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Franco American Studies in the footsteps of Robert LeBlanc

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Franco Americans constitute ten to twenty-five percent of New England state populations.¹ Composed of Acadian settlements in northern Maine that date back to the eighteenth century and communities of French Canadians, most of whom immigrated from Quebec and the Maritimes in the late nineteenth century, Franco Americans represent many New England states' largest ethnic minority.² Yet this Franco American community is often referred to as the "silent minority." Dyke Hendrickson calls his collection of oral histories *Quiet Presence* and Joan H. Rollins includes an article on Franco Americans in her book *Hidden Minorities*.³ Though a substantial presence, the "French fact" of New England is often overlooked and unheard.

The sources of this silence lie in a number of places: in the community itself, in the long history of discrimination against the French in New England, and in the standard narrative of American identity. Many blame the Franco Americans themselves, citing their over-reliance on French Canada and on the Catholic Church to preserve their cultural heritage. Unlike other nineteenth-century immigrants, Franco Americans did not travel far, maintaining close ties to friends, family, and cultural institutions across the border. Their proximity to Canada discouraged early attempts to establish an entirely United States-based ethnic identity. Others find the "quiet presence" to be the result of a silencing. They trace deep-seated bias against the Catholic French back to the earliest conceptualizations of New England, through the anti-catholic protests of the Know-Nothing party and the KKK at the turn of the century, to the English-only laws that were in place in Maine until 1969.⁴ Still others argue that it

is the prevailing narrative of nineteenth-century immigration in American history that obscures the Franco American experience. In the dominant American imaginary, English settlers established the leading characteristics of American culture. American culture is predominantly English culture; ethnic difference within that culture is created only with nineteenth-century European immigrations.⁵ The paradigm for these immigrations is Ellis Island, which symbolizes the passageway from the “Old World” to the “New.” Distinct from these European immigrations, Franco Americans traveled overland to the United States after hundreds of years in Canada. Theirs is not a tale that can be articulated through the Ellis Island metaphor and in this dominant narrative of ethnicity, Franco Americans have no place.

Whatever its cause, this silence has had profound effects on the creation of Franco American Studies programs at universities in the United States. Whereas thriving Irish American, Jewish American, and Italian American studies programs exist throughout the United States and Canada, Franco American Studies is a relatively undeveloped field. This silence has not only hampered institutional development but also deprived us of a determined canon and an established curriculum. Yet, Franco American experience offers meaningful insights into the fields of American immigration and French Studies, engaging the fundamental assumptions governing these disciplinary paradigms and opening them up to fruitful dialogue. The investigation of Franco America substantially alters the study of nineteenth-century immigration by broadening its parameters from a purely national story to a North American one. The French Canadian pattern of immigration and settlement resembles the borderlands configuration most often associated with the twentieth-century immigration of Mexican

Americans. The study of Franco America deepens the understanding of American immigration by historicizing this “contemporary” pattern of Mexican immigration, placing it within a larger, continental view. Similarly, Franco America innovates the field of *la francophonie* by conceptualizing the French language as a space of comfort and safety rather than one of oppression. Francophone Studies in the United States has predominantly focused on French speaking Africa and the Caribbean. This attention to postcolonial societies is crucial to the study of French, highlighting the role language and culture play in France’s colonial past and postcolonial present. As an exclusive focus, however, it limits francophone studies to seeing the French language only as an imposed colonial language. Within Franco American texts, however, French figures a “home.” Franco American communities understand the French language to be a determining mark of culture and one of the bulwarks against cultural assimilation. For North American francophones, French defines their cultural space in contrast to English speaking institutions. The study of this perception of language broadens and deepens our understanding of French outside the *métropole*.

Seeing the possibilities the study of Franco America offers, several of us are working to develop and institutionalize the field of Franco American Studies. Faced with the breadth of the task, the effort would be daunting were it not for the path-breaking work of Robert LeBlanc. A cultural geographer who studied Acadian, Quebecois, and Franco American communities, Professor LeBlanc’s oeuvre lays the foundations for the interdisciplinary field of Franco American Studies. The importance of his work is seen in its insistence upon the uniqueness of Franco American culture and in the methodological model his work offers for further research. LeBlanc foregrounds the

specificity of Franco American culture by resisting the “traditional” understanding of it as an extension of French Canada. Such a conceptualization downplays differences by arguing that Franco Americans, Acadians, and Quebecois share a common history, similar culture, and a comparable battle against the assimilationist forces of English-speaking society.⁶ Whether exploring Acadian responses to emigration, the failure of Quebecois attempts to repatriate Franco Americans, or the divergent responses between French Canadians and Franco Americans to World War I conscription, LeBlanc’s oeuvre documents the differences that define each culture. While some maintain that early French communities in the Americas were but a European cultural transplantation (this argument is made especially in relation to their literary production), LeBlanc’s earliest work “The Acadian Migrations” insists upon the cultural specificity of the Acadians through the example of those who returned to France only to find they no longer belonged. In later work, LeBlanc delineates the continuities and the divergences between the Quebecois, Acadian, and Franco American communities. While recognizing the close connections between French Canada and Franco America, LeBlanc sees each culture as unique, for “despite the maintenance of close cultural and personal bonds, the gap between the two continued to grow”(LeBlanc 1993, 366). For LeBlanc, Franco America has its own cultural specificity, reducible to neither French nor French Canadian identity.

