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Writing an Ethnic Identity between Worlds: Claiming and Maintaining a Franco-American Self

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Résumé de l'article

Les immigrants d'ascendance européenne de tous horizons qui sont venus aux États-Unis à l'aube du XX^e siècle ont subi la même oppression religieuse, linguistique et ethnique. En évoquant les réalités des familles franco-canadienne et acadienne de l'auteur, ce document analyse certains motifs qui pourraient expliquer le manque relatif de réussite visible, de notoriété et d'unité des collectivités franco-américaines et de leurs membres, comparativement aux cohortes d'immigrants italiens et irlandais. En cherchant à mettre en lumière la dynamique au sein de la collectivité franco-américaine et l'imaginaire qui peuvent avoir contribué à cette situation, l'auteur s'intéresse à deux différences importantes entre les Franco-Américains et les autres groupes d'immigrants. L'idéologie héréditaire et conservatrice de la 'survivance' des Canadiens français et la proximité géographique du Canada, leur dernière mère-patrie. En s'appuyant sur les concepts de la théorie des systèmes familiaux de Bowen et de la théorie jungienne ainsi que sur des publications sur les Franco-Américains du Nord-Est des États-Unis, l'auteur aborde ces questions dans une perspective psychosociale. Des extraits pertinents d'entrevues réalisées avec des poètes franco-américains dont les oeuvres ont été publiées viennent élargir la discussion. Ces extraits sont centrés sur les questions de la langue et de l'appartenance religieuse, qui demeurent les deux critères les plus controversés de l'inclusion dans la collectivité franco-américaine. La conclusion de l'article contient de l'information sur des ressources universitaires et internet susceptibles d'accroître l'inclusivité, la visibilité et la viabilité de la collectivité franco-américaine, et d'établir des réseaux de pairs à l'intérieur des États-Unis ainsi qu'entre les États-Unis et le Canada.

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Caroline A. LeBlanc

***Writing an Ethnic Identity between Worlds:
Claiming and Maintaining a Franco-American Self***

Abstract

Euro-heritage immigrants of all backgrounds entering the U.S. at the threshold of the twentieth century experienced much the same religious, language, and ethnic oppression. Calling on facts about the author's French-Canadian and Acadian families, this paper explores some reasons for the relative lack of visible success, prominence, and unity among Franco-American individuals and communities, when compared to Italian and Irish cohort groups. In seeking to identify what dynamics within the Franco-American community and psyche might have contributed this situation, the author explores two important differences between Franco-American and other cohort immigrant groups. These are the inherited, conservative French-Canadian policy of "la survivance" and the geographical proximity of Canada, the most recent Mother Country for French-Canadian immigrants. Calling on precepts of Bowen Family Systems Theory, Jungian Theory, and publications about Franco-Americans in the Northeastern U.S., the author offers a psychosocial perspective on these questions. Relevant excerpts from interviews with other published Franco-American poets expand the discussion. These excerpts focus on the issues of language and religious affiliation, which remain the two most contentious criteria for inclusion in the Franco-American community. The paper concludes with information on university and internet resources that create new opportunities for a more inclusive, visible, and viable Franco-American community and network within the United States, as well as between the United States and Canada.

Résumé

Les immigrants d'ascendance européenne de tous horizons qui sont venus aux États-Unis à l'aube du XX^e siècle ont subi la même oppression religieuse, linguistique et ethnique. En évoquant les réalités des familles franco-canadienne et acadienne de l'auteur, ce document analyse certains motifs qui pourraient expliquer le manque relatif de réussite visible, de notoriété et d'unité des collectivités franco-américaines et de leurs membres, comparativement aux cohortes d'immigrants italiens et irlandais. En cherchant à mettre en lumière la dynamique au sein de la collectivité franco-américaine et l'imaginaire qui peuvent avoir contribué à cette situation, l'auteur s'intéresse à deux différences importantes entre les Franco-Américains et les autres groupes d'immigrants. L'idéologie héréditaire et conservatrice de la 'survivance' des Canadiens français et la proximité géographique du Canada, leur dernière mère-patrie. En s'appuyant sur les concepts de la théorie des systèmes familiaux de Bowen et de la théorie jungienne ainsi que sur des publications sur les

Franco-Américains du Nord-Est des États-Unis, l'auteur aborde ces questions dans une perspective psychosociale. Des extraits pertinents d'entrevues réalisées avec des poètes franco-américains dont les œuvres ont été publiées viennent élargir la discussion. Ces extraits sont centrés sur les questions de la langue et de l'appartenance religieuse, qui demeurent les deux critères les plus controversés de l'inclusion dans la collectivité franco-américaine. La conclusion de l'article contient de l'information sur des ressources universitaires et internet susceptibles d'accroître l'inclusivité, la visibilité et la viabilité de la collectivité franco-américaine, et d'établir des réseaux de pairs à l'intérieur des États-Unis ainsi qu'entre les États-Unis et le Canada.

My life as a writer is a public expression of my discoveries about what it means to be a Franco-American woman. One would think I already knew what this means since I grew up in a large extended family descended from Quebec and Acadian ancestors who had migrated to Massachusetts early in the twentieth century. Like many Franco-American women, I had little conscious appreciation of my history and membership in “the Franco-American cultural group.” I was well aware that options for French Canadian women had traditionally been limited to religious life or marriage and motherhood. However, I was not aware that concerns for the collective ethnic and religious survival of French identity in English Canada had migrated to the U.S. with my ancestors (Côté Robbins, “Literary Tradition” 4–5). As I learned and appreciated more about my history and membership in the Franco-American community, it informed my poems. Eventually, the passion that generated my poetry developed into a desire for a more in-depth understanding of how my family’s and my people’s history evolved. Mirroring this progression, I have included sample poems in this paper’s notes,¹ while the body of the paper interweaves family history and a psychosocial discussion of salient points.

In addition to ethnicity and gender, issues of class such as lineage, occupation, education, and income have a bearing on my Franco-American consciousness. Historically, ecclesiastical status and/or inherited family wealth and social standing predicted linguistic skills, occupational choices, and educational opportunities. Like my ancestors, the majority of French-Canadian (as we still say) and Acadian immigrants to the United States and their descendants worked in the mills until World War II opened up educational and travel opportunities for working-class immigrants (Brault 64–65). Rhea Côté Robbins, quotes Valeria Mines’ observation that even with education, issues of self-revelation are compounded for writers from working-class backgrounds since “for some working-class people the secrets seem all they have. Thus writing... feels like betrayal... or desertion... because it embraces [middle class] literacy... [and can be] like moving to a country where a different language is spoken” (“Literary Tradition” 4). In short, Franco-American women writers, especially those from working-class backgrounds, often break rules when recording the realities of their lives.

I write as a Franco-American woman with working-class roots who orbits, rather than lives in the heart of the Franco-American world. My blood and cultural unconscious, however, are French-Canadian and Acadian, even if my lifestyle is not. My brother and I, as the children of parents divorced in the 1950s, clearly did not fit the prevailing model of the good Catholic family. Nuns and priests, family members and neighbours did not know how to treat us, or our mother. Best to worst, responses were whispered sympathies, neutrality, and disregard, or disdain and exclusion. We were tolerated as charity cases, both financially and spiritually. We lived in the shadow cast by the cultural light that guided Franco-American and Roman Catholic society in my community, which was dominated by the Irish and Italians.

