
A Critical Survey of Recent Geographical Research on *la Franco-Américanie*

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Introduction

On March 15, 1980, the French Institute at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts hosted a colloquium on Franco-Americans – the first in a series of colloquia held annually on the same subject. Appropriately, the first colloquium was focused on an assessment of the status of research on *la Franco-Américanie*. There were contributions on community studies, language, literature and on the migration of French-Canadians to the United States. The proceedings were subsequently published under the editorial supervision of Professor Claire Quintal with the generous financial support of the Conseil de la vie française en Amérique (Quintal and Vachon, 1980). During the course of the day's intellectual and social activities, old friends made contact while new friendships were begun. That first colloquium brought together a small group of scholars and nonscholars with a shared interest which would be nurtured by the colloquia which followed. It was an auspicious beginning and an event long overdue!

Several of us present that day in Worcester ten years ago are in the group currently convened. The small community has grown significantly since then and while the venue has changed, the task before us seems to be much as it was then. We are to inventory the progress made in and chart the future of Franco-American studies. My

particular assignment is a critical commentary on the contributions of geographers to the field of inquiry. My remarks will be confined to those works produced during the last ten years.

CARTOGRAPHY

Many maps have appeared in print for the first time which reflect upon the Franco-American experience. Most are integral parts of books or articles and are designed to enhance the text. Geographers, by the nature of their perspective, can be counted on to make good use of them. Other writers, whose works could benefit from their use, lamentably ignore them. Maps, when well designed, can illustrate, inform and stimulate inquiry. I find them most useful when they are provocative. Maps included in books and articles are less accessible because they are seldom catalogued. Others, when collected frequently around a central theme and published as an atlas are more readily available.

Several atlases which have been published in the last decade deserve some mention here. The highly acclaimed *Historical Atlas of Canada* is well known to most in this audience (Harris, 1987). The maps meet a very high standard of cartographic design and execution and are accompanied by a brief but informative text. The maps relevant to Franco-American studies are found in the sections entitled « St. Lawrence Settlements » and « Interior Expansion ». *We the People: An Atlas of America's Ethnic Diversity* has been accorded the same kind of high praise and includes two maps showing the distribution of Americans of French ancestry and those of Haitian ancestry based on the 1980 U.S. Census (Allen and Turner, 1987). Another valuable addition to the cartographic literature, *This Remarkable Continent: An Atlas of United States and Canadian Society and Cultures*, does not match the afore-mentioned atlases in quality of production but compensates for that by including maps, some of which have never been published, that both delight and stimulate (Rooney, Zelinsky and Louder, 1982). The sections on language and place names, religion and ethnicity include several maps of particular interest. Another atlas with a narrower focus should prove of great interest and use to specialists in Cajun history and genealogy. *An Atlas of Louisiana*

Surnames of French and Spanish Origin includes maps which show the distribution in Louisiana and east Texas of one hundred Acadian patronyms based on household telephonic data (West, 1986). Additional genealogical sources were consulted to provide a brief history of initial settlement for each of the families. The *Atlas de la francophonie: le monde francophone*, a modest but attractive work has recently been produced at Laval University (Waddell, 1989). It provides a timely perspective with maps and brief text on the use of the French language – as a mother tongue, as a second language and as an official language around the globe. As such, it is only incidentally and marginally involved with *la Franco-Américanie*. Similarly marginal are the following regional atlases which complement each other and complete the continental dimension of *la francophonie*: *Atlas de l'Acadie* (Arsenault et al., 1976), *Atlas de l'Ontario français* (Vallières and Villemure, 1981), *Atlas des francophones de l'ouest* (Bédard and Nickerson, 1979). Finally, the Geography Department at Laval University has produced *La francophonie nord-américaine à la carte*, an interactive computer atlas. The maps and the linguistic and ethnic data upon which they are based are found also in *Voir et chiffrer la francophonie nord-américaine*. Both are unpublished but available from the Secrétariat permanent des peuples francophones.

