The University of Maine
DigitalCommons@UMaine

Franco-American Centre Franco-Américain Faculty Scholarship

Franco-American Centre Franco-Américain

2012

La Langue est gardienne': French language and Identity in Franco-American Literature

Susan Pinette
University of Maine, spinette@maine.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/francoamericain_facpub

Part of the French and Francophone Literature Commons, and the Literature in English, North America, Ethnic and Cultural Minority Commons

Repository Citation
Pinette, Susan, "La Langue est gardienne': French language and Identity in Franco-American Literature" (2012). *Franco-American Centre Franco-Américain Faculty Scholarship*. 5.
https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/francoamericain_facpub/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine. It has been accepted for inclusion in Franco-American Centre Franco-Américain Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UMaine. For more information, please contact um.library.technical.services@maine.edu.

La langue est gardienne: Language and Identity in Franco-American Literature

Susan Pinette
University of Maine, Orono[i]

Despite the increasing dominance of English, the ability to speak French remains an important touchstone of Franco-American identity.[1] Proximity to home and relative ease of travel ensured that many Franco-Americans remained connected to Québec long after migration (Leblanc, Richard) and many among the Franco-American elite remained committed to traditionalist discourses of French Canadian nationalism (Leblanc, Roby). Despite shifts and changes in these discourses, language in many Franco-American communities, like Québec, remains intimately tied to identity.[2] Unlike Québec, however, French does not delineate public space for many Franco-Americans, and although it

[1]The term Franco-American typically designates descendants of Québécois and Acadian migrants from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who settled in the northeast United States, particularly in New England and New York.

[2] "Reconnaissons-le, nous craignons, nous ne voulons pas amorcer une discussion pour remettre en question le paradigme premier de l'équation, qui veut que langue et religion soient indissociablement liées pour définir l'espace culturel. Pour la religion, c'est devenu une donnée variable. Pour la langue, c'est autre chose. Et si c'était que nous n'avons pas le choix" (Carrière 150).

continues to articulate a private, familial space for a significant number,[3] the majority of younger Franco-Americans are heritage language speakers or monolingual Anglophones (Fox). Despite this steep decline of language proficiency among younger generations, speaking French remains a principal marker of authenticity. The centrality of this marker is easy to understand in older Franco-Americans, the majority of whom are francophone and grew up speaking French.[4] Yet the importance of French for Franco-American identity is also apparent among younger, anglophone generations. Many middle-aged Franco-Americans articulate their ethnic identity by claiming a connection to French, irrespective of language skills. Even if they never spoke French, learning French is often conceived as the *reacquisition* of a language lost, not as a new language that needs to be

[3] The Franco-American community is diglossic, "A diglossic situation exists in a society when it has two distinct codes which show clear functional separation; that is, one code is employed in one set of circumstances and the other in an entirely different set" (Wardhaugh 89). While French might be their first language, many Franco-Americans attended public schools and were taught to read and write in English. This separation between oral and written expression overlays the functional separation between informal (French) and formal (English) registers.

[4] Grégoire Chabot parodies these francophone elders for their absolutist rejection of English in his vignette "Languestapomanie." "Pauvre Henri" is dragged away from a "colloque franco-américain" for having asked the anglophone waitress for a glass of water in English.

learned from scratch.[5] The correlation between language and identity is harder to discern in younger monolingual Franco-Americans, but it is their continued allegiance to the equation of language and ethnic identity that prevents many of them from self-identifying as Franco-American. Many younger Franco-Americans willingly categorize their relatives as “French" but without French language skills, they no longer feel that they are or can be.[6] While Franco-Americans may or may not be francophone, many nonetheless seem committed to the idea that speaking French is intimately tied to Franco-American identity. Franco-American literary production exists in this domain, heavily laden with cultural codes deeply rooted in French-speaking Québec. This article will argue that even though French may no longer be the lingua franca of Franco America, it nevertheless retains its social significance within Franco-American communities, functioning as an important signifier of ethnic identity. I will examine the role of French in two recently

---

[5]An example of this dynamic can be seen in a *Zone Libre* special on Franco-American language reacquisition attempts in Waterville, Maine and Susan Poulin and Gordon Carlisle’s play “Pardon my French!”

[6]A tale often told is of the school teacher who asked how many of the students were "French," to which no one raised a hand. (The term "Franco-American" is rarely used by Franco-Americans. Most self-identify as "French.") When this same teacher then asked how many students had a “mémére,” 2/3 of the class did. I encounter a similar dynamic in my own teaching. Many of the students who take “FAS 101: Introduction to Franco-American Studies” are Franco-American; most if not all do not identify themselves as “French” because they do not speak it. They do not hesitate, however, to claim that their parents or grandparents are “French.”

published *Bildungsromane* by Franco-American authors: *Le Petit Mangeur de fleurs* by Norman Beaupré and *American Ghosts* by David Plante. Even though one text is written in French and the other in English, both authors use French to construct a Franco-American subject.

***The Ethnic* Bildungsroman**

The novel of formation, or *Bildungsroman*, as Tobias Boes notes in a survey of the genre's recent critical interventions, "continues to thrive in post-colonial, minority, multi-cultural, and immigrant literatures worldwide" (239). Initially coined to refer specifically to a nineteenth-century German "poetic expression of the Enlightenment concept of *Bildung*" (232), the term was broadened through feminist, postcolonial, and minority interventions during the 1980s and 90s to include "coming-of-age narratives that bear only cursory resemblance to nineteenth-century European models" (231). In her foundational article, Marianne Hirsch explains that broadening the definition allows us to perceive "significant formal and thematic links" among different texts, distilling that the novel of formation "is the story of a representative individual's growth and development within the context of a defined social order" (296). It is this aspect of the genre, Richard Barney contends, that continues to be a compelling narrative scheme for ethnic writers because "narratives of development promise the ability to explore origins, consider the viability of social roots, and reassess the prospect of social cohesion" (360): the novel of formation allows the ethnic writer to explore his or her formation as both "biographical and social" (Hirsch 297).