This paper examines aspects of my personal and family history as a Franco-American from several psychosocial perspectives, including the feminist and postcolonial perspective that “le privé est politique” (Jack 88). As stated above, despite my ancestry, I knew little about what it meant to be Franco-American—or Canuck, as we were often called. On my mother’s side, where I lived my life after the second grade, it meant little more than special holiday food, especially after French churches and schools closed and we were left to choose between Irish or Italian parishes. We were French-Canadians in Massachusetts, but had little connection with or curiosity about Quebec. Only first cousins were included in regular gatherings. Adults talked about their own cousins but saw them only at weddings or funerals. My aunt, a war bride from France, asked more questions about our heritage than my blood relatives. From her convent in England, my grandfather’s sister gathered, recorded, and disseminated essential genealogical information. If what it meant to be “French” was discussed by adults, it was in the *Franglais* we children were discouraged from learning. When I was a child, most of my relatives had left the factory floor for work as skilled labourers or office/service workers. My mother, who had dropped out of high school to help support her siblings, was the Holy Cross College Foreign Language Department secretary. My father’s Assumption Prep classmate was a Jesuit who helped my mother get the job after my father abandoned his young family. My Jesuit “uncle” taught three languages—including French. Early on, I knew the French I heard around me was not considered “good French.”

My father’s family was Acadian. *Pépère* was a carpenter who built houses for other Acadian immigrants in Massachusetts. *Mémère* and the children returned to their Acadian village in New Brunswick each summer. After my parents’ divorce, my mother, brother, and I were all but shunned on *Mémère*’s orders. My aunt’s children all moved fluently between French and English. I once told an old Acadian woman in Nova Scotia about how they learned French but I did not. She said, in that accent that elicits the smell of *Mémère*’s blueberry pie, “Oh yes, it is always the mother who assures the children learn French.” After the divorce, my mother had little time to teach us French even

if she had not been so ambivalent about her Canuck heritage and its Franglais. Despite my father's education as a dentist and my mother's employment in an Anglophone institution of higher learning, my childhood milieu was working-class Franco-American, imbedded—perhaps because of my parents' anomalies—with the expectation that I would “get an education” and succeed in the anglophone world.

Over the past decades, my research has helped me appreciate the distinctions, as well as similarities, between my French Canadian and Acadian heritages. I found that the literature—in the United States and even in Canada, outside the Maritimes—confounds these historically distinct groups of French colonial settlers. Quebec's story is the umbrella for most stories about New France and how it survived conquest by England. Even researcher David Vermette, in his otherwise insightful description of Franco-Americans as “the remnant of the remnant,” overlooks the 1755 deportation of the Acadians from their lands in what is now Maritime Canada. Despite this limitation, his analysis is enlightening. With the English conquest of 1763, New France became a remnant of the former *Nouvelle France*. The 1789 French Revolution assured the *Canadien* provinces would never again be ruled by a French Monarch. In addition the “[s]taunchly Catholic... more conservative elements among the Canadian elite, viewed the anti-clericalism, modernism and republicanism of the French Revolution with alarm.” Quebec's *Quiet Revolution* (1960s to 1970s) made Franco-Americans in New England a “remnant of the *pre-Quiet Revolutionary Quebec*.” With the Quiet Revolution, the more liberal interpretation of *la survivance*, which had been brewing in Quebec since the early nineteenth century, prevailed. It “burned away two of the chemical elements from the older formulas of *la survivance*—*Catholic* [with its hierarchical traditions] and *rural*—and what remained was the precipitate: *the French language*” (Vermette 1–3).

These Canadian developments made French Canadians and Acadians in the United States the “official” enclave for conservative versions of *la survivance*, a doctrine that I, again, only became familiar with as an adult. While Franco-Americans in the Northern U.S. and Louisiana experienced parallel histories, the salient differences are largely beyond the scope of this paper's focus. In New England, the industrial revolution essentially deprived Franco-Americans of land. This made allegiance to the Church and language even more important. To this day, these allegiances remain the most exclusionary and divisive criteria for perceived membership and status in the Franco-American community. This despite the fact that, as Mary Elisabeth Aubé notes in her article on “Culture and Identity in French Canada,”

[a]mong the Franco-Americans of New England, mostly descendants of immigrants from Quebec and New Brunswick, the elite resisted linguistic and cultural assimilation longer than the working class by

means of the numerous cultural organizations that they created in the late nineteenth century and through a tradition of sending their children to the *collèges classiques* in Quebec and then to private French-language schools in the United States. During the 1970s and 1980s a group of young Franco-Americans tried to resurrect interest in francophone identity among the largely assimilated descendants of working-class immigrants... [None the less], while a certain Franco-American identity is persisting, it has less and less a linguistic base (3–4).

In feminist and postcolonial tradition, this paper moves beyond sociological aggregates and romanticized visions of life under inherited worldviews. It challenges the belief that the outside world—the English world—has been the only source of Franco-American invisibility and lack of united presence/prominence in the larger American culture and economy. The Anglo oppression that held down French Canadians and Acadians in Canada and the United States is well documented. Once they survived English Canada’s archaic eighteenth and nineteenth century oppression, the religious, language and ethnic oppression of Franco-American men and women was comparable to that experienced by other Euro-heritage immigrants entering the United States during the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries (Brault 165; McClymer). And yet Italians and Irish, for example, are very proud of their heritage and group. They are visibly successful in American society whether they live in ethnic enclaves or in mixed communities. My studies caused me to wonder what dynamics within the Franco-American community might have contributed to their present lack of status and visibility in American society. I identified two factors unique to Franco-American immigrants, which this paper explores: the French-Canadian policy of *la survivance* and the geographical proximity of Canada, which was the last Mother Country for French-Canadian immigrants.

My father, before World War II, was the first to attend college (and beyond) in his family thanks to his mother’s determination. I was in the first generation of cousins to attend college (and beyond) in my mother’s family. Neither of us was ever quite at home in the world after that. We were set apart from our Franco-American working-class roots by both divorce and the privileges of mind, employment, and geographic mobility afforded by our educations. The family became forever confining but the English world would always be too different, too subtly rejecting. My father was unsuccessful in his efforts to be of the family and of the world. He was—at a time when it was a very big deal—excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church for reasons I can easily guess at but do not know for certain. I, in turn, have found the orthodoxy of American Catholicism, and/or the Fundamentalist Protestantism other family members have embraced, too restrictive. Truly, I am a Franco-American who orbits, rather than inhabits the pockets of Franco-American renaissance that

run along the U.S.–Canadian border, down into New England and the Cajun renaissance in Louisiana. And yet, my ancestry and my identity as a Franco-American are increasingly important to me, and to my place in the world. Fortunately, one great Franco and three great Anglo teachers have helped me understand and bridge the divide between my heritage and my life in the modern world.