INSTITUTIONAL STUDIES

I have not been asked today to set the agenda for Franco-American studies but note, nevertheless, the enormous void which exists in the scholarly literature on our institutional life, past and present. A quick browse of *Le guide franco-américain* or of a city directory for Manchester during the « Golden Age » of *la Franco-Américanie*, will reveal the breadth of religious, educational, fraternal, social, intellectual and economic institutions which played such large roles in our communities. Modest, but most welcome contributions on this subject have been made recently by geographers.

The brief study by Thouez and Hamelin of the Association canado-américaine (ACA), informs us, by means of a questionnaire of its members, of the changes in membership and of the functions of the Association which have accompanied the steady assimilation of Franco-

Americans (Thouez and Hamelin, 1986). The conclusions of the study suggest an expansion of the cultural role of the ACA, a modification of a traditional function of the venerable institution which appears to be already underway. Stump's studies of ethnic parishes in the United States note the numerical changes that have occurred by region and ethnic group, including French, over the period 1900 to 1980 and may be taken as a measure of the relative rate of assimilation of these groups (Stump, 1983 and 1986). Trépanier's study of the Catholic church in Louisiana focuses more precisely on the relationship between the church and ethnicity (Trépanier, 1986). Apart from its utility as a religious institution, fidelity to church is seen by the Louisiana French as a means of maintaining tradition and a convenient means of providing contrast between themselves and Anglo-Americans.

LANDSCAPES AND MATERIAL CULTURE

The contribution of geographers to the study of Franco-American landscapes or to aspects of their material culture have been limited due in large part to the character of the French-Canadian migration. Since most went to cities there was little prospect for creating anything culturally distinctive. The work places (mills) were constructed for them and served other ethnic groups as well. Their living spaces (three-decker or company row housing) were similarly provided for them and, therefore, show no distinctive architectural style. As with other ethnic groups, French-Canadian migrants were grafted onto the mass culture of the new industrial city. The « Petits Canadas » of mill towns did, in fact, represent distinctive ethnic space but differed little in general appearance from other ethnic neighborhoods beyond the use of signs and the large number, size and the architectural style of ecclesiastical buildings.

It was especially in rural areas where French-Canadian migrants, whether as initial settlers or subsequent occupants of a previously settled area, were able to mold or modify the preexisting natural and cultural landscape and, in so doing, mark it as distinctively French. The exceptional cases of French-Canadian rural settlement are to be found in northern New England, a few scattered areas of the Midwest and southern Louisiana. In northern Vermont, McHenry found that

Yankee farms purchased by Québécois farmers were distinctive in appearance because of their bright colors and barn murals (McHenry, 1976). Elsewhere, he observed, through field work and areal photographs, the persistence of the long lot survey near Alburg, Vermont despite subsequent modification by Yankee farmers. In Orleans county, just south of the Québec border, he noted how French-Canadian farmers had modified the Yankee rural landscape by systematic removal of tree lines and field consolidation «giving the landscape a Quebec-like appearance» (McHenry, 1986).

The upper St. John Valley in northern Maine and adjacent New Brunswick is another segment of the political frontier along which cultural transfer has been noted. The distinctive agricultural colony organized by its Acadian and Québécois settlers was ruptured by the superimposition of the international boundary in 1842. Konrad has examined aspects of the material culture of the region and the forces which have guided its evolution on each side of the boundary (Konrad, 1980). The Madawaska twin barn, for example, found only on the U.S. side is considered a fusion of barn building traditions of both French-Canadian and Yankee cultures – the concept having originated in Québec but adapted to the economic needs of farmers in Maine (Konrad, 1982; Konrad and Chaney, 1982). More recent incorporations of distinctively Québécois or Acadian architectural styles or ornamentation are attributed to the reawakening of cultural pride among the Franco-Americans in Maine (Konrad, 1986). In a more recent monograph, the twin-barn study has been deftly integrated into a schematic for borderland studies which offers potential use in the further examination of interaction and cultural transfers between Franco-Americans and French Canadians (McKinsey and Konrad, 1989).

