Why does the name of a metro station matter?

Crédit: «Rename Metro Lionel-Groulx for Oscar Peterson» Facebook Group by Sharon Hyman, Design by Nicole Aline Legault

We may not realize it, but the urban spaces we traverse in our day-to-day lives actually unfold in front of us like novels. Walking down streets named after national heroes, watching birds sit on the heads of statues, what we are actually encountering is a narrative structure of the book called «national culture».

This is why one of the most memorable actions we have seen in the wake of the George Floyd protests is the destruction of monuments, particularly those depicting Confederate War generals in the United States. These defiant acts are so provocative precisely because they force us to confront the fact that the cultural history our nations celebrate in the form of statues, public holidays, and street names, is in fact written by colonizers, where the presence of the people they suppressed along the way is categorically denied and erased. The names we see in the city around us emerge as a language speaking of its cultural history. But what happens when this language does not resonate equally with all of the city's residents?

Crédit: Illustration by Nicole Aline Legault - Facebook

In Montreal, a petition has emerged to rename Metro Lionel-Groulx after the jazz legend, Oscar Peterson. Since its creation in June, the Facebook group has around 1200 members, and the petition itself has received roughly 22,000 signatures. Nevertheless, there has been resistance both from the Societe de Transport Montreal (STM) and from members of the public who have created a counter-petition that has garnered more than 10,000 signatures. But why does changing the name of a metro station matter, and why is this stirring such passionate debate?

Perhaps some answers can be found in looking more closely at who these men were. Lionel Groulx (1878-1967) was a historian, priest, and Quebec nationalist even though he denied advocating for separatism. He is often credited for being the father of modern Quebec, and throughout his life fought to preserve French Canadian autonomy, especially through promoting the use of the French language as a form of claiming a Quebec identity. Oscar Peterson (1925-2007) on the other hand, was born in Montreal to a migrant family from the West Indies and eventually became a multiple Grammy award-winning jazz musician. The metro station in question is located in the neighborhood of Saint-Henri, where Peterson grew up and after which he named one of his most iconic songs. The petition was started by a Montrealer named Naveed Hussain, who claims it was a COVID passion project, and that he was inspired not only by the fluidity in Peterson's music but also by his role in civil rights movements in the 1960s.

This debate is not just about a name, then, but about the history the city chooses to remember. In 2019, Quebec received the second highest number of immigrants in Canada. Even though we can witness diversity in the faces we see on the streets of Montreal, this diversity is not reflected in the story told to us by the names of the places *everyone* inhabits. One of the reasons STM is resisting the petition is because they insist that metro station names must be the same as the name of a major street near the station, in order for people to better orient themselves within the city. Ironically, however, a street name had to be changed to Rue Lionel Groulx *in order to* name the metro station after him. This clearly shows an intention to prioritize certain figures as more important to the cultural history of Quebec.

STM defends itself by saying that metro station names matter because they help orient individuals according to the names of the streets. I agree, but I also think there is a question of orienting oneself culturally that we often seem to ignore. We better understand ourselves and our place in a city through the names of its places, which can become personally significant and end up having nothing to do with the name after all. Nevertheless, the names we see around us only speak to one version of history. The petition to change the name of Station Lionel-Groulx is more than just a petition, it's a rallying shout for recognition. It's a reminder of all the stories we are not hearing about when we are on our daily commute. If the name of a place gives us the language by which we can lay claim to the city as our own, then why is so much of this language frozen in a specific narrative of Quebec's history? Why is the city so reluctant to share other cultural narratives that are just as much part of Quebec's story?

Perhaps the most interesting outcome of this petition is the debate that it has incited. Through numerous Facebook comments, both for and against the issue, what emerges is that people feel very strongly about the cultural figures after whom important locations are named. So when we ask the question of why this petition matters, we would realize that it matters because everybody who calls Montreal home wants a say in the story being written by their city. On the surface level, the petition began as a movement towards including Black voices in the history of Quebec, or more specifically, Montreal. However, what it has revealed is that history is not just a matter of remembering or commemorating. Rather, history is being formed within the clash of opinions, where Montrealers are coming to realize just how little they know of their past. I would hope, then, that the real change that happens is that we reclaim the stories our city tells us, and we continue to challenge the dominant narratives imposed by monuments and names.

If anything, this should be even more possible in Quebec. For a province where under every license plate, you will see the words *Je me Souviens*, cultural memory is not simply an aftermath, but rather an active promise.

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