The first, Murray Bowen, MD, developed Bowen Family Systems Theory. From 1982 to 1986, I did post-graduate work in family therapy at the Georgetown University Bowen Center for the Study of the Family in Washington, DC.² The central premise of this training is that therapists learn and mature more by working with their personal Family of Origin while also studying the clinical case material of patient families (Titelman). We created “genograms”—a kind of in depth family tree. We gathered family history, asked about family secrets, and noted the family’s reaction to our inquiries. We looked at how family members related through generations, especially relationship patterns where two people “triangle” or pull in some third person, issue, or activity to decrease the anxiety in their dyadic relationship. We examined multigenerational “family emotional issues” and how the complementary pull togetherness and individuation forces affected us, how they operated within our family and at the interface of our families and the larger society. Dan Papero, in *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, describes “togetherness forces” as follows:

When anxiety pervades a family, the tendency toward togetherness is most observable. The family describes all members as alike in terms of thoughts, principles, feelings. Family members think and act as if they were responsible for the happiness, comfort, and well-being of others. Some rebel and define themselves in a manner opposite to the others ... [T]he feeling climate can be positive or negative ... [R]elationships may be both positive and negative ... The higher the level of chronic anxiety in the family [or group], the more each individual life course comes to be determined by ... reactive mechanisms [such as total compliance or rebellion]. The togetherness force must be seen as natural and a necessary part of life. It exists together with a companion ... tendency for the person to be a separate and self-contained individual ... The balance of pressures for togetherness and individuation within a person and a family shapes the life course of those involved (43–44).

Clinically, *la survivance* is an example of an intense, anxiety-driven togetherness reaction. Initially it was a reasonable, even essential, response for threatened French Catholics who came under British rule in 1759. This was a time of severe religious and ethnic conflict when the comparatively small number of French Catholics in Canada did not fare well under the oppressive rule of English Protestants. The community lived in constant fear for its livelihood, language, and religion. Out of this trauma *la survivance* grew into “the

raison d'être for French Canadians in Quebec. [Theirs was] a divine mission to preserve their national 'race' and religion against Anglo-Saxon inroads" (Sorrell 38–39). I propose that, after the acute danger to life and culture had passed, the *survivance* worldview froze into an anxiety-driven togetherness reaction that complicated rather than promoted a flexible balance between togetherness and individuation within the group. It also hindered the movement of its members between their ethnic community and an increasingly navigable larger culture.

Gerard Brault (66) as well as Regis Langelier and Clair Quintal (231) note that Jansenism influenced Catholicism in French Canada from the time of its formation. This, in turn, led to rigid codes of behaviour and a re-enforcement of an "outsider" and "siege" mentality. In *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*, Langelier and Quintal's chapter on "French Canadian Families" describes how, for Franco-Americans,

Life was seen as full of temptations, offering opportunities to sin rather than strike out constructively and to choose wisely. Franco-Americans had defeatism in their blood. They set limited goals. They settled for less and had to be content since the best reward of all—paradise—could be attained [only if] ... they had been faithful to Mother Church and to Mother tongue—language being perceived as the guardian of their faith ... Survival as a separate entity, against all odds, became a mystique. [They] distrusted outsiders ... [and, paradoxically, they also] did not support their own (231–32).

Sorrell, in his discussion of Franco-American writers Jack Kerouac and Grace Metalious, similarly observes that in the larger social realm, *la survivance* enforced the French Canadian and Franco-American "sense of aloneness ... and introspective obsession with group solidarity and national survival" (39). Gradually, I began to understand why my families of origin embraced me during my return visits but never reached out to visit me where I lived, even if it was in the same state. Family did not relocate for a better life; they made the best of opportunities available where the family—which is life—was already established.

Such characteristics undermine rather than encourage success and prosperity—beyond the narrowly defined collective sanctions determined by religion, class, and gender—for the individual and her group in the larger world. Langelier and Quintal, in summarizing clinical observations of Franco-American families, discuss characteristics that are eerily descriptive of my family of origin:

Franco-Americans have been "put down" since birth: first, by parents fearful of raising an arrogant child ... second, by religious teachers and priests for whom pride is thought to be the ultimate sin. They

share the pervasive sense that they have been born into a group whose chances of material and personal success are problematic, they will be happier with their lot if they do not strive to rise above their lowly station in life. This upbringing discourages taking chances for the sake of future success. Those who do not dare to achieve the very best of which they are capable, feel lasting bitterness. Toward those who have taught them excessive humility and caution, they harbor ambivalent feelings—both respect and resentment (232).

All this helped me understand and confront personal psychological, familial, and professional challenges. I began to appreciate the historical oppression my ancestors survived, as well as how patterns of anxiety management (coping) truly are passed down generations, long after they are constructive. Bowen's concept of Multigenerational Transmission Process states that when "anxiety leads to a new level of togetherness within a family [or social group], differentiation [of the individual] decreases..., rendering [them even] less able to withstand heightened anxiety in the future" (Papero 44). Langelier and Quintal found that, while Franco-Americans are honest, loyal, and hard working, they cope with stress by unquestioningly obeying authorities, avoiding conflict, and drinking. As is the case in many historically oppressed groups, male authority is paramount. The woman's role as wife, child bearer, and mother is valued above any aspirations she may have in the larger world. Traditionally, father was the family authority and provider; mother was the family heart and mediator. But what if the authority was cruel or weak, the provider unsuccessful, the heart hungry or bitter, and the mediator manipulative? (Langelier and Quintal 233–34).

Franco-Americans have trouble with separation from the familiar, conflate personal values and religious dogma, and experience episodes of depression and/or rage when usual coping mechanisms are insufficient for life's challenges. Since Franco-Americans value emotional control, their usual burden of shame increases when the failure of usual coping mechanisms results in yelling or other overtly abusive behaviours. They also tend to "deny that significant family problems have long-range effects" (Langelier and Quintal 240).

The policy of preserving the group language and culture at the price of the potential of individual group member can lead to the very result it was designed to prevent, as evidenced in Langelier and Quintal's description of Franco-American community attitudes in the 1980s:

The old revere the past and are deeply attached to their French language, culture, and religion. The middle-aged are less committed to their traditional culture, and the young ignore their ethnic history. Those who do know it object to cultural discrimination [in private] ... but little is done about complaints ... Young Franco-Americans today,

except for some who live in rural areas, are becoming assimilated into American society. Many young Franco-Americans do not want to be associated with their ethnic group at all. (237)

In contrast, as Bowen theory posits, when togetherness and individuation forces are balanced, individuals, families, and societal (including ethnic) groups can function better since the “unit has sufficient flexibility to adapt to change” (Papero 44). Individuals can differ and blossom while proudly maintaining connections with their heritage.

Generations ago, my father’s family was forcibly taken from Grand-Pré to Massachusetts during the 1755 Acadian Deportation. Later, they migrated back to New Brunswick. This history was known, but minimized and never discussed, by my LeBlanc and Melanson relatives. I learned of the true import of this deportation trauma from my second great teacher, Marion Woodman, the world renowned Jungian Analyst from Ontario, Canada. Together with Ann Skinner and Mary Hamilton, Woodman developed the Bodysoul Rhythms Work, which is now led around the world by leaders trained through the Marion Woodman Foundation.³

In 1996, after a summer trip to Grand-Pré, her Anglo husband’s birthplace, Marion told me of all the LeBlanc names she had seen on the deportation registries at the Grand-Pré memorial. She encouraged me to visit Acadia—the land lost to me through divorce—saying, “It could be important to your psyche.” She was right. I contacted U.S. relatives who put me in touch with cousins in New Brunswick. The next summer my Swedish-American husband and I visited these cousins before travelling to Grand-Pré. In 2004 we attended the *Congrès mondial acadien* at *Université Sainte Anne* in Nova Scotia. Program organizers offered simultaneous bilingual translation of the conference proceedings and I was in heaven—my body feeling the French, my mind understanding the English. The next summer I attended Ste. Anne’s French Immersion program, with limited success.