LeBlanc also maintains that the recognition of this cultural uniqueness is fundamental to its survival. In his study of the education of Franco Americans in the traditional colleges of Quebec, LeBlanc shows that this educational system maintained “an ideological conformity between the elite groups on either side of the border...for

several decades”(LeBlanc 1988, 49). The persistence of sending Franco Americans to Quebec for school “seemingly rendered insignificant the political border that separated French Canadians from Franco Americans – despite the fact that on either side of the frontier, the demographic, social and political forces affecting the process of assimilation were, indeed, quite different” (LeBlanc 1988, 62). LeBlanc concedes that this refusal to acknowledge the political border initially led to vibrant French-speaking Franco American communities throughout the Northeast. The strategy for cultural survival that they brought with them, *la survivance*, gave their communities a remarkable ability to maintain language, religion and cultural institutions long after other ethnic communities adapted to American ways. But this denial of the border, in the long run, failed the Franco American community as it hindered the ability of the Franco Americans to address the specific pressures that their community faced in American society. They relied almost exclusively upon the strategy of *la survivance*, which succeeded in French Canada but “failed in the United States” (LeBlanc 1988, 62). With its failure, Franco America became extremely vulnerable. Many continued to insist upon old strategies that no longer appealed to a secularized and increasingly Anglophone population. The weight of *la survivance* slowed the emergence of an organic exploration and active creation of a Franco American ethnic identity.

The import of LeBlanc’s work reaches far beyond his vital contribution to the relatively small field of Franco American Studies. His methodological subtlety offers a model for cultural studies generally. In LeBlanc’s work, Franco America – as a culture – neither is a collection of individual or family histories, nor is it a cultural “whole.” By attending to the specific embodiments of cultural practices, LeBlanc refuses to treat the

complexities and contradictions of culture as a transparent, singular unit, a representation he calls “dogmatic ideology” (LeBlanc 1988, 61). In this regard, he does not reduce culture to any one of its registers, he never overlooks the differences and divergences that structure an ethnic community, and he understands culture in its intersection with broad socio-economic forces.

Unlike many evaluations of culture, LeBlanc avoids the easy equation of culture and language. For LeBlanc, culture is larger than the language its members speak. Cultural traditions can be seen, for example, in the way a people interact with the natural world: “Each culture group united by a common tradition perceives nature in its own particular way, thereby identifying those aspects of nature which offer utility. Each appraisal of nature is culture specific” (LeBlanc 1972, 138). These cultural views, however, are not consistent across the entire group. “Within any large culture group...it is possible to identify resource appraisals which differ from one class to another” (LeBlanc 1972, 138). Though members of a culture may share the same vocabulary, relative positions within that culture will differ, creating diverse perspectives and self-understandings. Similarly, while language bridges French Canada to Franco America, it does not define a similar culture. Even though Franco Americans were “francophones, they were no longer ‘gens du pays’” (LeBlanc 1983, 118). LeBlanc’s formulation anticipates the work of modern day scholars of ethnicity who contend “ethnic cultures are merely mental tracks, transmitted through families (women), over which ethnics travel”(di Leonardo 23). For LeBlanc, no one aspect of culture – language, institutions, or class – can stand in as the exclusive marker of *franco-americanité*.

LeBlanc is also careful to attend to the broad contexts that surround communities as well as the tensions within them. “Little Canadas...are more than the individually or collectively experienced ethnic ‘turf’ of New England’s mill towns. They are, in fact, a single component of the mosaic of urban land use...they are functionally related to other parts of the city...they are born, grow, [and] change in size and character”(LeBlanc 1985a, 334). Scholarship that fails to document such changing and variable contexts reifies the community it seeks to record and runs the risk of creating a merely nationalist discourse. LeBlanc similarly focuses on the differences within culture. As he documents the cultural evolution of Franco America, his work delineates the differences between what he called the “folk” and the “elite.” LeBlanc mostly studies the written documents that testify to the perceptions, ideologies, and arguments of those who spoke for the Franco American community. But LeBlanc maintains that we must also “reconstruct a folk attitude” (LeBlanc 1972, 138) both internal and external to these writings. Since the “folk” attitude was unwritten, its traces remained in the response to the written documents of the elite. On occasion, these documents presented broadly held views. During World War One for example, the Franco American elite supported the war and pledged the community to the effort. The large number of men who did conscribe shows that these writings revealed a consensus (LeBlanc 1993, 344). This was not always the case, however, as revealed by his study of the attempt to repatriate Franco Americans to Canada. LeBlanc details both the nationalist rhetoric of repatriation along with its extensive failure to effectively convince large numbers of Franco Americans to return (LeBlanc 1985b, 406). The failure of this discourse to move

the people is not simply the measure of its rhetorical weakness. Where discourse fails we hear those who could not write.