Much of the landscape and material culture of southern Louisiana has been crafted by the region's amphibious Cajuns. Apart from Québec, Acadiana provides the only example of a folk culture region in North America organized by francophone people. The elements of that culture are currently experiencing the stress of modernization and the intrusion of elements of the popular culture. Fortunately, those elements have been studied and continue to receive the scrutiny of scholars, some of whom are geographers. Building on the life-long

efforts of Professor Fred Kniffen at Louisiana State University, his students and others continue the work of cataloguing, measuring, classifying the components of Cajun material culture. Kniffen's early studies of folk housing (Kniffen, 1936) were carried forward by Newton, one of his students, who traced the houses of French architectural heritage to the building traditions of France, Canada and the Caribbean (Newton, 1985). The advent of the age of lumbering after 1880 and later of tract housing has changed substantially the built environment of the Louisiana French. While distinctions between American and French landscapes were readily discerned in 1920, the differences since then have diminished. Comeaux has expanded on his earlier studies of Cajun material culture (Comeaux, 1972 and 1978) with two recent contributions. The first, a study of the folk boats of Louisiana, presents an illustrated inventory of some of the boats, of their specific uses, of the conditions accompanying successful modification and finally of their singularly important role in the lives of many Cajuns (Comeaux, 1985). His most recent contribution is a study of the Cajun farmstead whose common elements reflect their form and function and which are shown to vary little within Acadiana (Comeaux, 1991).

CAJUN STUDIES

Apart from the studies on material culture noted above, southern Louisiana has attracted the attention of several geographers. «Projet Louisiane», a major research effort organized, in part by members of the Laval University Geography Department, was mounted with the financial support of the Ford Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the Canadian Arts Council. The collective product of their effort was substantial. Much of it appearing initially as a special issue of the *Cahiers de géographie du Québec* under the editorial supervision of Professors Louder and Waddell (Louder and Waddell, 1979). Contributions by geographers to that special issue included an article by Waddell which analyzed the specific nature of Cajun culture which he judged to be at variance with its perception by the local elite and by Québécois (Waddell, 1979). Two articles focused on language, one by Breton and Louder on the language geography of Acadiana (Breton and Louder, 1979), another by Maguire on Creole (Maguire,

1979). Louder noted some interesting comparisons between the French Quarter of New Orleans and Vieux-Québec (Louder, 1979) and with LeBlanc examined the rapid assimilation of the Cajuns of East Texas (Louder and LeBlanc, 1979). «*Projet Louisiane*» would later produce two outstanding monographs by geographers. In one, Trépanier examines the contemporary status and condition of Cajun culture in Louisiana (Trépanier, 1989). Based on extensive field work in 1981 and 1982, it includes an impressive array of documentation much of it in the form of maps. In the other, Robert Maguire traces the socioeconomic evolution of the francophone Black Creole community of Parks, Louisiana (Maguire, 1989).

Two articles by Estaville examine the historic efforts at delineating the Cajun and the Louisiana French region (Estaville, 1986a, 1986b and 1990). He notes that attempts at mapping Cajuns have suffered from excessive generalization, from confusion between Cajun and French (the latter includes Creole and foreign stock), and from flawed methodology. He moreover points to the absence of maps which illustrated the Cajun region for the period 1801 to 1933. Estaville concludes, however, that historic data are available (U.S. manuscript schedules) to produce those maps while additional data, as yet unexploited, could improve upon the quality of maps seeking to illustrate contemporary distributions. Forty-five examples of maps depicting the Louisiana French based on a wide array of material and nonmaterial cultural markers are summarized, all of which suffer from similar flaws. One of the maps, Estaville's own, seeks to bridge the 19th century gap in mapping.