Since beginning my Jungian studies in 1989, I have been intrigued by the concepts of the family and cultural unconscious. Related theories about psychological complexes (Jung; Henderson) shared many of the insights Bowen discussed as Family and Societal Emotional Process. Our Bodysoul work included the exploration of the effects of psychological trauma on the individual and across the generations. Certainly forced deportation and economic, religious, and ethnic/racial oppression create psychological trauma. Likewise, frozen-anxiety-driven coping mechanisms, whether individual, familial, or cultural (such as *la survivance*) compound the effects of that psychological trauma. Certainly, rejection and exclusion because one does not meet language, religious, or other criteria for membership in one’s ethnic group, creates psychological trauma for the affected individual.

Class issues again enter the picture when one considers the interplay of *la survivance* and the social structure of immigrant Franco-American communities:

Frano-American merchants and professionals benefited greatly from the loyalty of members of their ethnic group and never hesitated to encourage this kind of solidarity ... Because throughout this period [1865–1920] (and well into the next) Franco-American merchants and professionals virtually monopolized their compatriots' patronage, one scholar has suggested that they consciously promoted survivance ideology in order to perpetuate this control. Self-interest no doubt played a role; but in the main, Franco-American ideology appears to have developed spontaneously as a continuation of the struggle against the assimilation that began in Quebec in the aftermath of the British Conquest. (Brault 66)

Within the Franco-American community, external and internal pressures maintained the established worldview and order. A subtlety of psychological trauma is that abuse and betrayal by outside oppressors often undermines the individual and/or group psyche less than comparable abuse and betrayal by one's own family or societal group members—i.e. by those we trust to accept us and have our best interest at heart. A corollary is that subtle abuse often leaves more lingering scars than overt abuse, since the latter can be unequivocally identified. To the extent that this is true, limiting, internalized dogmas such as *la survivance* compromise the psychosocial development and success of individuals and groups. This could, in fact, help explain why, as Brault indicates, successful Franco-Americans are disproportionately less visible in American society when compared to individuals in other Euro-heritage immigrant groups—Italian, Irish, and Jewish—who suffered comparable oppressions in nineteenth and twentieth century America. Also related is the lack of ethnic pride shown by many Franco-Americans who are successful outside the traditional communities (Brault 165). And yet, according to the 1980 census, “persons of French origin constitute[d] the fifth largest ancestry group in the United States” (Brault 1).

In the psychotherapy field, it is now widely held that the effects of trauma are passed down through generations, in much the same way my green eyes and my French nose were passed down to me from my ancestors (Jung; Harris; Henderson; Sheldrake). Much as new anxiety interacts with and compounds the untoward effects of pre-existing anxiety-related togetherness, unresolved ancestral trauma increases the vulnerability to and effects of personal trauma in a given individual's life. Among others, Donald Kalshed has demonstrated that with persistent or intense enough trauma, predictable psychological mechanisms become active. The traumatized individual develops an internalized “protector” that helps the psyche survive attacks by external persecutors. However, like the

overprotective parent of an adult child—or like the lingering restrictions of an outdated social code—this internalized “protector” can flip into a persecutor in its own right. This happens when antiquated fears of persecution from outside forces inhibit the individual from growing beyond outdated behaviour patterns that have always assured a “safe enough” status quo. The behavioral outcomes are such things as alcoholism and other addictions, underachievement, crippling shyness (especially outside of familiar circles), rigid religiosity, anger control problems, shame and undercutting others in personal relationships—attributes shared by Franco-American individuals whether living in Franco-American population centres or in scattered locations throughout the United States (Langelier and Quintal). According to the documented lives of such Franco-American writers as Jack Kerouac and Grace Metalious, and according to several interviews reported below, these dynamics linger the Franco-American heart, mind, and body (Sorrell). Paradoxically, trauma can cause us to either unquestioningly cut off from or intensify our attachment to the past, to our families and communities of origin. It compromises our ability—individually and communally—to negotiate differences within and outside our group, as well as our ability to shine in the larger American culture while remaining connected to our roots in geographical ethnic centres.

My contention is that Franco-Americans—living outside and within the few remaining Franco-American enclaves in the U.S.—need each other if we are to thrive as proud, visible, successful ethnic individuals and groups. We need to provide roots and vision for each other, exchange points of view, and engage in the struggles of togetherness and individuation. We need to find ways to communicate that welcome all Franco-Americans without requiring physical residence, religious affiliation and/or francophone discourse since so many, within and outside of our enclaves, have left Mother Church and lost Mother Tongue.

Perhaps this would be a good place to look at where Franco enclaves are in the United States as well as the issues created by the proximity of the Mother Country of Canada, and the effects of density of population in ethnic communities. In *The French-Canadian Heritage in New England*, Gerard J. Brault notes that

From an ethnic point of view, the Cajuns of Louisiana and the Franco-Americans of New England and upper New York State stand out from the population of French origin [reported in the 1980 census] because of the density and cohesiveness of their groups. Both have a common national origin but each also has a distinctive culture, history, and identity. (2)

Louisiana Cajuns are predominantly descendants of Acadians deported by the British in the mid-eighteenth century from what are now the Maritime

Provinces of Canada. Others have ancestors from France and Santo Domingo. Population centres in the Northeast consist of descendants of Acadians and French from Quebec. They are concentrated in Northern Maine, Western Vermont and upper New York State, and central/southeastern New England including Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and southern Maine. According to Brault,

Communities with a high Franco-American population—where this group constitutes 20 percent or more of the total inhabitants—have tended to remain more “French” than others. However, other factors of a geographical and historical nature—for example, relative proximity to the Canadian border or to other Franco-American centers, and number of recent arrivals—must also be considered. (3)

My family history is not atypical. To reiterate, years after their deportation to Massachusetts in 1755, my Acadian ancestors returned to New Brunswick where many resettled on inferior land. My father’s parents were among the many Acadians who migrated to Leominster, Massachusetts, for work in the early 1900s. My *Pépère* built houses for other Acadians flocking to the mills. A generation earlier, my mother’s grandparents had migrated from Quebec for mill jobs in Webster and Worcester, Massachusetts. Most of my relatives continue to live in the area, in close proximity to each other. Though all identify themselves as “French,” only my Acadian relatives have retained much of the language and traditions our ancestors brought from Canada.

I have a friend whose family lives on the Maine–Quebec border. Crossing to Canada is a routine event. The family finds meaning and fulfillment in frequent family visits, group, and traditional Franco community activities. They speak French but are not necessarily able to read and/or write French. My friend now lives across the country. She apologetically admits that, while visits with her Family of Origin are “full of warm fuzzies,” her work and writing is unproductive when she is there. She finds it impossible to “hold her own” with the overwhelming togetherness in the family milieu.