While this genre allows the ethnic writer to place "complex interactions of self and society into literary form" (Holte 28), the novel of formation at the same time has been called a conservative genre due to its "traditional goal of accommodation to the existing society" (Lima 859). For ethnic writers in the United States, this formal drive towards accommodation dovetails with an ideological insistence upon assimilation. James Craig Holte notes, "Every literary genre exists within a specific framework of textual forms, functions, materials, authorial intentions, and reader expectations (26)," and in the United States, *Bildungsromane* operate in a "terrain introduced by the Statue of Liberty, discovered by the immigrant, dreamed in a common language, and defended in battle by the independent, self-made man" (Lowe 2). In this "terrain," the "subject becomes, acts, and speaks itself as 'American'" (Lowe 3). For ethnic writers based in the United States, the genre's possibilities therefore work at cross purposes. On the one hand, the *Bildungsroman* creates a space in which to explore cultural origins; on the other, it fuses with an ideological demand of assimilation, one specifically accomplished through the rejection of cultural heritage, "The traditional bildungsroman [...] requires [the protagonists] to relinquish their 'particularity and difference.' This formulation lays bare a function that was always present but generally undiscussed: *assimilating* subjects" (Chu 12). Both *Le Petit mangeur de fleurs* and *American Ghosts* are structured by this narrative form, and both are built around the tension inherent to it. While each text explores the "viability of social roots," at the same time, their representation of Franco-American communities is framed by the melting-pot teleology of the U.S.-based ethnic *Bildungsroman*. Despite these formal constraints, both "exist within the general tradition even as they extend its parameters" (Holte 26), and Beaupré and Plante use French – as a

means of communication and as a sign of the ethnic self – to open up a space in which to construct Franco-American identity.

Normand Beaupré

Le Petit Mangeur de fleurs is a coming of age story, "a *bildungsroman* as it is known in literature" (Beaupré "Introduction"). It opens with the hero's childhood in the *petit Canada* of Biddeford Maine and closes with the young man's leave-taking. True to its narrative form, it is built around the two opposing tendencies inherent to the novel of formation. On the one hand, *Le petit mangeur de fleurs* celebrates the Franco-American community of Biddeford, Maine and explores the interconnection of the young protagonist and his social realm. Family members, religious practices, and community events are described with elaborate, ethnographic detail and are explicitly marked as Franco-American.[7] Beaupré unambiguously identifies the hero with this community, declaring in the introduction to his English translation that the novel is about a "boy growing up francophone with a Québécois set of traditional values that remain, to this day, in the deepest part of myself" and the Québec-based publishing house markets *Le petit mangeur de fleurs* as a text which "transporte le lecteur dans cet État et lui fait découvrir la richesse de la communauté Francophone de l'endroit" (Les Éditions JCL).

---

[7] We find, for example, throughout the text phrases such as, "Dans mes souvenirs de jeunesse, je revois ma mère à l'œuvre dans la cuisine, pièce-pivot du ménage franco-américain. Traditionnellement, chez la mère franco-américaine, le besoin d'épargner, l'exigence de ne pas dépenser pour rien et le gros bon sens pratique motivaient ses démarches quotidiennes" (85).

On the other hand, the text is structured by a particularly "American" plot that demands the rejection of this traditional culture, portrayed as the main obstruction to the hero's long-term goal of manhood. In *Le petit mangeur de fleurs*, the ethnic community is feminized and the youth's life within it dominated by women, "Ma vie d'enfance était renfermée dans le domaine des femmes: mère, grand-mère paternelle, sœurs, marraine et religieuses enseignantes. Seul garçon de la famille, ce fut le cas d'un petit abandonné à la tendre domination des femmes" (53). This society of women threatens the protagonist's masculinity. His mother teases him at times, "en me prévenant de ne pas faire de la 'menette'" (96), and he realizes that he sometimes is unable to live up to the demands of masculinity. "Après tout, il faut apprendre à se maîtriser, à devenir un homme. Embarrassé, j'ai dû, à ce moment, prendre davantage conscience de mon insuffisance" (87). With its opposition between a feminized community and the protagonist's quest for self-realization, *Le petit mangeur de fleurs* enters into an American literary tradition that posits "Americanness" upon the separation from "cultures and family responsibilities (embodied by women)" (Chu 5). This turn to "the figures of œdipal strife" help Beaupré construct an "explicitly masculinized model" of subjectivity "based on established models in American letters" (Chu 5).

In *Growing up Ethnic*, Martin Japtok argues that "when ethnic writers adopt [the ethnic autobiography and *Bildungsroman*], they transform them" (25). *Le petit mangeur de fleurs* is no exception. The text adopts a formal organization that pits individuation against the Franco-American community in order to establish its protagonist as an "American" subject. At the same time, Beaupré's text uses French to construct a subjectivity that is also rooted in its ethic customs. *Le petit mangeur de fleurs* is written

in French. The text's use of French belies the U.S. imperative of monolingualism; it also aligns it with a French Canadian form of literary nationalism that equates language to identity. A bilingual author, Beaupré's language choices appear motivated. His writings not related to his ethnic community are written in English[8] while his texts on Franco-American communities specifically foreground its oral dialect. [9] Three of his French-language works are theatrical monologues (modeled explicitly on Antonine Maillet's *La Sagouine*) in which the main character speaks Franco-American French.[10] His other two French writings are novels, and Beaupré fills his text with characters who speak the vernacular. *Le petit mangeur de fleurs* opens with the spoken directive, "Ferme tes quenœils," signaling the emphasis that is placed on speech throughout the text. Direct quotations transcribe both the vocabulary and oral pronunciation of various aunts, neighbors and friends. Relatives exclaim, "Qu'ossé qu'tu veux" (51) and explain, "Personne y parle. Seulement moé. Asteur, j'la vois presque jamais" (49).

