, with eminently qualified advice from Janine Carreau, Yseult Riopelle, and Ginette Michaud. That said, I must admit I haven’t always agreed with everything my friend François-Marc wrote, and the same applies to some passages in this book.

This publication brings together several threads of enquiry that Gagnon had been following in the



past thirty years, branching out from his early work more specifically on Borduas into a more general look at the Automatist movement and its participants. Having published his important *Paul-Émile Borduas (1905–1960): Biographie critique et analyse*

*de l’œuvre* (Montréal: Fides, 1978, reworked, translated, and published by McGill-Queen’s in 2013), he and Dennis Young also made available in the same year a bilingual edition of a selection of Borduas’ writings, including *Refus global* (Halifax: Nova Scotia College of Art, 1978). There followed many articles, catalogue publications, television appearances, along with work on a Borduas *catalogue raisonné* published on the internet through Concordia University. This focus on Borduas eventually expanded into what I consider his magnum opus: the *Chronique du mouvement automatiste québécois* (Montréal: Lanctôt éditeur, 1998). It was around this time he began to shift his attention more towards Riopelle. The bibliography on Riopelle was already very extensive, with biographical and critical studies by international critics such as Pierre Schneider and the well-known Quebec art historian Guy Robert. In 1999 came the first volume of an ongoing work that is undoubtedly the major source of information on Riopelle and his work: the very ambitious *Catalogue Raisonné*, edited by Yseult Riopelle (Montréal: Hibou Éditeurs, 1999). This was followed by four volumes (Vol. 2, 2004; Vol. 3, 2009; Vol. 4, 2014; Vol. 5, 2200), each covering roughly ten years of Riopelle’s production, plus a special number devoted to prints (2005). Authors of critical articles in the catalogues are an international group including Michel Waldberg, Yves Michaud, David Moos, and Monique Brunet-Weinmann (who wrote two fine articles for Vols. 1 and 3). François-Marc Gagnon’s quite novel approach, as discussed below, can be seen the fourth volume.

But to return to Gagnon’s *Chronique du mouvement automatiste*, it was there that readers found more detail than we had seen before (one of the main contributions of Gagnon to his field of study was an astonishing attention to detail concerning exhibitions, works shown, press coverage) about Riopelle’s early

years in Paris, his contacts with Surrealist groups and publications, his early successes, and his eventual link with the Pierre Matisse gallery in New York. Part of this work involved an ongoing dispute with critics who connected Riopelle too closely with Jackson Pollock, suggesting that the two painters' approaches were the same. Not by accident, a final and important chapter in this last of Gagnon's books is entitled "Riopelle and Pollock," where Gagnon goes over all the arguments, gives a trenchant analysis of painting styles, and ends emphatically:

To conclude this overview of the facts: there could not have been any direct influence of Pollock on Riopelle, because Riopelle was practising the kind of painting where that influence may have been felt *before* his discovery of Pollock's work. When he did come in contact with it, he saw no affinity between Pollock's work and his own. As soon as we examine the two painters' ways of working, the choice of formats, the importance of the line for Pollock, the coloured spatula strokes applied by Riopelle, their conception of the line, dripped by Pollock, projected by Riopelle, we must agree with Riopelle. The painters have very little in common, regardless of what the American critics thought at the time (181).

I agree fully with this assessment, and I should point out that Anais Barbeau-Lavalette in *La femme qui fuit* (translated with the title *Suzanne*), a 2015 novel set partly within the Montreal Automatist circle, paints a completely false picture of Riopelle with a studio in New York frequented by Pollock, in contradiction to Gagnon's assertions and in spite of the fact that she claims Gagnon as one of her major sources of information.

The passage cited above, with its reference to line and the application of paint, has been prepared for and explained in earlier chapters with titles such as "From Paintbrush to Spatula" and "Imprint and Invisibility," as Gagnon looks closely at how

line works in traditional and modern painting, drawing on observations of philosophers and theoreticians such as George Didi-Huberman, Jacques Derrida and Walter Benjamin. For me, these are some of the most enlightening sections of the book, going beyond recounting of events into a very succinct lesson in art history and visual theory. To get to this point, however, Gagnon provides a fascinating and sometimes amusing account of Riopelle's early years, insisting on accurate dates and often correcting the painter's own faulty recollections, showing how his upbringing and early art education were highly conservative. Having learned from his first instructor, Henri Bisson, that "reality" could and must be faithfully copied in art, Riopelle eventually had to confront the paradoxes of that belief and take a significant leap in adopting the methods and ideas of the Automatists on spontaneity and non-figuration. The history of Borduas and the Automatist group has been told many times by many writers, but here it becomes fresh again when seen through the eyes of a young Riopelle who was not at all convinced, at first. Having shown how Riopelle eventually accepted Borduas' method of beginning a painting or drawing with no preconceived idea, Gagnon goes on to analyze important differences in their approach:

Riopelle's first watercolours seem to take a similar approach to those of Borduas, but very soon they reverse Borduas's relatively academic process of first drawing then applying colour. Riopelle, after a few hesitations, decides to instead begin with colour and to end by adding black lines after the fact, which do not delimit the areas of colour, or create contours (42).

Gagnon goes on to show how this difference continues in larger paintings, and the analysis is accurate and important, in my opinion. But in a book ostensibly on Riopelle in the

context of the Automatist movement, I'm surprised and disappointed that very little mention is made of similar experiments by other younger members of the group, such as Marcel Barbeau and Jean-Paul Mousseau. It's not enough to show how Riopelle differed from Borduas. I'm afraid this will be a continuing complaint in the remarks that follow.