Less visible are Franco-Americans dispersed throughout the blended towns and cities of the United States. Like me, these individuals live in mixed-ethnic, English-speaking communities. They are often unrecognized as Franco-Americans by either community members (including other Franco-Americans) or their cousins in Franco-American population centres. Many no longer identify themselves as Franco-Americans. Like me, some have married individuals descended from other ethnic and religious groups. Also like me, many are not francophones, or their French is “academic” in every sense of the word.

From a psychological perspective, proximity to the Mother Country and density of population centres are relevant to understanding the individual's or group's degree of attachment to the traditions and language of the Mother Country (Sorrell 39). Proximity and access to the object of attachment, be it a person or a country, allows individuals to put off painful separation and change. The closer the family or Mother Country, the greater is the continued reliance on them for practical and emotional support. The associated ambivalence about challenging the status quo, including any movement toward a new or wider cultural world, is also greater. Cohort Euro-heritage immigrants from across the Atlantic had little chance of returning for visits, or receiving emotional or financial support from families back in the homeland. Most immigrants at the twentieth century threshold had few economic resources. However, taking a train a few hours north was often manageable, whereas a ship journey to Europe was formidable. Though often starting out in ethnic enclaves of their own, immigrants who came directly from Europe simply had to adapt and succeed in their new environment and with minimal practical, emotional, or spiritual support from the old country. Not so French Canadians/Acadians, particularly those who, as Barkan observes, resided near the border and often lived as "commuting immigrants," much as Mexican immigrants living in the Southwest now travel between Mexico and the United States (qtd. in Sorrell 39).

Traditions and languages are more likely to survive, even thrive, when there is a critical mass of people who speak the same language, share the same values and attachments, and celebrate the same feasts and festivals. Likewise, the more members of one's ethnic group in one's community, the less likely one has to venture beyond the familiar for employment, entertainment, companionship, or other needs—at least until such things as world wars and public education introduce the adventurous (especially the young) to possibilities beyond the traditional community. After that, relocation for education and employment can become a way of life.

As Brault discusses, it is often the "third generation in America—the grandchildren of immigrants—[that] cultivates an ethnic identity that the second generation was eager to lose." This leads to individuals, including Franco-Americans,

who approach their ethnicity selectively ... (They) are genuinely interested in certain elements of their heritage (and) they may pay little or no attention to other facets of their culture, in particular the French language and the Catholic faith. Informed observers point out that other American ethnic groups—for example Greeks and Jews—have a highly developed sense of pride or solidarity that does not necessarily depend on language loyalty or religious affiliation. [Likewise some] Franco-Americans may reject many of the values the group holds dear

yet continue to exhibit a strong attachment to the milieu from which they sprang or to their French-Canadian forebears. (159–60)

Brault observes that “these aspects of ethnicity” create interesting dynamics between Franco-Americans and *Québécois*. As noted earlier, Quebec’s Quiet Revolution broke the church’s and the rural power base’s hold on Quebec life. The *Québécois*, however, remained passionate about French, which is now Quebec’s official language. Again, scholars often subsume the Acadians of the Maritimes into discussions of Quebec’s historical dynamics. While the Acadians share a history of similar economic and political domination by the English, they had a separate struggle for autonomy, equality, and language. The result was that the Acadian Maritimes became functionally bilingual. In fact, New Brunswick is officially bilingual. While the lingering Franco-American attachment to Catholicism confuses the *Québécois*, it is not so confusing to many in Acadia where the Church is still very involved in community life. However, both groups of French in Canada share a “[dismay] when Franco-Americans show indifference to the language question, which French Canadians consider to be an absolutely essential concern.” Also, as recently as the mid-twentieth century, there was great tension with American cousins over the disparity in prosperity between the French in Canada and American relatives who had “abandoned” their homeland (Brault 160; Laxer; Runte).

My third teacher was Molly Peacock,⁴ the American/Canadian poet who encouraged me to study New World—Canadian and American—Franco poets. She brought Christine Gelineau and Jack Bedell’s anthology, *French Connections: A Gathering of Franco-American Poets* to my attention. Each chapter of *French Connections* introduces another poet: his/her credentials, a brief autobiographical sketch, and poems. Eleven of the thirty-two poets represented in the book agreed to an interview with me about their perceptions of today’s realities for Franco-Americans and Franco-American writers. Selected excerpts from these interviews provide insight into the place of language and religious affiliation (the two consistently contested criteria for membership in the Franco-American community) in the lives and work of more Franco-American writers.

Eight of those interviewed were sixty years of age or older, two were in their forties, and one was in his thirties. Two were descendants of Huguenot immigrants. Only two remain practicing Roman Catholics. Two were born and raised in Louisiana, one (of Huguenot ancestry) was from the Midwest, and eight were from New England. Five still live in New England and three have relocated—to New York, Florida, and New Mexico. Nine teach or taught English/creative writing at the high school or college level. One teaches both French and English. One is a collegiate cultural and community administrator. Five interviewees were women; six were men. Both poets from Louisiana were fluent in French, which they learned as adults. Five of the poets from New England grew up hearing French. Three have limited fluency after studying

French in school. Three have no fluency despite efforts to learn French. One grew up on the Canadian border and has fluency in regional French. The poets from Louisiana thought fluency in French was very important for membership in the Cajun community, a reflection of the Acadian Renaissance flourishing in Louisiana. Eight from New England said that the French community must find a way to engage non-francophone Franco-Americans if it is to survive, thrive, attract, and welcome young people, as well as the scattered Franco-Americans who are not fluent in the Mother Tongue. What follows are observations and reports based on interviews with the poets who granted permission to identify their responses by name.

Franco-Americans are not a homogenous group. First, because French colonialism was universal, Franco-Americans include many of French descent whose ancestors came directly from European or a number of colonial/postcolonial locations, including, but not limited to French Canada. Second, some Franco-Americans, such as poets Chard de Niord and Michelle Boisseau, are descendants of Huguenots who fled religious persecution in Europe. Some families, such as Boisseau's, converted to Roman Catholicism in recent generations. While de Niord and Boisseau are sympathetic to Franco-Americans of Canadian descent, they do not identify with the latter's difficult history. Unfortunately, I cannot include their stories here. However, in any broader considerations of Franco-American culture, I believe the Franco-American community would benefit by including non-Canadian descendants. Third, even these limited interviews revealed regional trends among French Canadian and Acadian descendants.

Two respondents, Beverly Matherne and Darrell Bourque, were born and raised in Louisiana when Cajuns were severely oppressed and their French language was officially suppressed, as were all languages but English in the United States at that time. Matherne grew up hearing French at home, but lost it, then relearned it as an adult. She now teaches English and French at Northern Michigan University and publishes most of her poetry bilingually. She regards French fluency and Catholicism as essential to Franco-American identity and writes, "Those in the U.S. no longer speaking French, though wanting an affinity with other Francophones in North America, express a great loss over losing their maternal tongue."

Bourque, a retired professor of English and Louisiana's poet laureate, had parents and grandparents who spoke French among themselves but wanted the children to learn English in order to have a greater chance at success in mainstream America. For years, he has been active in the French renewal spearheaded by the Council for the Development of the French Language in Louisiana. He taught himself French as an adult in order to join the vibrant and growing francophone renewal in Louisiana. When asked if he thought one could be a member of the Franco-American community without fluency

in French, he was quiet for a long while. Then he gently said, “If it must be either/or, I have to say ‘No’... How can you be part of things, understand what is said, even the words of the music if you don’t know the language?”