---

[8] Beaupré has several titles in English: *Before All Dignity Is Lost: The Living and Dying of an AIDS Victim, The Boy with the Blue Cap, Trails Within: Meditations on the Walking Trails at the Ghost Ranch in Abiquiu, New Mexico, Simplicity in the Life of the Gospels, The Man with the Easel of Horn.*

[9]Linguists Cynthia Fox and Jane Smith note that Franco-American French is "une variété du français nord-américain" with phonetic and morphological traits drawn from both Acadian and Québécois French and some shared vocabulary and structure from the English that surrounds it (120).

[10] *La Souillonne*, *La Souillonne, Deusse*, and *Madame Athanase T. Brindamour*

Lise Gauvin notes that all francophone writers are faced with a dilemma: "Comment intégrer aux codes de l'œuvre et de l'écrit le référentiel qui renvoie à différents systèmes de représentation culturels?" (*Langagement* 11), for as Mireille Rosello notes, "French as an international language cannot be equated with national borders but no one can deny that it has historically been fused with a triumphant celebration of France" (126). Beaupré's reliance upon Franco-American speech to disrupt the metanymical relationship between language and nation places him in a long line of Québecois and Acadian writers who turn to oral transcription to "ground" the written word. While this transcription can be seen as a candid attempt to, "rendre un compte immédiate, préalable à tout autre message, de la situation des homes murés dans la langue de leur classe, de leur région, de leur profession, de leur hérédité, ou de leur histoire" (Barthes, "l'écriture et la parole" 59), it simultaneously recalls a specifically Québécois nationalist contention that authentic self-expression requires "une langue à soi." Gauvin contends, "l'idéologie jouale […] est l'un des derniers avatars du mythe d'une langue à soi" (30) and in *Le Petit Mangeur de fleurs*, it is Franco-American French that guarantees authenticity.

> À l'école on enseigne au petit Franco-Américain à franciser davantage sa langue, à ne pas la parsemer de mots "canayans" et de mots anglais comme si son parler tel quel n'avait pas assez de mérite [...] Un mot comme 'écrapoutir' n'a-t-il plus de force qu''écraser' ou même 'écrabouiller', mot étrange pour nous, mot qui ne nous appartient pas. [...] il y a bien des années lorsqu'on nous 'écrapoutissait' comme des insectes, en nous lançant des apostrophes de dédain à propos de *notre*

> *langue à nous*, dans notre petit coin du monde. Continent: Amérique du Nord; pays: États-Unis; région: Nouvelle-Angleterre; État: Maine; comté: York; ville: Biddeford; citoyenneté: américaine; culture: franco-américaine. Voilà mes coordonnées, mon environnement, mon milieu, et voilà le domaine où sont entassés les souvenirs de mon enfance. (142-43 emphasis added)

Ethnicity in Beaupré's text is not biological, it is language-based. It is the particular Franco-American French, "notre langue à nous" that the narrator equates to his cultural community and that functions as "substitute identitaire" (Gauvin 30). This emphasis on the spoken word places *Le petit mangeur de fleurs* within a French-Canadian literary canon. Yet this text is not a Québécois novel; Beaupré offers us a specifically Franco-American story, one that blends aspects of Québécois nationalism with a particularly American story of modern man.

While the spoken dialect in *Le petit mangeur des fleurs* signifies the Franco-American community at its most authentic, the narrator does not speak Franco-American French. In this way, French also marks the narrator's distance from this community. The narrator's use of more standardized French formalizes a central concern of this novel of formation, namely his difference from this ethnic community. Franco-American French in Beaupré's text evokes a feminized space in which mothers, grandmothers, and aunts talk loudly and often. This feminine, ethnic community gravitates around the kitchen, where women gather to talk and share each other's company.

> Ce dont je me souviens surtout de tante Louise, c'est le son de sa voix dans la cuisine de ma grand-mère. Parfois, ce n'était pas la seule; on en entendait trois ou quatre, dont celle plutôt criarde d'une quasi-parente par

> mariage, Florence Bouthillette. […] Pour nous, ce n'était que babillage, potin de cuisine sans queue ni tête. Néanmoins, nous savions que mémère se délectait de tout ce vacarme, assise parmi ces femmes jacasseuses et partageant tout ce qui débordait de son cœur. (77)

Franco-American French is the language of women, and women are defined by their relationship to it. "Ma mère était femme énergique, à l'œil pétillant, parlante [...] elle fuyait la solitude et le silence" (emphasis added, 12). Men, on the other hand, play a very small role during the protagonist's youth: "Je dois avouer que leur présence, lorsque je grandissais, ne m'était pas aussi étroite que celle des femmes" (101). Unlike the conversant women who rule the cultural hearth, Franco-American men do not talk: "Lorsque j'aborde la question des hommes dans ma jeune vie […] je me rends compte que je ressens l'angoisse du silence et de la noirceur" (101). Whereas women are described by their relationship to the spoken patois, men are characterized by their lack of language, "Mon grand-père, lui, je ne l'ai jamais entendu adresser la parole à ma grand-mère. [...] L'éternel silence, mon grand-père" (72).

