

Tracking the Cheshire Cat: Ethnic Americans and American Ethnicity on Cape Breton Island

Michael Taft

Volume 13, Number 1, 1991

Frontières: interactions canado-américaines
Bridges and Boundaries: Canadian/U.S. Interactions

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1081697ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1081697ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Taft, M. (1991). Tracking the Cheshire Cat: Ethnic Americans and American Ethnicity on Cape Breton Island. *Ethnologies*, 13(1), 35–44.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1081697ar>

Article abstract

Among the largest, yet most neglected, ethnic groups in Canada are those who have emigrated from the United States. While their differences from other ethnic and immigrant groups are quite evident — no American clubs, festivals, native foods and dances, etc. — their identity as a national, immigrant group with certain shared ethnic traits is undeniable. The problem remains, however: how can this group be characterized according to its shared ethnicity? The answer is not easy. Using material gathered from interviews with ethnic Americans now living on Cape Breton Island, this paper explores the question of Americanness, group identity, the context of the group, and ethnicity itself.

TRACKING THE CHESHIRE CAT: ETHNIC AMERICANS AND AMERICAN ETHNICITY ON CAPE BRETON ISLAND*

Michael TAFT

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

Among Alice's problems with the Cheshire cat was that it kept dematerializing: she complained, "I wish you wouldn't keep appearing and vanishing so suddenly: you make one quite giddy". The cat's answer was to vanish more slowly, leaving behind its grin.¹

Although I would not want to push the analogy too far, I have felt a bit like Alice lately: trying to track a group of people who vanish when caught, who remain elusive even when trapped within a cassette tape, who leave big, toothy grins behind in my imagination as I attempt to make some sense out of my quarry. I have not been tracing informants in some dream world—unless one considers Cape Breton Island no more than a phantasmagoria—nor have I been engaged in cryptozoological investigations. Yet my recent research has led me to wonder about the nature of my informants and to reconsider my notions of "ethnicity" and "group".

In 1987 and 1988 I interviewed immigrants from the United States (and their descendants) who have settled on Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia. My aim was to come to some understanding about a group of people, quite ubiquitous and influential in Canada, but who, nevertheless, have rarely been the subject of academic study.

My premise was that Americans are indeed an ethnic or national group, and that if scholars consider ethnic Ukrainians, Greeks, Chinese or Newfoundlanders to be groups worthy of study, then there is no reason not to include ethnic Americans within this purview. This premise grew not only out of some, perhaps flawed, egalitarian logic; being an ethnic American myself, I was aware that I carried certain cultural baggage from my homeland; that I was, in some not-quite-tangible ways, "different" from both natural-born

* I should like to thank the Department of the Secretary of State of Canada, Multiculturalism, for financing my research; the Beaton Institute, University College of Cape Breton for acting as my host and for their support and encouragement; and Ron Caplan and Shelley Posen for suggestions and references.

1. Lewis Carroll, *The Annotated Alice: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland & through the Looking Glass*, New York, Clarkson N. Potter, 1960, p. 90.

Canadians and immigrants from other countries. Identifying these differences, and thus identifying Americans as a distinct group within Canadian culture, however, has forced me to confront a Cheshire cat.

In the past, those interested in multiculturalism have been more likely to ignore the grinning, half-materialized presence of ethnic Americans in Canada than to deal with them as a group, unless these Americans fell into the specific sub-groups of the United Empire Loyalists or descendants of American slaves. For example, Canadian census statistics have been, at best, erratic; the Department of Manpower and Immigration counted immigrants from the United States for the years 1900-1965, but Americans as an *ethnic* group were omitted from the population statistics of the 1971 census.² In the 1981 census, Americans were listed as a possible ethnic group, but curiously only 7,370 Canadians (and only 75 Nova Scotians) identified themselves under this category.³ It appears that the American remains invisible not only at the academic level, but at the local level as well. This “artificial quality” of the Canadian census—as Porter has described it⁴—reflects a general lack of consistency or understanding of Americans as an ethnic group. Anderson and Frideres described the situation well when they wrote “by convention or tradition . . . Americans are not considered ethnics” (p. 51).