When looking at how Riopelle applied paint to canvas, Gagnon devotes some time to a method called *décalcomanie* whereby colour is applied to one surface, and then a decal effect is acquired by blotting another paper or canvas surface to the first, the result being a relatively uncontrolled, surprising image appearing as the paper is lifted—an image that can be kept as such or further developed. This was a technique used by the European Surrealists, especially Oscar Dominguez. It is not discussed much in studies of Automatist art because Riopelle was the only member of the group who used it to any extent. Gagnon returns to it in a central chapter entitled "Imprint and Invisibility," arguing that, in his use of the spatula, Riopelle introduced "a factor of invisibility into the act of painting" similar to the "invisibility" that occurs in decalcomania before the applied sheet is lifted. He gives evidence that Riopelle did not start by applying pigment to the palette knife or spatula, but by applying it to the canvas and then pressing the implement into it. As Gagnon explains, "It is then that the spatula came into play, crushing the mound of paint laid down. It is important to note that at that moment the spatula's blade hides what is going on beneath it. And thus an instant of invisibility is introduced into the very act of painting" (115). He then cites Didi-Huberman arguing,

*Tuchè* and *technè*: the history of ancient art is full of dramas and magical accomplishments that resulted from their meetings. These encounters generate a principle for the imprint, which leads to the

following non-principle: *we never know exactly what is going to result*. The form, in the imprint process, is never rigorously 'pre-visible': it is always problematic, unstable, open (116).

And Gagnon goes on to cite Derrida who suggests that anyone who draws "is a great clairvoyant, a visionary who as long as he is drawing, if his drawing comes to pass, is blind" (116). I find these observations trenchant, and certainly relevant to Riopelle's methods, but I don't follow Gagnon when he argues that Riopelle was unique in his practice. Derrida's remarks clearly apply to anyone who draws, and I would argue that a moment of invisibility would have occurred each time another Automatist painter, Marcelle Ferron, applied her often huge spatulas to the surface of a painting, before she spread a great swipe of mixed colour, equally as much as it did with Riopelle. I simply can't agree with Gagnon, who seems to agree with Riopelle that he had introduced a new element and gone beyond Automatism, reaping "with each stroke of the spatula the benefits of total chance..." (128). I find this observation surprisingly overstated, given all the conscious preparation needed even before a first stroke is made (which does not, in any way, reduce the importance of the spontaneous gesture).

Gagnon's interest in the term "total chance" goes back to the fact that Riopelle used it with reference to Nietzsche in a note he wrote for the catalogue of *Véhémences confrontées*, an exhibition organized by the French painter Georges Mathieu of important American and European artists in March 1951. I am not sure what Riopelle meant by "chance" in his statement, nor am I convinced by Gagnon's explanation, but I would suggest that a possible source of the painter's sudden interest in Nietzsche might have been his frequenting of the group around the French critic Georges Duthuit. This group of French artists and

intellectuals included Patrick Waldberg, Isabelle Waldberg, and Robert Lebel, who had all been involved in a set of open letters that spoke about Nietzsche, published in New York during the war in the Surrealist magazine *VVV*. Isabelle Waldberg had been a source of information about, and translation of, German philosophers for the *Acéphale* group in Paris before the war and it was she who invited Riopelle to share an exhibition with her in Paris in March of 1952, a major event in the advancement of his career. If we are looking for a possible source of Riopelle's citing of Nietzsche, I would suggest her. In any case, pages 134 and 135 and the following chapter have a very interesting account of the debate among intellectuals in Europe and North America about control and non-control, consciousness and non-consciousness, chance and desire in art making. The only objection I would raise is that, if Automatism were really as important in this book as the title suggests, there would be at least a nod in the direction of other members of the Automatist group, such as Fernand Leduc and Claude Gauvreau, who had much to say about these questions.

Finally, I would say that, for me, one of the most interesting parts of this book is Chapter 7, "Imprint and Invisibility," mentioned above. Here, Gagnon relates his comments about Riopelle's "blind" use of the spatula to works the artist made much later, when he was using stencils and imprints of a wide variety of objects, from dead animals to horse-shoes to his own hand, in order to make images for works leading up his *Hommage à Marcel Duchamp* (1990) and, of course, eventually to his monumental elegy for Joan Mitchell, the *Hommage à Rosa Luxembourg* (1992). It bothers me that Gagnon says not a word about the work Pierre Gauvreau was doing around the same time, also using spray paint and stencils but with results quite different from Riopelle's. But,

grumbling aside, Gagnon's is a fascinating examination of a technique used late in the careers of both Riopelle and Gauvreau, and I would suggest that interested readers might have a look at earlier essays where Gagnon worked out his ideas giving some details not included in this book. The first, to my knowledge, was "Negative Impressions," published in the 1993 catalogue, *Riopelle, Œuvres vives*, by the Michel Tétrault Art International Gallery, where the *Hommage à Rosa Luxembourg* was shown along with other works of the same facture. In that brief essay, Gagnon makes connections between Riopelle's work and modern graffiti artists, as well as prehistoric artists in the caves of France. I would recommend especially a larger essay that impressed me hugely at the time of its publication: Gagnon's *Riopelle: visibilité et invisibilité*, published in 2014 as the introductory essay to Volume 4 of the *Jean Paul Riopelle Catalogue raisonné*. This essay contains not only what are obvious kernels of sections of the book now under review, but also full-page reproductions of such things as prehistoric cave drawings besides texts written by various artists, including Riopelle, for *Véhémences confrontées*.

In conclusion, although *Jean Paul Riopelle and the Automatiste Movement* disappoints me in some ways, mainly because of my own obsessions, I still admire it as a concise and admirable account of Riopelle's development as an artist, of his ideas concerning his own work, and of the fascinating directions his work took over the years, fueled by seemingly irrepressible creative energy. ¶

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