The œdipal break with this feminized community occurs, most tellingly, around the familiar American narrative of self-betterment and upward mobility. At twelve and a half, the hero leaves his family to enter the minor seminary in Winthrop, Maine; three years later he enters the novitiate in L'Ancienne-Lorette (Québec) only to return home after a month, rejecting forever a life in the church. He initially finds work first in a shoe shop and then in a textile mill to help support his struggling family. When the protagonist quits his job in the mills after working the night shift for several months, "Je rentrai à la maison le cœur net, bien déterminé à me revaloriser, et à développer mes capacités" (165), he sparks the event that highlights the need to separate from his cultural surroundings. When the protagonist decides to pursue self-cultivation, his mother

disapproves of his decision, "'Qu'est-ce que tu vas faire sans travail? [...]' Elle me toisa d'un œil à la fois suppliant et froid […] Puis, elle se tut. Elle se tut pendant des semaines. Mais, son silence était un silence lourd, insupportable" (165). His voluntary unemployment flouts the Franco community's profound respect for work, "J'avais osé ébranler les principes d'une sécurité si importante dans les maisonnées franco-américaines: le travail salarié" (166). Just as his cultural community was defined by the women who spoke loudly; his estrangement from it is registered with silence. There is quiet where there once were Franco-American words.

While it is the protagonist's mother who advocates for the son's submission to wage labor, she speaks for the entire community. Franco-American masculinity in *Le Petit Mangeur de fleurs* asserts itself as working class, "Toute sa vie, mon père travaillera de ses mains, de ses muscles tendus, avec l'acceptation de quasi-servitude de l'ouvrier manuel. Il le fera, sans doute, par devoir, mais aussi avec la conviction que le travail, le gros travail rachète un homme de ses insuffisances" (113). Whereas mainstream U.S. culture sees work as a means for self-betterment and upward mobility, manual labor in this Franco-American context is valued for its religiously redemptive qualities. The Franco-American father works without regard to upward mobility, "Mon père se trouva du travail, un travail dur mais qui rapportait un salaire chaque semaine. […] Jamais je ne l'ai entendu se plaindre, jamais il n'a souhaité un sort meilleur" (16). Franco-American masculine identity is characterized by its silent commitment to salaried work. When the hero decides to quit his mill job in order to "[s]e revaloriser," his rebellion – characterized by a rejection of manual labor and the desire for something more – closes down any possible identification with his Franco-American father.

With his determination to improve himself, the narrator embarks on a journey of assimilation. After leaving the mill, the hero finds work on the printing presses of the Saco Lowell Shops and spends all his free time in the graphic arts department. He befriends Frank, an artist, and they spend long hours in Frank's studio, speaking about colors, myths, and poetry. Like "America" itself, anglophone Frank lacks any ethnic markers and encourages the boy to break away from his ethnic community in order to pursue his own individual dreams, "*Find your way*, me dit Frank [...]. *You're young, break away, be yourself. Listen to what you have to say deep down inside*" (169). Confronted by the protagonist's self-doubt, Frank encourages him, "*you have the imagination, the words*. Oui, des mots. Mais, je n'en avais pas assez. Pas assez pour vraiment écrire. *'Well, get them*.'"(170).

The hero's reaction to Frank is complex, representing his own complicated relationship to assimilationist America. While he acknowledges the importance of Frank's counsel, he insists upon maintaining his connection to his community and a sense of himself as Franco-American, "J'avais toute une vie à faire. Fallait-il que je m'arrache à mes liens ethniques tantôt doux, tantôt étouffants? Car je sentais que j'étais aussi autre que mon argile franco-américaine. Pas nécessairement, car je risquais de devenir inachevé. Surtout pas"(173). The crisis precipitated by the hero's rejection of millwork does not find its resolution in Frank. The protagonist fears losing connection to his ethnic "clay" and the text rejects the Americanized, anglophone subject that Frank represents as an adequate solution.

With his encouragement to write, Frank does point the way, however, to a means of self-fathering. Affirming his desire to remain connected to his ethnic community, the

narrator nevertheless feels constrained and wants more, “il me fallait aller au-delà des routes, des petites aspirations, des défaillances, sur la voie du succès, de ceux qui me servaient de modèles ou de complices” (173). *Le petit mangeur de fleurs* concludes with a long meditative walk along the ocean at Fortune’s Rocks, “un lieu magnifique où les touristes passaient la saison estivale [...]. Mais les Franco-américains ne fréquentaient pas beaucoup cet endroit, car les droits d’accès publics étaient rare” (171). It is here, in a place known to but rarely visited by Franco-Americans, that the protagonist conceptualizes a Franco-American identity at once rooted in the Franco-American community but distinct from it. He imagines an author to be like a blacksmith:

> Tout à coup, je me suis mis à chercher des mots, des mots de couleur et de lumière afin de traduire cette scène qui se déroulait devant moi. Forge, forgeron! Vole, homme aux ailes de cire! D’autres l’avaient déjà fait, tels ces deux artistes; ils pouvaient donc m’apprendre à le faire [...]. Peut-être que moi aussi j’apprendrais à peindre avec les mots, à les employer avec la fougue d’un forgeron. (175)

This figure of the author-blacksmith constructs a specifically Franco-American masculinity on two separate but related levels. First, his Québécois great-grandfather was a blacksmith, “Les souches de pépère Beaupré étaient québécoises. Il était né à Saint-Liboire, d’un père forgeron-mécanicien. On dit que l’arrière-grand-père, Thomas, avait les mains d’un géant [...]. Une présence, sans doute, gigantesque, virile et dominante. Tout un homme, mon aïeul” (103). Identifying himself with this “virile” ancestor constructs a masculinity grounded in the homeland. Secondly, liking the figure of the author to a blacksmith allows him to define writing as manual labor, connecting the hero

to the language of his community in an entirely masculine way. Throughout the narrative Franco-American French stands in for the Franco-American community. It is the language of characters embedded in ethnic traditions. The trope of the author-blacksmith establishes a relationship to language that is not feminine: he will use words like a blacksmith.