Lastly, LeBlanc never divorces his study of culture from economic forces. Those involved in the attempts to repatriate Franco Americans and to further expand Quebec's colonial reaches ignored the role the economy played upon their efforts.

“Malheureusement, il était illusoire de vouloir retenir sur place ou de rapatrier des Canadiens français: l'émigration était motivée par des besoins économiques qu'on ne pouvait atténuer par l'expansion agricole sur des terres improductives. Les appels au patriotisme tombèrent dans des oreilles de sourds”(LeBlanc 1985b, 406). For despite addressing a Franco American commitment to *la mère-patrie*, these purely “cultural” claims are always within an economic framework that fundamentally affects people's decisions and their lives. For LeBlanc, culture without economy remains “inflated rhetoric and hyperbole” (LeBlanc 1985c, 294) as it fails to address what he calls the “reality” of the ethnic community.

LeBlanc's oeuvre presents an in-depth study of an ethnic community offering a model for those of us in this field. He insists upon the uniqueness of Franco America without ignoring its deep-rooted connections to French Canada. He attends to the complicated nature of culture, refusing to reduce it to language or to a simple reality that could be grasped as a total, transparent whole. And he warns against the all too easy answer of nationalism. His work consistently records the failure of nationalism to address the dominating influence of the English-speaking world. This is perhaps his most important lesson for Franco Americans, the scholarly community, and those of us at the University of Maine as we look forward to constructing Franco American Studies.

We are deeply indebted to the insights of Robert LeBlanc who will continue to speak to us as we continue his work.

Endnotes

¹ According to Madeleine Giguère, 23.7 percent of Vermont, 23.5 percent of New Hampshire, 22.6 percent of Maine, 15.7 percent of Rhode Island, 11.4 percent of Massachusetts, and 8 percent of Connecticut reported French/French-Canadian single ancestry in the 1990 Census. Madeleine Giguère, "New England Francophone Population Based Upon the 1990 Census," *Steeple and Smokestacks: A Collection of Essays on the Franco-American Experience in New England*, ed. Claire Quintal (Worcester: Institut français, 1996) 579.

² In three New England states (Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont), French is the leading non-English language, and Franco Americans are the largest ethnic group. Giguère, "New England Francophone Population Based Upon the 1990 Census", 567.

³ Hendrickson argues, "The Franco-Americans are the invisible minority group of New England... But because those of French-Canadian ancestry do number close to 2.5 million, the presence, albeit quiet presence, of the Franco-Americans should be more than a footnote in New England history." Dyke Hendrickson, *Quiet Presence: Histoires De Franco-Américains En New England* (Portland, ME: Guy Gannett, 1980) viii.; Leon F. Bouvier, "The French-Canadians of New England," *Hidden Minorities: The Persistence of Ethnicity in American Life*, ed. Joan H. Rollins (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1981).

⁴ François Weil argues that New England is built upon the assumption of primacy over the French, citing the anti-French bias of well-known historians such as Francis Parkman. François Weil, *Les Franco-Américains, 1860-1980* (Tours: Belin, 1989) 114.

⁵ Leonard Dinnerstein and David Reimers enact this deep-seated assumption in the opening lines *Ethnic Americans: A History of Immigration*, a successful title now in its fourth edition, “Never before – and in no other country – have as many varied ethnic groups congregated and amalgamated as they have in the United States. The original seventeenth-century settlers were overwhelmingly English, and it was they who set the tone for American culture.” While Dinnerstein and Reimers proceed to acknowledge, “The New World was also characterized by ethnic diversity,” they do not recognize its importance in the development of Early American culture. They continue to posit English settlers as the “foundations for American society.” Leonard Dinnerstein and David M. Reimers, *Ethnic Americans: A History of Immigration*, 4th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) 1.

⁶ LeBlanc situates this claim to a “common heritage” squarely within a nationalist discourse. Faced with a dwindling population as thousands of Quebecois emigrated to the United States and seeking to convince them to return, nineteenth-century nationalists asserted that Quebec is “the ‘sacred ground,’ the ‘mère pays’ to which many were presumably prepared to return if provided the opportunity” (LeBlanc 1983, 117).

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