Like me, the remaining eight poets were born and raised Roman Catholic in one of the many Franco communities of New England. The institutional church remains an important part of only one respondent’s life. Jim Bishop and one other interviewee grew up in Maine. The latter now lives and teaches in a Southwestern state. Bishop is a retired English teacher and publisher in Maine. Again, like me, he has not been able to learn French despite many attempts. He wonders if some residual psychological barrier from a childhood where French was okay in Frenchtown but not okay in the larger world undermines his efforts. Nonetheless, he works tirelessly on behalf of Franco-American culture and visibility. He believes the traditional Franco-American community alienates the young and undermines its future when it insists on French language skills as a criterion for membership. In 1982 he helped found “Rassemblement des Artistes Franco-américains,” an annual gathering of artists, musicians, and writers that met for twelve years (Brault 164). Rhea Côté Robbins (see below) was also involved in some of these programs. Bishop argues for more programs like this where Francos can gather to explore and showcase talents—programs where those who speak French and English can celebrate a common heritage.

Denise Duhamel, Christine Gelineau, and Chad Parenteau all grew up in Rhode Island. Gelineau and Duhamel both had anglophone mothers but remember hearing French spoken by relatives and neighbours. Parenteau, the youngest poet, heard his father speak French but his mother “had French forced out of her” as a child when “shamed by the parents” of an anglophone friend—a poignant example of the shame Franco-Americans carry.

Christine Gelineau has lived in central New York since finishing college. She teaches English and creative writing at Binghamton University. She has studied French but has limited fluency. When she was a child, Irish and French lived together easily in her neighbourhood. She attended the French church and parochial school taught by English-speaking nuns from Kentucky. There was a “tribal sense of identity” in the immigrant community. She regarded Protestants as “separate.” Gelineau recalled her surprise when her mainstream (Protestant) American roommate at college did not understand the question, “So what are you?” Her Irish roommate had understood perfectly. Gelineau decided to edit the *French Connections* anthology in order to highlight the achievements of Franco-Americans because, during the 2004 American presidential race, she got tired of hearing derogatory snipes that John Kerry “looked French.” “Most Americans don’t have a clue about what we Franco-Americans are,” she told me. She attributes the disregard of French Canadian immigrants to the narrow sightedness of early British New England settlers who were largely upper class and concerned with “racial purity.” When she went to a public middle

school, she “lost [her] reference group but not [her] identity.” Though she is no longer a practicing Roman Catholic, she bears the “mark of a Catholic childhood” in her concern with “the big questions.” This echoes the spiritual perspective of a number of interviewees who grew up Roman Catholic but no longer participate in organized religion. For example, Jim Bishop said that his major source of inspiration is an “inner pool” and a sense he has of “how mysterious it is to be here.”

Denise Duhamel grew up hearing French in her community but has not been able to learn French herself. Her college friends were intrigued with her French name. Her sense of difference had to do with her working-class—rather than her Franco—status, even though they did not discuss backgrounds. Duhamel said her life involves “a lot of bridging of worlds.” Now living in Florida, she teaches creative writing at the university level. She also lives near the “Little Canada snowbirds [and] loves being near proud French Canadians.” She recognizes something familiar and satisfying in their “comfort in their skins,” their laugh and language, their *joie de vivre* and how they “take care of their own.” Duhamel regrets that she cannot talk to them but she enjoys relating to them whenever and however she can. In the spring of 2010, she completed her second extended writing retreat in Quebec City where she “feels at home.” Her writing focuses on gender, class, race, and language issues. She feels she “understands the minority perspective but it is different for [her] because [she] ‘can pass.’”

Chad Parenteau reported having “little awareness [of ethnicity] as a kid.” He felt disconnected from his “French history” but remembers no prejudice while growing up. He is “trying to get back to a sense of the past” and says, “I’m the historian” because the rest of his family is absorbed in “working to survive even when it’s not necessary.” They continue Franco-American family traditions without consciously recognizing what they are doing. Parenteau majored in English but did not want to teach, so he has done a variety of jobs that allow him to travel. He began writing poetry because it was the “one thing I thought I could do well, then the thing I wanted to do well, the way I could contribute.” His poetry is about personal history, relationships, and nomadic themes. It examines his “sense of not agreeing and not fitting in with groups and family.” He has found a poetry family in the Boston poetry community where he is a leader in the Stone Soup Poetry Group.⁵ Regarding the ability to speak French he said, “It matters but [is] not important in [my] community ... We just don’t make a big deal about it.” His interest in his Franco-American heritage and Franco-American poetry peaked when he went through “a spiritual search” after he became friends with David Surette.

David Surette and Paul Marion were born, raised, and presently live in Massachusetts. Surette teaches high school English, writes poetry, and is active in the southeastern Massachusetts poetry network. He remembers Francos

being invisible in his hometown where Irish and Italian groups dominated. He and his brother were “good hockey players, which is a sport often identified with French Canadians.” Family stories and French were “lost two generations ago.” Only when his daughter attended *Université Sainte Anne* in Nova Scotia and found work as an archeologist at Grand-Pré did he discover, “celebrate, ... and begin to love [his] Franco-American identity.” He has some fluency in French from studies in high school and college. Regarding the relevance of French fluency to Franco-American identity, he writes, “It’s important for those that have it to keep it and pass it on. Those who lost [it] can’t [be] discounted as Franco-Americans ... As a poet, I’ve met and befriended people who identified with my poems about my Franco identity.” As we have seen, one of those people is Chad Parenteau.

Paul Marion, my last interviewee, is the Executive Director of the Office of Community and Cultural Affairs at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell. His poetry is widely published. In 1999 he and three other people edited an anthology of essays called *French Class: French Canadian–American Writings on Identity, Culture, and Place*. Marion is a Kerouac scholar and has presented at academic venues in the United States and Canada. He reports finding more of a community in these settings than in the Franco-American clubs of his home region. He attributes the fragmentation of his once vital Franco-American community to many things, including the urban to suburban exodus that helped to split those who adhere to a more traditional, working-class lifestyle from those who ascribe to more middle-class values. With passion in his voice, he recalls the gradual decline of French schools and churches and the 1962 razing of the “blighted Little Canada” tenement houses. Without a community where he can regularly speak French, he has lost some of his “facility” speaking, reading, and writing the language. However, he does not think it necessary to speak French to claim Franco-American status. This, despite the passionate group of francophone loyalists who would disagree with him—perhaps for reasons of ethnic pride and a sense of keeping faith with ancestors, he conjectures. Marion believes that unless the Franco-American community opens to its non-francophone members, it will become extinct “like the Druids or the Shakers.”