> Les mots, il y en a qui sont forgés expressément pour tel et tel sens […] d'autres se donnent facilement à l'alchimie du verbe […]. Puis les canadianismes et les canadianismes-franco-américanismes […]. De plus, il y a les anglicismes, ces tournures invétérés d'une collectivité Francophone à trait d'union entre deux cultures, accusés de mauvais français. Quel tour de force que de se servir des mots de la culture-mère, de la culture-fille ainsi que de la culture-petite-fille! Pourquoi tant se tracasser des mots, mots anglais autant que mots français? Et bien, en ce temps-là, je ne me tracassais pas en entrevoyant la possibilité de jouer avec les mots. Peut-être auraient-ils une place pour moi et moi une place pour eux, une place de choix où je me sentirais à l'aise, nourri d'inspiration et muni des outils qui me permettraient enfin de la traduire, cette inspiration, avec le souffle des mots. (173-74)

The figure of the author-blacksmith creates a subject position rooted in the masculine and ethnic values of the Franco-American community, and at the same time, one with a voice freed from the conventions of masculine silence.

Martin Japok notes that for many ethnic authors, "the ethnic artist […] appears as the embodiment of ethnic solidarity" (72). *Le petit mangeur de fleurs* constructs a Franco-American subject that combines ethnic solidarity with American individualism. The Franco-American writer/blacksmith looks to the ethnic community; he understands and is inspired by the language they speak. He will use Franco-American French, and his writing will guarantee that the community lives on. At the same time, he looks outside the community, "Le chant du large m'appelait à sortir de ma coquille" (175) and pursues his own individualized path. The "français standard" of the narrator is not the language of the Franco-American characters who define the cultural community but that of the Franco-American author, writing his ethnic self.

David Plante

Werner Sollors declares that "writers of national fame or of striking formal accomplishments or of international fame are often categorically excluded from the realm of ethnic writing" (241-42); his assessment rings true for David Plante. An author with an "estimable public career" (Birkerts), David Plante's writing is rarely identified as ethnic. Reviewers of *American Ghosts* willingly explore the impact of Catholicism (Hansen), homosexuality (Nickels), and the influence of Henry James (Wright); Plante's explorations of ancestry, however, are dismissed as superfluous, "Here the memoir essentially ends. There follows a series of chapters on Plante's ancestry… a precious distraction to accompany this otherwise beautiful memoir" (Nickels). These reviews are striking, given that a major theme of the novel is the protagonist's relationship to his ethnic community and that the book is dedicated to Philip Roth, one of the most

prominent American writers exploring themes of ethnicity. It is also noteworthy that French words and phrases figure prominently throughout and that the text is marked by the formal characteristics of the U.S.-based ethnic *Bildungsroman*. It is hard to ignore the role ethnicity plays in this work, and I will argue that far from disrupting the text's exploration of themes of sexual identity, religious belief, and writing, Plante's investigation of ethnic identity provides its overarching frame. *American Ghosts* opens with a focus on the ethnic community, it moves into a period of rebellion and rejection, and ends with the protagonist's embrace of an ethnic identity reworked to include both the ethnic past and the American present. It is within this framework that the novel's other themes are given significance.

The first twelve chapters of *American Ghosts* are set in Providence, Rhode Island, and the text's opening sentence contextualizes the protagonist squarely within his Franco-American parish. "On our way to and from parochial school, my younger brother and I walked through a wooded lot between our house and our nearest neighbor […] The French nighttime air seething through the screen smelled of wild roses that grew between our narrow yard and the small lot of woods, and also some other smell, perhaps of skunk cabbage or skunk, which I thought of as *bête puante*" (1). These lines simultaneously introduce the text's definition of the cultural community and its understanding of ethnic identity. In *American Ghosts*, the Franco-American community is first and foremost characterized by its religion. In these initial chapters characters attend church, visit family after mass, and the children spend their days with the nuns at parochial school. The church as a defining social institution structures Franco-American life. "In our classroom, in our school, in our parish, in our French fortress surrounded by Yankee territory we all

sang, led by Mère Sainte Flore: *Ô, Canada, terre de nos aïeux, Ton front est ceint des fleurons glorieux* – We lived in what we called Le Petit Canada, where we preserved the beliefs of Le Grand Canada" (5).

Those who live within the confines of this Franco-American world are further defined by their relationship to French. French words and phrases are scattered throughout *American Ghosts*, and in most cases they translate the English written before or after it. As reiteration, these French words seem superfluous. They are not necessary to the narrative, instead functioning much like what Roland Barthes called the "*détails inutiles*" of a realist novel, "Ces notations sont scandaleuses […] elles semblent accordées à une sorte de *luxe* de la narration, prodigue au point de dispenser des détails 'inutiles' et d'élever ainsi par endroits le coût de l'information narrative" (84). Despite what appears at first to be inessential luxury, these seemingly insignificant particulars are shown to produce "*l'effet de réel.*" It is these details which "sont réputés dénoter directement le réel, ils ne font rien d'autre, sans le dire, que le signifier" (88). In *American Ghosts*, French words are not a vocabulary lesson. They function instead to mark Franco-American identity, and the words *bête puante* establish the hero as a Franco-American embedded within his cultural community.

The novel's language-based conceptualization of ethnicity structures the portrayal of each character in this early section of the novel. The language one speaks determines the connection to the Franco-American parish and each character unfolds in the social significance of his/her language choice. The only person who speaks English in these opening chapters is the protagonist's Franco-American mother, "My mother was a soft, slightly plump woman in a housedress and apron. She spoke to us in English" (10).