There have, of course, been some overall studies of Americans in Canada, but these tend to be statistical works, rather than more detailed sociological or historical studies. Thus, the statistical study by Coats and MacLean is a starting-point for research into American ethnicity rather than a definitive work.⁵ The same may be said of studies such as those by Harvey and St. John-Jones.⁶ In fact, for modern American economic immigrants—such as white-collar workers and professionals—the few studies extant are of this type; for example, Boyd’s work is based on statistics rather than on fieldwork or historical documents.⁷

2. Alan B. Anderson and James S. Frideres, *Ethnicity in Canada: Theoretical Perspectives*, Toronto, Butterworths, 1981, p. 136-137, 140-155.
3. Statistics Canada, *Population: Ethnic Origin: Canada, Provinces, Urban Size Groups, Rural Non-Farm and Rural Farm*, 1981 Census of Canada, Catalogue 92-911, Ottawa, Statistics Canada, 1984, p. 1-13.
4. John Porter, “Ethnic Pluralism in Canadian Perspective”, p. 267-304 in Nathan Glazer and Daniel P. Moynahan (eds.), *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1975, p. 282.
5. Robert H. Coats and M. C. MacLean, *The American-Born in Canada: A Statistical Interpretation*, Toronto, Ryerson Press, 1943.
6. David Harvey, “Garrison Duty: Canada’s Retention of the American Immigrant”, *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 15, 1985, p. 169-187; L. W. St. John-Jones, “The Exchange of Population between the U.S.A. and Canada in the 1960s”, *International Migration Review*, 11, 1973, p. 32-51.
7. M. Boyd, “The American Emigrant in Canada: Trends and Consequences”, *International Migration Review*, 15, 1981, p. 650-670.

There are few, if any, studies on ethnic Americans in Canada similar to Lang's analysis of white-collar American immigrants in Ecuador.⁸

Canadian scholars have been, to some extent, blinded by the question of the americanization of Canadian culture (on which there are scores of writings), and consequently have ignored the presence of Americans as a factor in Canadian ethnicity.⁹ Friedenberg's polemic shows this blindness: his few observations on the nature of ethnic Americans in Canada are highly subjective and far removed from reality. His elaboration of Stein's contention that the position of ethnic Americans may be compared with that of Jews in respect to mainstream Canadian prejudices does not take into account the vast majority of immigrant Americans who have either shed or kept unexpressed any socio-political beliefs which they may have brought with them from the United States. Friedenberg is not alone in confusing the effect of United States culture on Canada with the effect of American ethnicity in Canada.¹⁰

Ethnic Americans themselves have not been helpful in describing their ethnicity or their experiences as immigrants. For example, Lesley Choyce's autobiography is a romantic view of dubious ethnographic value, whatever its merits as literature.¹¹ Although there are a number of anthologies in which immigrants to Canada describe their roles as ethnic newcomers, only one—to my knowledge—includes an immigrant from the United States: Andy Melamed's account of his new life in Canada may well be the only document of its kind which speaks to the questions I am raising in this paper.¹²

Folklorists have also, by and large, been followers of the "convention or tradition" described by Anderson and Frideres. For example, Georges' and Stern's bibliography has neither a section on American immigrants in Canada nor, for that matter, Canadian immigrants in the United States.¹³ Stern partially explains this lack by viewing ethnicity as an identity concept; that is, an ethnic

-
8. Norris G. Lang, "Transplanted Technicians: Americans on an Ecuador Sugar Plantation", in George L. Hicks and Philip E. Leis (eds.), *Ethnic Encounters: Identities and Contexts*, North Situate, MA, Duxbury Press, 1977, p. 103-118.
 9. On this matter, see T. H. B. Symons's review of *The Canadian Ethnic Mosaic: A Quest for Identity*, edited by Driedger, in *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 10, 1978, p. 159-164.
 10. Edgar Z. Friedenberg, "Changing Canadian Attitudes toward American Immigrants", in Leo Driedger (ed.), *The Canadian Ethnic Mosaic: A Quest for Identity*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1978, p. 135-146; David Lewis Stein, "'Some of My Best Friends': Americans as Canada's Jews", *Canadian Forum*, 55, June 1975, p. 25-27.
 11. Lesley Choyce, *An Avalanche of Ocean. The Life and Times of a Nova Scotia Immigrant*, Fredericton, NB, Fiddlehead Poetry Books and Goose Lane Editions, 1987.
 12. Andy Melamed, "Quebec: A Haven of Peace", in Milly Charon (ed.), *Between Two Worlds: The Canadian Immigration Experience*, Dunvegan, Ont., Quadrant Editions, 1983, p. 131-145.
 13. Robert A. Georges and Stephen Stern, *American and Canadian Immigrant and Ethnic Folklore: An Annotated Bibliography*, New York, Garland, 1982.