Estaville's major argument with many contemporary writers is with the common assumption of isolation experienced by Cajuns during the 19th century (Estaville, 1987 and 1988a). The cartographic gap which he reveals is symptomatic of the problem. Cajuns seemed to have fallen through the cracks of history. Their historic «*dark age*» roughly parallels that of their «*cousins*» in maritime Canada. Were the Cajuns isolated or was the assumption of their isolation simply an easy explanation of their quaint, folksy and backward character? Estaville identifies three studies of the 1930s as the source of the myth whose life was sustained by the works of twenty-three scholars – all of them cited! In his most recent works, Estaville challenges several

other myths (Estaville, 1988b and 1990). Contrary to conventional wisdom, he insists that the Louisiana French were mostly farmers, were not agriculturally backward, had access to innovations and participated in urban life, had families no larger than Anglos and suffered serious loss of language before 1900. The evidence which he marshalls to support his claims is impressive, varied and to this reader convincing. I will, however, defer to the current generation of scholars of Louisiana should they choose to engage Estaville in debate.

LA FRANCOPHONIE CONTINENTALE

In my opinion, the most significant contribution of geographers to the study of Franco-Americans is a descriptive model conceptualized by the geographers of Laval University with the significant contribution of other scholars. The model is at once both a spatial and temporal expression of the French fact in North America. It incorporates the dynamics of the origin and development of French settlement, its past and current geographical extent, its occasional conceptualization and the prospects for its future. The model provides a context for *la Franco-Américanie*. I consider its major value to be the coherence it gives to *la francophonie continentale* all of whose parts are bound in a web of historic and contemporary interaction.

The outline and major components of the model are included in the well-known volume, *Du continent perdu à l'archipel retrouvé* (Louder and Waddell, 1983), which incorporated most of the articles formerly published in two separate issues of the *Cahiers de géographie du Québec* (Louder, Morissonneau and Waddell, 1979; Louder and Waddell, 1979). In addition several articles, which appeared before the publication of the book, can be effectively incorporated into the model, while other works published afterward elaborate or give additional substance to it. The model has three spatial or territorial components, one that is currently vibrant, and apparently viable even as it experiences rapid and revolutionary change, another which has already expired but whose past is well documented and finally one whose future appears clouded and threatened.

The first component of the model is the culture hearth of *la francophonie continentale*: the Laurentian plain of Québec (Waddell, 1987a). The business of New France was the fur trade but its enduring expression is found in the place – a very small part of the colony – which served as home for most of its population and which nurtured a distinctive New World culture. Its function as historic foyer is complemented today by its current role as « referential hearth » – the place to which most Franco-Americans and others can turn to for confirmation of their origins, or even a place that can offer a cultural refuge. The secondary hearths of Acadia, old and new, southern Louisiana, the Prairies of western Canada and the Caribbean each of which has spawned and nourished a variant form of francophone culture can easily be accommodated by the model (Arsenault, 1982 and 1988; Vernex, 1983; Louder and Waddell, 1988).

The second spatial component of the model has reference to the vast extent of the continent from the Appalachians to the Rockies, from the Arctic to the Gulf of Mexico. It was the place of the lucrative fur trade of New France, the place that was « overrun » by the « coureurs de bois », the place that was ultimately lost to the unrelenting forces of Anglo-Saxon political, economic, and demographic dominance. We know it well from our historical atlases and from the vestiges of Empire which dot the landscape and testify to its former French character.