Accordingly, she is the only character who is not identified with her ethnic heritage. "My mother, who in marrying my father had married a real Canuck as if she herself, being French, were not" (51). In this world, defined by the Franco-American parish, she is identified as American:

> Though both my parents were Franco-Americans and Catholics and every Sunday went to Mass together, Lenard and I with them, they belonged to different nationalities and different religions. This came to me one Sunday morning at Mass with my parents. My mother's religion, I thought, was as American as the American flag that stood to one side of the altar, and my father's religion was Canuck, which had no identifying flag, not even the Vatican flag that stood on the other side of the altar. (36-37)

She actively pursues assimilation, surrounding herself with only anglophone friends. "With my mother's protestant friend and with Irish friends from the Irish parish where she would go once a week to join a group of women who sewed dressings for a hospital, I began to see how lonely she was in our parish, though she was supposed to be, herself, French" (53). Feeling suffocated by the closed-off, French-speaking world, the hero's mother pounds against the walls of their home in frequent fights with her husband, raging against all that shuts her in.

The French speakers in this early section are all closely identified with the Franco-American parish and the most notable among them is the protagonist's paternal aunt, Matante Cora. Her familial moniker "Matante Cora" foregrounds her Franco identity as well as her preferred language. "I walked to my aunt Cora's […]. She told me that the great pleasure of her childhood was oranges at Christmas. '*On n'avait des oranges ainques à Noël*'" (20). Embedded in her Franco-American world, she has trouble speaking English. "My aunt, whose French was greatly more grammatical than her English, said, 'Hey, you done a good job.'"(27). Matante Cora is the most identifiably

ethnic character in the text and she connects the protagonist with his heritage in concrete ways. She tells the hero family stories that his father refuses to share and is characterized by her ardent embrace of Franco-American ideals as they are portrayed in the novel. As a girl, she wanted only to become a nun but was denied. "Her agony was her longing. And her greatest longing, ever since she was a girl, was to enter a convent and become a nun. God had given her a vocation, she was sure […]. After a year of washing floors and cleaning toilets, she was told she didn't have a real vocation and must leave the convent" (29). Subsequent to leaving the convent, she married. Almost a caricature of a subservient Franco-American female, she accepted all her husband's abuse without protest. He beat her, slept around with other women, and left her and their daughter to starve. Despite this mistreatment and the eventual death of their child, she repeatedly took him back and eventually he died in her arms. "'Because I knew that everything I prayed for, with all my heart and soul, I could only ever have by staying with him and suffering whatever God sent to me through him'" (30). Once her husband was gone, she went to work in a laundry, embracing the dirty, low-end work that her social status as a Franco-American earns her. "Matante Cora said, 'Well, who else would do such dirty work, who else but one of us French? We're not called white niggers for nothing'" (35). Invoking Pierre Vallière's manifesto, *Les negres blancs d'Amérique*, Matante Cora aligns herself with nationalist Québec and the struggle against the English-speaking elite. Language, religion, and politics identify Matante Cora squarely with "le petit Canada."

As a Francophone, the protagonist is aligned with his paternal aunt in these opening pages. The text describes his interactions with the nuns, his Sunday afternoons at

Matante Cora's, and his devotional practices when he was fourteen. The text even marks a deep if ambiguous connection with Matante Cora.

> Seeing my aunt made me feel a little sick to my stomach, as though I were allowing myself something I shouldn't allow and should have had the moral strength to deny myself. Though I thought of her, as my mother did, as a joke and an embarrassment, I also thought of her as allowing in me embarrassing feelings I couldn't express to others, perhaps especially to my mother, except by joking about them. (21)

Against this ethnic world, the young man rebels, and *American Ghosts* replays the American plot of escape from the feminized ethnic enclave. The second section of the text (also twelve chapters) begins when "David" at nineteen leaves for Europe. These chapters recount the hero's attempts to live completely "outside the parish"(180), "All that I really felt about my revealed ancestry was that I must protect myself from it, perhaps by forgetting about it" (176). They detail the hero's pursuit of love and various attempts to "lose himself," first with a series of lovers and finally with his lifelong partner, Nikos, "His world became my world for the particulars of it" (177). Through the rejection of ethnic traditions, the protagonist is able to come out as a gay man, an atheist, and perhaps most tellingly, an Anglophone, "I not only wanted to get out of the parish, I felt I *needed* to get out […]. I began to write down images. I wrote in English" (59-60).

While *American Ghosts* deploys this recognizable narrative, it simultaneously undermines it. In this middle section of the novel, the hero – much like his mother – pursues the assimilationist American dream, "Of course I wanted to belong to their America, of course I did" (73). Yet the novel marks the failure of both his and his

mother's attempts, calling into question the modern, American self the narrative claims to construct. His mother, despite her desire to escape, does not dare to leave. The narrator notes that "she longed to get out of it, though she knew this was impossible for her because my father would never leave, and she would never leave my father. And she was as intimidated by the world beyond the parish as I was" (53). Perhaps her fear came from the realization that she does not really fit into mainstream America. "After one of those confrontations in which my mother accused my father of closing her in our house as in a tomb," the hero's mother decides to go shopping and asks "David" to go with her. She is convinced to buy an expensive coat from an exclusive women's shop, both pressured by the elegant saleslady and motivated by shame. "She had bought – had, against her will, been made to buy – an ugly coat […]. I resented that she had to wear that coat and felt she should not have to resign herself to it as she did. It wasn't her fault that she had to wear it, and perhaps it wasn't altogether mine" (57). Despite her attempts, the hero's mother is taken advantage of when she tries to enter into the upscale, anglophone world. Instead she is left to beat against the walls of her home and rail against her feeling of being trapped. The hero also attempts to escape the confines of traditional culture and overcomes many of the barriers that prevented her escape. As "David" moves into the anglophone and anglocentric worlds of Boston and then London, the text details the hero's self-development as he explores his sexuality and establishes a loving relationship with his partner Nikos. He succeeds where his mother does not. Despite this American success story, the third part of the novel is initiated by "David's" emotional breakdown, attributed to his inability to live a life completely disconnected from his parish, "I had no reason to want to die, had every reason to live my life with a richness that I, growing up

in my parish, had fantasized might be possible outside the parish, the life I had with Nikos" (180). With this turn of events, *American Ghosts* marks the failure of a modern, American subjectivity predicated on the rejection of the ethnic past. Though the protagonist may have come out as gay man, found his true love, and left behind the church that disapproves of him, he finds himself unable to go on. "Why can't my love be enough for you?"(190), Nikos asks.