group is only an ethnic group if it identifies itself as such.¹⁴ Isajiw's widely-accepted definition of ethnicity also depends upon this identity factor:

ethnicity refers to: an involuntary group of people who share the same culture or to descendants of such people who identify themselves and/or are identified by others as belonging to the same involuntary group.¹⁵

Isajiw's ideas of "involuntary group" and "identified by others" partly explain American ethnicity in Canada, but not entirely. Many ethnic Americans in Canada neither identify themselves, nor are they identified by others, as members of a specific ethnic group, yet their shared background—that is, all coming from the United States—*involuntarily* gives them certain shared traditions.

My contention is that ethnicity is not solely a matter of perception, as Weber believed,¹⁶ but a matter of historical inheritance. One betrays one's ethnicity in one's expressiveness despite whatever perceptions one holds, or which others hold, about one's ethnicity. Thus, ethnicity exists independent of any function of solidarity. Manyoni's distinction between ethnicity as an "identity concept" and as a "structural concept" speaks to my point.¹⁷ The question is not so much, "are Americans in Canada an ethnic group"? as it is "how do Americans in Canada betray their ethnicity"?

Perhaps it is best to go back to Dundes's problematic, but pedagogically interesting, definition of a folk group: "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor".¹⁸ The common factor of American immigrants is their shared nationality; even if they do not form themselves into clubs, preserve national dishes and costumes, lobby politicians for recognition—even if they are not asked to partake in folk-fests, sit on multicultural boards—even if they are not discriminated against or picked out as a potentially dangerous social or political ethnic group—Americans cannot escape their one common factor of nationality.

Dundes's definition makes for difficulties, because it forces us to group people together, even if there seem to be no profound or significant points of cohesion among members of such a group. But why should our jobs be easy? If we only study those groups whose shared traditions are obvious, familiar, comfortable, visible or self-conscious, then we will miss much of what Canadian ethnicity has to offer. Like the fool who has dropped a dime in a dark alley,

14. Stephen Stern, "Ethnic Folklore and the Folklore of Ethnicity", *Western Folklore*, 36, 1977, p. 32.

15. Wsevolod W. Isajiw, "Definitions of Ethnicity", *Ethnicity*, 36, 1977, p. 32.

16. Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, volume I, New York, Bedminster Press, 1968, p. 389.

17. Joseph R. Manyoni, "Ethnics and Non-Ethnics: Facts and Fads in the Study of Intergroup Relations", in Martin L. Kovacs (ed.), *Ethnic Canadians: Culture and Education*, Regina, Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1978, p. 27-42.

18. Alan Dundes, *The Study of Folklore*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1965, p. 2.

but searches for it under a lamp-post because that's where the light is,¹⁹ we might never discover the less tangible commonalities which form people into involuntary—yet very real—groups.

Turning this problem around, perhaps we have been too complacent in our studies of visible ethnic groups; those ethnic Canadians who virtually call out to be recognized and studied. Do we assume too readily that Ukrainians, Italians, Jews or West Indians are indeed easily-defined ethnic groups? In his study, "Ethnic Identification in a Complex Civilization: Who Are the Lue"?' Moerman discovered that the more deeply he investigated what seemed to be a clearly-delineated ethnic group in Thailand, the more completely the ethnic boundaries of that group crumbled; he finally had to conclude that he might be able to define the Lue who lived in one part of Thailand, but he could only guess at what factors the Lue in general shared to make them an ethnic group.²⁰ Discovering ethnicity is more than a matter of esoteric or exoteric identification.