The French language « islands » which today are scattered over the continent are largely expressions of the 19th and 20th century diaspora of French Canadians. They constitute, in the aggregate, the archipelago, or the third territorial category of the Laval model. Morissonneau provides a credible explanation of a population whose mobility was prompted by the character of continental resources and the nature of their exploitation (Morissonneau, 1983). The continental destinations of « Canadien » and « Acadien » varied in terms of their natural social and economic conditions and in the location of each relative to the hearth. Many drifted west to the agricultural colonies of the Prairies. Some went to the cosmopolitan centers of New York City, Chicago, Detroit, Minneapolis. McQuillan demonstrated the extent of French-Canadian settlement in the farming communities, logging camps and mining towns of the American Midwest (McQuillan,

1983). The majority, as Vicero has shown, chose the more familiar and closer mill towns of New England (Vicero, 1968; Ancil, 1983; Allen, 1972 and 1974; Thornton, 1985). The linguistic expression of the diaspora in Canada has been treated in several articles by Cartwright. The territorial patterns of English and French language are viewed from the perspective of change, of interaction between the two language groups, and finally of policy implications for both provincial and federal governments. (See Cartwright's work in the bibliography.)

Most human migrations are accompanied by a varied set of relationships between those who left and those who remained – between the hearth and the linguistic-cultural islands which make up the archipelago. The evolution of those relationships, their current condition and future status are at the very heart of the Laval model. Even as they left the hearth, many of the emigrants planned their return. Repatriation en masse was very early dismissed as unlikely but formal programs to encourage the return of migrants received endorsement and financial support from the state and the church. Many did return to the hearth for social, recreational, religious and economic reasons only to leave it once again (LeBlanc, 1983b, 1985a and 1988b). For the francophone elite, the diaspora was initially perceived as a serious threat to the viability of the hearth but that fear was replaced by the vain hope and promise of territorial aggrandizement – « le Québec aggrandi ». Labelle made available his frozen *terre promise* for agricultural colonization (Morissonneau, 1978; Morissonneau and Asselin, 1980) while other visionaries saw the eventual latinization of large parts or all of Anglo-America (LeBlanc, 1985b).

Diaspora settlements were seldom culturally secure even when accompanied by a supportive social infrastructure, nor even in the few cases where they grew large enough to achieve a majority at the small town or county level. The Franco-American elite declared to all the clear intention of Franco-Americans to remain French while judiciously assuming the civic responsibilities of their adopted society. The elite was deceived by the absence of excessive hostility by most Americans to the pursuit of their cultural-linguistic goals. By contrast they could point to the harsh treatment accorded the French in

Manitoba, Ontario or the Maritimes. The elite failed to gauge accurately the unwritten agenda of America with respect to its immigrant groups. Occasional charity or indifference was replaced by unmistakable animosity after World War I. The Great Depression served another severe blow to Franco-American cultural aspirations as it brought an abrupt end to the migration depriving the diaspora communities of new «blood». The many ties that bound those communities to the culture hearth weakened (LeBlanc, 1988a). Québec became an island unto itself. Preoccupied with its own cultural struggle, it was distracted from its historic relationship with the archipelago. The specter of continued assimilation of the francophone islands loomed large.

The Quiet Revolution marked a significant turning point in the relationship between the hearth and the archipelago. The self-conscious assertion of Québécois nationalism breathed a new vitality into the cultural life of the province. With greater self-confidence and a sense of security accompanying the political gains of the 1960s and 1970s contact was reestablished with the culturally moribund communities of the archipelago. Québec's prolonged amnesia or indifference vis-à-vis *la Franco-Américanie* was replaced by concern and the assumption of a maternal responsibility to those communities (Louder and Beach, 1988). Louder and Waddell have reflected on how the relationship has changed because of its prolonged interruption (Louder and Waddell, 1988). The nurturing role of Québec, whether sovereign or not, remains as critical as it has always been, but they maintain that the performance of that role must not be accompanied by any appearance of condescension or imperialism. Furthermore, they argue that Québec must be prepared to pursue the relationship in the English language! Dupont has raised similar questions relating to the continued evolution of Québécois and Franco-American culture, defining each as it has changed, assessing the perception of each group by the other and the continued interaction of each with larger anglophone culture of the continent (Dupont, 1988).