In an interview with Lise Gauvin about the francophone writer's relationship to French, Assia Djebar explains, "Au fond tout mon travail de vingt à quarante ans, a été de rechercher cette ombre perdue dans la langue française. Il y a deux sortes de perte: il y a la perte qui vous hante et la perte que vous oublier, l'oubli de la perte […]. Le terrible, c'est l'oubli de la perte" (Gauvin 30). *American Ghosts*, both in its title and in its storyline, echos Djebar's observations. Plante's model of ethnicity is not one rooted in politics or history but one which announces itself as a non presence, and *American Ghosts* constructs an ethnic identity that builds around the sense of loss and of haunting. Notably, this vision of ethnic identity is articulated first around the narrator's use of English.

> Though I wrote in English, there remained within this language the baptized letters of my French religion, letters that always promised the invisible; but, as much as I tried, my English could not fulfill that promise, nor, really, could my French, not any longer, for I was losing my French. Because I was losing it I looked more and more often at *Mon premier livre de lecture*, which more and more, appeared to have

> been the first reading book of a boy who was becoming a stranger to me. (58-59)

This discussion of language articulates the central problematic of these final chapters, namely how the ethnic author, embedded in the anglophone world, reaches the invisible that continues to haunt his letters. On the one hand, French is his native language and can connect him to "the only authentic reality I had ever known" (193). It is here, in this invisible presence, that he feels the "greatest sense of everything that was most important to me" (2). On the other hand, that invisible world is alien, a "stranger to me" for it is in a language he no longer speaks.

After the failure of trying to escape his ethnic past, the hero turns to face it and articulates an identity rooted in both. "I was more aware than I had ever been of the split in me (which is the split in this book): the split and pull between the secular and the religious, between the definite and the vague, between what can be said and what cannot be said, between law and freedom, state and self, politics and poetry, between light and darkness, between life and death, between my mother and my father" (243). The hero solves his crisis when he makes a place for his ethnic past, symbolized by his acceptance of and identification with his father. The protagonist's father is francophone. He differs from his sister however and is presented in many ways as Cora's opposite. Whereas Matante Cora talks non-stop about her ancestry, his father always answers with, "*J'n'sais pas*" (12). He is silent while she, "unlike my father, was incapable of withdrawing into silence" (20). While Matante Cora makes her devotions the topic of every conversation, his father's prayers remain a mystery (38). Perhaps most significantly, the hero's father is

described in abstract, non-institutional terms. “He was a North American, but he came from a country that no longer existed, that had already succumbed to its doom – a country with no defined cities, without churches, without libraries, without courthouses, where no records were kept. And at a deep level he continued to live in that nonexistent country” (76). Whereas Matante Cora identified with the Franco-American institutions and is defined by them, his father offers an alternate embodiment of Franco-American ethnicity.

The text defines his father’s francophone identity as one disconnected from the Franco-American parish so significant in Matante Cora’s life and yet distinct from his mother’s active embrace of the American dream. It exists, invisible and ultimately subordinated to the visible, active American world. “She [his mother] didn’t intend it, but her God won out over my father’s God. Not that there was a decisive battle between them – my father’s God simply, unassumingly gave into and became invisible within my mother’s God, in the same way that the Canuck tribal parish, weak and helpless, simply and unassumingly gave into and became invisible within the en-globing country of America” (63). Plante’s ethnic signification emerges out of the disjuncture between the invisible and the visible. “We had lost that French continent, but even if we did not know its history, it remained an invisible presence to us, in the same way that what is invisible is more of a presence to us than what is visible” (8). The ethnic hearth is an absent presence, existing within the visible but resistant to articulation. “We may try to see the invisible, and may, at moments, see it in a slouch hat with a plume or a lace fan, in a stone arrowhead, or in a beaver pelt, but it cannot be made visible, as much as we try” (8).

Ronald Wright complains, "But although this book seems to promise both a personal and historical quest, it seldom ventures beyond the subjective and imaginary, recoiling from real contact with history, geography, ethnicity or politics" ("Cast Off"). *American Ghosts* stretches the definition of ethnic identity, rooting it neither in the nationalist identities of his Franco-American youth or in an American dream of complete self-determination. In the final chapters the protagonist travels back home, visits Québec and his father's parish, and pursues his genealogical tree as far as he can go into French archives. Far from leading to a reification of ethnic identity, this journey is understood as an undoing of the self, "After years and years of trying to find out about my ancestry, starting with my childhood eagerness to investigate it through to my discovery of the genealogical list, I was, by finding out about it, undoing myself. This was a great relief, a great pleasure, a joy" (269). *American Ghosts* constructs ethnic identity as a haunting and place of non-identity. The novel ends with French a prayer written first in French, then in English. David does not identify with this French speaker. "Not I, but someone else near enough for me to hear him […] prayed to God […]. Whenever I heard him, he was, very quietly, praying in French" (288). At the end of his quest, his mother tongue is still out of reach. David's non-identification with his ethnic past does not mean, however, that it is absent. Listening, Plante's ethnic self at the end is Franco-American, defined by the language that promises the invisible.

Franco-Américain and/or Franco-American

Le Petit Mangeur de fleurs and *American Ghosts* share many thematic and formal traits. Both depict a feminized Franco-American community, both situate their protagonist's growth in relation to it, and both use French to create an ethnic subject. At the same time,

these texts propose two very different models of ethnicity. *Le petit mangeur de fleurs* constructs a Franco-American subject through a re-identification with the originary homeland; *American Ghosts* articulates ethnicity as a space of non-presence. In their similarities and differences, these authors show that Franco-Americans – be they anglophone or francophone – continue to live in a continent-wide, North-American semiotic space.