My point is that whenever we think we've arrived at a clear-cut definition of "group"—ethnic or otherwise—that is the time for some serious self-examination. Over-confidence only makes the Cheshire cat vanish that much more quickly.

Getting back to the Americans—what makes them so difficult to define as a group within the context of Cape Breton Island? As in other parts of the country, Cape Breton Americans do not, for the most part, consciously or self-consciously form themselves into a group, nor do they immediately identify themselves to others as immigrants from the United States. In turn, native Cape Bretoners do not always identify Americans as ethnically distinct from other come-from-aways.

I should not generalize, however, no matter how tempting the generalization is. On the whole, I have not found great ethnic pride among Americans, yet I have met one fellow whose great-grandfather was born in northern Maine and who, despite being a native-born Cape Bretoner, still thinks of himself as an ethnic American. He recalls his father constructing a flagpole for their front lawn and raising the American flag; his neighbors took a dim view of this, preferring that he fly the Union Jack. Instead of giving in to his neighbours, this man's father chopped down the pole.²¹ This man's pride in his American roots is obvious in his family legends, but also in his social activities and associations: for example, he has attended large family reunions held in Massachusetts, even

19. Ernest W. Baughman, *Type and Motif Index of the Folktales of England and North America*. The Hague. Mouton, 1966, J2259* (v).

20. Michael Moerman, "Ethnic Identification in a Complex Civilization: Who Are the Lue"?' *American Anthropologist*, 67, 1965, p. 1215-1229.

21. This story and other such information comes from taped interviews I conducted with Cape Breton Americans. Copies of these tapes are in the collection of the Beaton Institute at the University College at Cape Breton.

though he cannot officially trace his ancestors back to this particular large and influential New England group. He is also fond of talking about his experiences travelling around the United States, and he is especially proud of the fact that he does *not* have a Cape Breton accent.

If I had found a large group of like-minded ethnic Americans in Cape Breton, my job would be easier, but this man is definitely an anomaly, not only among Cape Breton Americans, but even within his own family—his brother and his sons seem totally acculturated to the island and cannot easily be identified as ethnic Americans.

Of course American immigrants to the island know that they are Americans, but they are also aware of themselves as members of several other overlapping groups—and here is where the problem arises in identifying them as an ethnic group. As I mentioned earlier, these Americans are distinct from the native population—they are come-from-aways—and because they live in a culture which is both literally and psychologically insular, they will never be anything but “strangers” on Cape Breton Island.²² Almost all Americans I have spoken with mention the fact that they are forever strangers. On an island where introductions begin with the question, “Who’s your father”?, Americans can never claim local citizenship.

But this come-from-away status is not the same as an ethnic identity; settlers from Ontario, Holland, and even mainland Nova Scotia are also come-from-aways and, at least from an outsider’s viewpoint, they form a single group of strangers which also includes Americans. Americans themselves understand this, and thus they more often ally themselves with mainlanders and other come-from-aways, than simply with other Americans, when discussing distinctions between themselves and Cape Bretoners.

In the Autumn of 1987 I attended a reunion of American back-to-the-land settlers. Here, I thought, is the secret life of the ethnic American—people coming together because of their common national heritage and their natural sense of community. But in actuality, this was not so much a reunion of former American back-to-the-landers, as it was a get-together of a cohort of friends, some of whom were Americans, but many of whom were come-from-aways from other parts of Canada or from Europe, along with a fairly good representation of native Cape Bretoners who were either neighbours of the American host or long-time friends of one or another member of the get-together. Rather than defining this group as a bunch of ethnic Americans, it would be more accurate to define them as a bunch of middle-class, fairly well-educated, cosmo-

22. Melvin M. Firestone made similar observations about outport Newfoundlanders in his “Mummers and Strangers in Northern Newfoundland”, in Herbert Halpert and G. M. Story (eds.), *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland: Essays in Anthropology, Folklore, and History*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1969, p. 62-75.

politans who had special interests in organic gardening, log buildings, crafts and politics. The fact that perhaps a third of them were of American descent would not have been paramount in their self-identification, nor would it have been terribly apparent to the outside observer.