All the interviewees felt passionately about being part of the Franco-American community in the U.S., although they differed on the criteria for membership. I share the belief that our Franco-American maturation requires finding a way to salvage the best of our traditions while welcoming both francophone and anglophone Francos. My fourth great teacher is a Franco woman who is a leader in this effort. She is Rhea Côté Robbins whom I met when I took *Borders and Beyond*, her online course about Franco-American and francophone women. Rhea teaches Women’s and Franco-American studies at the University of Maine. She also teaches creative writing in other area colleges. She is the author of the award-winning book, *Wednesday’s Child*, which recounts the experiences of a young Franco-American woman growing

up in Maine. *French Connections* also anthologized her poetry. In 1997 she founded the Franco-American Women's Institute (FAWI). From 2004 to 2011, she edited the "Franco-American News and Events blog spot" where she posted worldwide news of relevance to Franco-Americans. Since 1998 she has edited an e-zine, *moé pi toé: Promoting Franco-American Women's Voices*. Accessed through the FAWI website, this publication contains writings in both French and English. *Borders and Beyond* is a combined graduate/undergraduate level course. Many of the students had been born and raised in the Franco-American communities of Maine. Our exchanges about family histories and particularly the experience of Franco-American women in the past and present were open and enthusiastic. Rhea works tirelessly for the preservation, recognition, and dissemination of Franco-American culture, including membership in that culture for all of Franco descent, regardless of country and language of origin.⁶

Today, the World Wide Web also allows anglophones to translate French documents using any of the many translations services available online. Though the translations may leave something to be desired, an anglophone reader of a French document can at least get the gist of the text. Franco-Americans living in dispersed communities throughout the country can find and access information that would previously have been available only at distant cultural and educational Franco institutions or government centres. Genealogy has become a very popular form of historical research for many of Acadian and French Canadian descent. Provinces and states have digitalized historic and demographic documents dating as far back as the seventeenth century. These can now be accessed on a home computer. Simply entering "French Canadian," "Acadian," or "Franco-American" on the computer's search engine brings up links that one can spend days exploring.

Lucie LeBlanc Consentino of Massachusetts has been particularly helpful to many Franco-Americans looking for a connection to their roots. Lucie is of Acadian and French-Canadian descent. My profile article on Lucie can be found in *moé pi toé*, as well as on Lucie's Acadian-French Canadian Ancestral Home website (see note 7). The site's listserv members hail from all over the United States and Canada. They offer generous and expert bilingual assistance, including translation assistance, to each other regarding genealogical data and sources.

The Acadian-French Canadian Ancestral Home also has the best-organized information on the history of the *Congrès mondial acadien* that has gathered every five years since 1994. Each gathering is held at a different Acadian population centre, most in Canada. The 1999 *Congrès* was in Louisiana. The 2014 *Congrès* will be in the St John's Valley at the triangle borders of Maine, Quebec, and Nova Scotia. As mentioned earlier, the 2004 *Congrès* was at *Université Sainte Anne* in Nova Scotia. The simultaneous translation available at conference presentations and panels greatly enriched the lectures and cultural

events for anglophones as well as Francos from other *francophonie* countries and territories who spoke different dialects. At each *Congrès*, members of the founding families gather for a family reunion. Some people come from as far away as California, and even other continents. World-class Acadian music groups provide entertainment.⁷

The University of Louisiana Lafayette (ULL), Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts, and University of Maine all have Franco-American study centres or courses. ULL has an extensive music and oral history library. The Franco-American Center at the University of Maine publishes a paper and online journal, *Le Forum*, which can be accessed through the online Franco-American Oral History Archives.⁸

In conclusion, proximity to the New World old country of Canada was a mixed blessing for Franco-American immigrants to the United States. While easy return to the homeland was comforting, it inhibited the separation needed for immigrants to move between their ethnic communities and the larger society in their new country. The conservative remnants of French-Canada's *la survivance* doctrine further encouraged Franco-Americans to maintain a low profile. They also unintentionally compounded the psychological traumas experienced by all immigrants of the time. The inherited after-effects of these traumas continue to limit individuals and divide one from the other to this day. Such divisiveness decreases the chances for a prominent, visible, and inclusive Franco-American community network in American society.

I chose to illustrate my theoretical assertions with elements of my family history and my own poetry¹ because this is the raw material for this paper. Story puts flesh onto the historical and theoretical data. Gerard J. Brault's book, *The French-Canadian Heritage in New England*, is a fascinating telling and comprehensive documentation of the French Canadian and Acadian story in the United States. This paper offers a new psychosocial perspective on the residual effects of the conservative *la survivance* policy that has influenced Franco-Americans since our ancestors settled on U.S. soil. My concern especially includes the difficulties that the lingering corollaries of *la survivance* pose for Franco-Americans like me who are not francophone, who do not live near a Franco-American population centre, and/or ascribe to the religious values of traditional Franco-American communities. Language and religious affiliation clearly remain the most volatile criteria for membership in the Franco-American community. In addition to my thoughts on the matter, this paper presents interview material from eleven other Franco-American poets. Also included is information on how the internet as well as Franco-American educational and cultural centres offer dispersed, English-speaking Franco-Americans the opportunity to participate as members of the North-American Franco community at large. My dream is that North American Francos can increasingly relate to each other—within the United States and Canada—in

a more mutually accepting and validating manner. Much as love begins at home, so does validation. Our home can include both the physical and virtual networks of Franco-American, *Québécois*, and Acadian communities on the North American continent.

Notes

1. Caroline LeBlanc's poems have been published in numerous journals, in her chapbook, *Smokey Ink and an Touch of Honeysuckle*, and constitute her creative thesis entitled, *Sweet Bitters: Exile, Love, and War*, submitted for her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing at Spalding University, Louisville, Kentucky. The following poems are included because of their relevance to the content of this paper.

Glazed
Acadian Foremothers, 17th century

In *Acadie*, we sleep
thirteen in a one room cabin,
winters we store grain,
vegetables in the loft,
summers, the spinning wheel.
Winters it spins
flax and wool into our cloth.
Covers us, our beds of straw.

Tepee style
stands of wood dry
fit for clogs,
or the fire that feeds
our hearth, hot or cold,
if we are to eat.

Winters it takes more
work to stay warm.

We tell our stories,
sing our songs,
dance and rest.
Once growing season starts
we plant and harvest
every bit of light
between darkness.
The little ones help
mind each other
oldest to youngest.

We raise them
in this dream.

Franco-American Mother, 20th century

Three converted rooms.
Brother has what privacy there is.

The old dining room holds
twin beds for daughter and mother.

Meals are in the kitchen,
after days at the job and school.

Evenings are filled with homework,
chocolate and vanilla ice cream,

black and white TV.
Summer days swelter beneath

Grandmère's resentful eye.
Brother and sister wrestle

bored and angry pretzels
sad about life.

Mum yells, punishes,
measures the worst offenses,
the yard stick between our beds
where she cries at night.

The Last Daughter, 21st century

We talk family story.
"Mothers walk through life
asleep on their feet,"
I tell my grown son.

In the studio,
my hands form soft clay.

Dried, it hardens. Too easily
its smoothness breaks,
melts if wet.

Glazed in kiln fires,
bowls hold ice cream
or the tears of the world.

Broke, 1894–1988

For VML

1

I was a woman of my time. Only a modern woman could imagine
my story should not be marked different from a man's. In Acadie,
at three, my mother was lost to me, and Papa too when he
brought me a step-mother, with brats in tow. We never liked each
other much. We never tried. I can sum up my life there like this:
Papa drove the old tractor, I followed behind. We were short people.