Notes

i

Works Cited

Barney, Richard A. "Subjectivity, the Novel, and the *Bildung* Blocks of Critical Theory." *Genre* 26 (1993): 359-75.

Barthes, Roland. "L'écriture et la parole." *Le degré zéro de l'écriture*. Paris: Seuil, 1953: 58-61.

---. "L'effet de réel." *Communications* 11.1 (1968): 84-89.

Beaupré, Normand R. *Before All Dignity Is Lost: The Living and Dying of an AIDS Victim / Drew.* Coral Springs, FL: Llumina Press, 2006.

---. *The Boy with the Blue Cap:* Coral Springs, FL: Llumina Press, 2008.

---. *Deux Femmes, Deux Rêves: Roman*. Coral Springs, FL: Llumina Press, 2005.

---. "La Langue de chez nous." *Défense de la langue française* Mar. 2005 : 7-9.

---. *La Souillonne, Deusse: Monologue Sur Scène*. Coral Springs, FL: Llumina Press, 2008.

---. *La Souillonne: Monologue Sur Scène*. Coral Springs, FL: Llumina Press, 2006.

---. *Le petit mangeur de fleurs*. Chicoutimi, Québec: Éditions JCL, 1999.

---. *Lumineau*. Chicoutimi, QC: Éditions JCL, 2002.

---. *Marginal Enemies*. Coral Springs, FL: Llumina Press, 2004.

---. *Madame Athanase T. Brindamour: raconteuse*. Llumina Press, 2011.

---. *Trails Within: Meditations on the Walking Trails at the Ghost Ranch in Abiquiu, New Mexico*. Coral Springs, FL: Llumina Press, 2007.

Birkerts, Sven. "'American Ghosts': Haunted House." *The New York Times Sunday Book Review* 16 Jan. 2005. Web. 30 Jan. 2012.

Boes, Tobias. "Modernist Studies and the Bildungsroman: A Historical Survey of Critical Trends." *Literature Compas* 3.2 230-43.

Carrière, Fernan. "Parti de Québec à la recherche de son frère. *Un Homme grand: Jack Kerouac at the Crossroads of Many Cultures/Un Homme grand: Jack Kérouac à la confluence des cultures*. Dirs. Pierre Anctil, Louis Dupont, Rémi Ferland, et Éric Waddell. Ottawa: Carleton UP, 19909. 145-54.

Chabot, Grégoire. "Languestapomanie." *Entre la manie et la phobie*. http://www.francoamerican.org/show_author.php?singer_artist_id=19.

Chu, Patricia P. *Assimilating Asians: Gendered Strategies of Authorship in Asian America*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2000. Print. New Americanists.

Fox, Cynthia A. "Franco-American Voices: French in the Northeastern United States Today." *French Review*. 80.6 (2007): 1278-92.

Fox, Cynthia and Jane Smith. "La Situation du français franco-américain: aspects linguistiques et sociolinguistiques." *Le Français en Amérique du nord*. Ed. Albert

Valdman, Julie Auger, et Deborah Piston-Hatlen. Québec: PU Laval, 2005. 117-41.

Gauvin, Lise. *Langagement: L'ecrivain et la langue au Quebec*. Montréal: Boréal, 2000.

---. *L'écrivain Francophone à la croisée des langues: Entretiens*. Paris: Éditions Karthala, 1997.

Hansen, Ron. "Blooming Where Planted." *America: The National Catholic Weekly* 4 Apr. 2005.

Hirsch, Marianne. "The Novel of Formation as Genre: Between *Great Expectations* and *Lost Illusions*." *Genre* 12 (1979): 293-311.

Holte, James Craig. "The Representative Voice: Autobiography and the Ethnic Experience." *MELUS* 9.2 (1982): 25-46.

Nickels, Thom. "Treasures of the Overlooked." *The Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide* 1 Mar. 2001.

Japtok, Martin. *Growing Up Ethnic: Nationalism and the Bildungsroman in African American and Jewish American Fiction*. 1st ed. Ames, IA: U Iowa P, 2005.

Leblanc, Robert. "The Education of Franco-Americans in Quebec and the Persistence of La Franco-Américainie." *Journal of Cultural Geography* 8.2 (1988): 49-64.

"Les Franco-Américains du Maine." *Zone Libre.* Sociéte Radio-Canada. September 2001. http://radio-canada.ca/actualite/zonelibre/01-09/franco.html.

Lima, M. H. "Imaginary Homelands in Jamaica Kincaid's Narratives of Development." *Callaloo: A Journal of African-American and African Arts and Letters* 25.3 (2002): 857-67.

Lowe, Lisa. *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1996.

Plante, David. *American Ghosts*. Boston: Beacon, 2005.

Poulin, Susan and Gordon Carlisle. *Pardon My French*: *A Play with Music.* Dir. David Kaye. Perf. Susan Poulin and Gordon Carlisle. University of Maine, Orono. May 20, 2011

Richard, Mark Paul. "From Franco-American to American: The Case of Sainte-Famille, an assimilating parish of Lewiston, Maine." *Histoire Sociale* 31(1998): 71-93.

---. *Loyal but French: The Negotiation of Identity by French-Canadian Descendants in the United States*. East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2008.

Roby, Yves. *Les Franco-Américains De La Nouvelle-Angleterre: Rêves Et Réalités*. Sillery, Québec: Septentrion, 2000.

Rosello, Mirielle. "Unhoming Francophone Studies: A House in the Middle of the Current." *Yale French Studies* 103 (2003): 123-32.

Sollors, Werner. *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.

Wardhaugh, Ronald. *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. New York: Blackwell, 1986.

Wright, Ronald. "Cast Off." *Times Literary Supplement* 25 Dec. 2005.