Recent studies of the cultural condition of Québec and of its role as culture hearth can be readily incorporated into the Laval model Kaplan has sketched out the broad course of French-Canadian history in which he notes successive stages of institutional dominance, each of which he associates with a particular spatial form (Kaplan, 1989).

His analysis, surprisingly carried out without reference to the work of Laval geographers, concludes that the province of Québec today is the current spatial expression of the secularized condition of the nation – «the French-Canadian Palestine, perceived by all as the national homeland». For some the attraction of a national homeland has become compelling. Waddell's study of *les revenants* reminds us that the persistent theme of repatriation, as old as the diaspora itself, can have its contemporary expression (Waddell, 1986), while the examination of «Franco-Floribécois» by Dupont and Dussault provides evidence that the diaspora continues (Dupont and Dussault, 1982; Dupont, 1982).

In summary, the Laval model appears well grounded on historic fact and upon sound interpretation. However, I am left somewhat ill at ease by visions of a future for *la francophonie continentale* expressed by geographers and others which seem excessively optimistic. The Laurentian hearth unquestionably is more vital and culturally secure today as a part of Canada and would be even more so should Québec opt for sovereignty. But what of the archipelago? One has to be impressed by the revitalization of the cultural role of the Association canado-américaine, by an active Franco-American Center at the University of Maine and by the current effort to market Franco-American culture on television, but can these or similar efforts which might be pursued in the future hope to slow the tide of assimilation? The French fact in North America is, after all a small fact, demographically or geographically speaking. Outside of Québec the number of francophones is small and declining. The islands of the archipelago atrophy and remain vulnerable due to their scattered distribution and remoteness from the hearth. I wonder if it is worthwhile to counter the losses by restoring some of the numbers to the ethnic mass by a generous redefinition of what a Franco is. Doesn't the concept of francogene, as identified by Louder and Waddell (Louder and Waddell, 1988), i.e. anyone of French-Canadian ancestry, while surely adding numerical strength and permitting more and larger circles on the maps of *la francophonie continentale*, contribute to a self-deception of the strength of that community? The suggestion recently made that an even more liberal definition of Franco-American to include « anyone with an interest in French culture » or « anyone with

a French surname» would achieve even further dilution of an already weakened ethnic broth. I have absolutely no quarrel with the idea of voluntary association or identification with an ethnic group as a substitute for membership by virtue of birth or language as in the past.

I look in vain for any continental trend which would rescue the archipelago and cause the pessimism expressed here to dissipate. Outside of Québec, French language will continue to have limited utility and the English Only movement in the United States reminds us of the limited patience of its many adherents with the pace of linguistic assimilation. Are any new national parishes being formed or are they being retired? Is French being restored as the language of instruction in the parochial schools that have escaped the bishop's budgetary axe? Don't courthouse records reveal a greater rather than a reduced rate of intermarriage among Franco-Americans? We may still be an underachieving ethnic community but doesn't the evidence show that Franco-Americans have begun to experience the social mobility to complement their unquestioned geographic mobility? And doesn't this mainstreaming into the larger society place at even greater risk the cultural life of Franco-Americans? Proximity facilitated the massive transfer of cultural institutions from Québec to the United States and permitted most Franco-Americans to maintain intimate and culturally nourishing relations with the homeland. Notwithstanding that special condition, assimilation, while forestalled, could not be prevented. I doubt that even a revitalized Québec committed to its maternal role can alter the dismal course of this history. Many of you will remember the melancholic song sung by Pauline Julien entitled *Mommy* in which a child of the diaspora, apparently assimilated but vaguely aware of her heritage, asks her mother a series of plaintive questions. What happened to my French name? What were those songs you sang to me in French when I was a baby? Where in Québec did we come from? Tell me the wonderful stories of Québec. How come we lost the game? Are you to blame? The mother answers each question ending with the refrain, it's too late, it's too late. The unequivocal finality of the song writer's statement, I find appropriate. We cannot redo history. Obviously it is not too late to fashion a vital future for *la Franco-Américanie*.

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