No need to stand tall when you bend all day to scrape root crops
from low-land scabble our ancestors got when *les Anglais* let them
back into Acadie—years after deportation. *Donner a contre-cœur.*

No matter how hard you worked that ground it hid rocks in between
the potatoes, and carrots came out all cork-screwed. Behind the plow
I gleaned a dreadful truth: the stone unhurled harbored the *coup de grace.*

2

By the time I met Francois on that train, I knew a pebble
from a *pomme de terre*. For sure, he was a keeper. Only had a piece
of the family's dirt-poor farm on the hill but *il était charpentier aussi*—

built the grotto to *notre Marie Stella*. Fire took the church, our house.

I took it as a sign. We drove south to *L'États Unis*—
kids and Francois' tools in our rusty truck. Francois, he liked

his spirits. They helped him saw and hammer new house after new house.

I can't complain. There was plenty of money and I put it to good use.

The priest, even the Bishop noticed me now, and it wasn't because

they thought I'd waited too long to conceive—

because I lost baby after baby at birth—three girls, four boys—

two twins. It was hard not to put all I had into the ones left to me.

3

They were like two halves of me. Marguerite, she was my helper.

Alphonse—he was shy as a child—but sly as the devil himself.

I pelted him with everything he could possibly want—and more.

He knew I pinned my hopes on him when I gave him to the priests

at the correct age, trusted they could cultivate him in church ways.

He was small but well-formed—had his father's charm, my fine nose.

It all worked good until he came home speaking that school-

book French—acted better than us. *C'est rien*, his thick

English would still mark him second-class in their world.

4

The Great War came and he pulled *les dents de soldats*. Later,
the only silver and gold he had for long, he put in someone's
mouth. Then came the day he left his wife and children.

Things went south from there. That new wife,
dumb as rocks. Bankruptcy. All our savings—
Francois' and mine. Rock bottom for sure.

Cleverness got me out of *incroyable* spots, but I never gleaned
how to size this one for success. His bones, they had no give—just broke.
Maybe it's that way when the milk you drink is someone else's dream.

5

I was a woman of my time. Only a modern woman could imagine
my story should not be marked different from a man's. In Acadie,
at three, everyone I could ever love had already been lost to me.

Count To Ten
Post WW II

Ten can help you remember yourself.
Ten can keep things calm. Carries magic.
Ten can aid forgiveness of a husband's flaws.
"Count to ten. Never smear your own house."

Ten can keep things calm—carries magic
spooned down through centuries like salt.
Count to ten. Never smear our own house,
our Acadian tables with rage at the English.

Spooned down through centuries like salt,
T'aunt Rita preferred not to heap
our Acadian tables with rage at the English,
just the *Québec* temper my mother showed.

T'aunt Rita preferred not to heap
judgments on her brother when he returned,
just the *Québec* temper my mother showed
her wayward husband and his wartime lover.

Judgments about *T'aunt* Rita's brother when he returned?
Rage boiled up in his Franco-wife, barren of child—
her wayward husband, this wartime lover,
his seed grown large in her English oven.

Rage boiled up in his Franco-wife, barren of child.
Can ten aid forgiveness of a husband's flaws?
His seed grown large in his English lover's oven?
No, ten can only help you re-member yourself.

Feathered Candy

Divorce meant St Vincent de Paul
clothes and counting nickels
at the end of the week. Shame,
bitter-black, soured stories about
when we had been a family.

Today I read about Maritime fishermen—
French Acadians and Irish alike.
They put aside rivalries, organized
cooperatives, demanded *les Anglais*
pay fair prices for their catch.

About the same time, I grew up
speaking English in America.
On summer Sundays—
before the divorce—
crow shadows crossed over
gaping gray-brown clams
and orange scalded lobsters
piled high on the table.
Adults clamored in *Franglais*
about a visit to Bouctouche
when I was three.

My father,
he was sick in his craw
from hauling up traps in *le blanc*
mist *sur la Baie*.

The lobstermen,
they laughed at their *cousin*
américain who poured maple syrup
on everything.

Next thing I know,
I am frying eggs, drizzling
amber sweetness on whites, smelling
it feather into candy.

Fashion

I was, in this regard, a disappointment *ma petite*
Mère who never had a mismatched item
of apparel, a hair out of place. It was so French,
like how she worked into the night, counted nickels
after Friday *souper*. She sewed dresses and coats
at Christmas, new Easter outfits, always a suit—
never a dress or pants—matching hand-crafted hats,
store bought gloves, black or white with the season.

When she died, finely tailored suits bulged out
of her closet, years after she had retired. They were
all store bought. She had forgotten how to do
things once second nature but she kept her Franco
eye for bright bargains, a good seam. She'd be happy
to know I donated her wardrobe to the *Impossible Dream*.

Whole Milk Sounds

Once life was more musical, I'm certain,
before generations lost their youth in the factory,
left me thirsty for the heart sounds of kin.

They decided our future lay in English. American
chatter bested their thick tongued *Franglais*.
Once life was more musical, I'm certain.

English left my mother's soul match-girl thin
while childhood's plastic tongue and ear
left me thirsty for the heart sounds of kin,

nasal consonants and vowels, bounced skin to skin.
Parched, I root for guttural teats, slippery memories
of when life was more musical. I'm certain

utters dripped harmonies in exotic rhythms,
primordial homeland songs, creamy and mythic.
I'm left thirsty for the heart sounds of kin

lost in the English reserve of my sentence.
How can I pour whole sounds, milky into a story
about when life was more musical? I'm certain,
I will always be thirsty for the heart sounds of kin.

2. Web information for Bowen Family Systems Theory and the Georgetown University Bowen Center for the Study of the Family: <<http://www.thebowencenter.org/>>.
3. Web information on the Marion Woodman Foundation: <<http://www.mwoodmanfoundation.org/>>.
4. Web information on Molly Peacock: <<http://www.mollypeacock.org/>>.
5. Stone Soup Blog Spot: <<http://stonesouppoeetry.blogspot.com/>>.
6. Websites associated with information on Rhea Côté Robbins: Franco-American Women's Institute (FAWI): <<http://www.fawi.net/>>. *Franco-American News and Events blog spot*: <<http://fanset8.blogspot.com/>>. *moé pi toé: Promoting Franco-American women's voices*: <<http://fawi.net/ezine/vol4no1/>>.
7. Websites associated with information on Lucie LeBlanc Consentino: *Acadian & French-Canadian Ancestral Home*: <<http://www.acadian-home.org/frames.html>>. *Acadian-French Canadian List Serve*: <<http://www.acadian-home.org/frames.html>>. "Congrès mondial acadien:" <<http://www.acadian-home.org/CMAS.html>>.
8. Websites associated with Franco-American centres connected with Universities: *ULL Center for Acadian and Creole Folklore*: <<http://languages.louisiana.edu/French/centeracadian.html>>. *French Institute, Assumption College*: <<http://www1.assumption.edu/dept/Institutes/Frinstitute>>. *Franco-American Center, University of Maine*: <<http://www.francoamerican.org/home.php>>. *Le Forum*: <<http://www.francoamericanarchives.org/ENG%20files/Leforum.php>>.

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