I initially thought that the special group of Americans called back-to-the-landers would be the easiest to identify ethnically. Especially within the context of Cape Breton Island, they were and are quite distinctive. I should note that most of the back-to-the-landers who came up from the United States in the 1960s and 1970s either returned to the States after a few years, or became local farmers and entrepreneurs (rather than subsistence survivors) in their local Cape Breton communities, or migrated to urban centres such as Sydney and Halifax, using their back-to-the-land log cabins and restored farmhouses as would the typical Canadian family with a summer cottage.

But these Americans do see themselves, and are seen by others, as distinctive—even if they have left their back-to-the-land ways. Among themselves, they often use the term “hippy” to describe their identity—although outsiders use this term in a pejorative sense of this term. But to what extent is their group-identity related to their shared ethnic background?

The fact that they opted for an alternative life-style might point to their American roots, but their motives for becoming back-to-the-landers do not entirely stem from American political and social traditions. True, some of them mention their repugnance for American political events of the 1960s, the Vietnam War (although I have met only three genuine draft-dodgers in Cape Breton), and American crass commercialism and materialism as reasons for their escape to the land; but upon further probing, their reasons for going back to the land had more to do with personal dissatisfactions with the way they were living or earning a living, their increasing disaffection with urban or suburban life, and their sense of adventure. There was nothing essentially American about their decisions to leave the United States, and as several of them have pointed out to me, they were no different in their motives from the Ontario back-to-the-landers.

Is this a group of Americans, or is it a group of people with shared philosophies, politics, and aesthetics who just happen to come from the same country? Are they identifying with their ‘Americanness’, or with their shared concern for ecology and a life free from modern complexities? One might theorize that this very philosophical stance is a mark of the American—Thoreau and all that—but it seems impossible to separate American back-to-the-landers from those from Ontario according to philosophical viewpoint.

One must also remember that the back-to-the-land, anti-commercialism, left-of-centre politics which characterize these Americans were feelings shared by the so-called “sixties generation” from North America to Europe to the

Cultural Revolution in China and the Narita demonstrators in Japan. Is this a group of Americans or is it a generational group?

Of course, the Americans in Cape Breton, whether back-to-the-landers or not, can be separated from their Ontarian cousins by their storehouses of immigrant experiences and narratives. I was able to collect personal experience stories from almost all of my American informants on the difficulties of applying for landed immigrant status, packing for the trip north, troubles at the border-crossing, attitudes of their American friends and family, and first impressions of Canada.

This repertoire of stories certainly separated the Americans from Ontarian settlers, but they had a familiar ring in my ear. They were not that different from stories which I and my students collected in Saskatchewan from European immigrants. Stories of troubles with bureaucrats and red tape, the hardships of travel, settling in a new and strange land, and the like, link these Americans with all of the other immigrants to Canada, if not exactly in the content of their stories, then at least in the structure and overall message of these narratives. Are these Americans or are they immigrants? Is this an ethnic group, or more accurately, an experiential group?

The Americans I talked with were as loathe as I was to make generalizations about the differences between themselves and Canadians. But when pressed, most of them admitted that Americans were more likely to be more socially and politically active, to be more aggressive in their dealings with authority, than their Canadian neighbours. On the surface, at least, this seemed to be a valid ethnic distinction. In fact, many of the Americans I met *are* social activists in one way or another. Not that they are involved in provincial politics and mainstream political parties—most of them care little for this kind of activity—but many of them are involved in local organizations and have been founding members of—for example—craft guilds, cooperatives, a market gardening association, a cattle breeders' association, a sheep-farmers' association, local publications, heritage and preservation associations, day-care services, and ecological protest groups. Many Americans attribute their activism to their national background—American political aggressiveness and independence, the great liberal tradition and the town-hall meeting style of local government associated with American society, as well as the pioneer, anti-authoritarian nature of Americans.

But while this theory for American ethnicity seems workable in the abstract, it loses some of its strength in the real world. For example, the Cape Breton Americans I interviewed were not consistent in their attitude towards Canadian socio-political traditions. About half of those I questioned considered Canadians conservative by nature—that is, unwilling to try new ideas, too compliant with authority, too fatalistic in their approach to social change; the other half thought that Canadians were more progressive than Americans—that is, more willing

to accept socialism and government intervention in the economy, more tolerant and less violent towards people with unpopular opinions, and more even-handed in their international relations. Some Americans considered unemployment insurance and other social welfare to be an insult to their sense of independence, while others welcomed these programmes as a sign of a truly civilized and caring society. My point here is that American social activism may not be an outgrowth of some shared, ethnically-based political philosophy—the Americans in Cape Breton represent too wide a political spectrum to be classified in this way.

The more likely cause of social activism among Americans has to do with where they have settled, rather than with where they came from. At the very time when the younger generation of Cape Bretoners were leaving their rural communities to go to large, urban centres, American urbanites were taking over the old farms and homesteads in Cape Breton. The political activists and social doers native to Cape Breton had, in effect, traded places with their activist counterparts from the United States and Ontario. Thus, is social activism a function of American ethnic identity, or are we again looking at a generational, experiential, and social group which extends beyond the borders of the United States? Are these Americans naturally filling an activist slot left by the young Cape Bretoners? If these same Americans had moved to Toronto or Vancouver, would their social activism separate them from the rest of the population as an ethnic group?

Trying to discover American ethnic identity through comparisons with local Cape Breton identity would seem to be an exercise in futility. Both my American informants and I have been frustrated in the attempt. The Cheshire cat tried to prove its insanity to Alice by comparing itself with a dog: "To begin with . . . a dog's not mad. You grant that? . . . Well, then . . . you see a dog growls when it's angry, and wag its tail when it's pleased. Now *I* growl when I'm pleased, and wag my tail when I'm angry" (p. 89). Such logic befits the search for American ethnicity in Cape Breton.

I have not given up, however. American ethnicity is there. Much of it involves a shared allegiance with other groups—generational, experiential, educational, socio-political and geographical. In speaking with Americans, I recognize an affinity between them and me—a shared body of knowledge and assumptions which comes from being an American. Some of this affinity is of a negative sort—Americans are *not* this, or *not* that. Some of it is trivial—understanding the finer points of a hotdog, for example. Some of it has to do with a shared, insider's understanding of American politics and social institutions. Little of this affinity, however, manifests itself in outward display. But, of course, if there was a strong commonality of song and dance, costume and food, custom and belief, Americans would fit comfortably into the pantheon of Canadian ethnicity.

Cape Bretoners, too, see Americans as an ethnic group, separate from other come-from-aways, although it is difficult to break through the barriers of etiquette and hospitality Cape Bretoners naturally erect when talking to an American about Americans. Yet so many Cape Bretoners have either been to the “Boston States” to work for a time, or they know someone who has, that the American come-from-away is perhaps not as much a stranger as the Dutch, German or even the Ontarian. One American told me the following anecdote: he walked into the local community store one day and saw a neighbor looping some rope around his arm. He asked him what the rope was for, and the Cape Bretoner replied, “I’m going to lend a hand to an American”. I am tempted to see much in this small story—perhaps too much—but I think the free and easy attitude of this Cape Bretoner towards his American neighbour shows a kind of recognition of ethnicity *within* the general recognition of the American’s come-from-away status.

At the Queen’s croquet-ground, an argument broke out between the executioner and the King ever how to deal with the Cheshire Cat:

The executioner’s argument was, that you couldn’t cut off a head unless there was a body to cut it off from: that he had never had to do such a thing before, and he wasn’t going to begin at *his* time of life.

The King’s argument was, that anything that had a head could be beheaded, and that you weren’t to talk nonsense (p. 116-117).

I’m inclined to agree with the King. Any group that shares a common national origin is an ethnic group, even if the body of its shared traditions is not apparent. Americans remain one of the largest immigrant groups in Canada; they also remain in some sense “American”—even if this sense is elusive. We ignore the Cheshire Cat nature of their ethnicity at our peril.