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Teaching Franco-Americans of the Northeast

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Teaching Franco-Americans of the Northeast

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Teaching Franco-Americans of the Northeast

In their introduction to a recent *Yale French Studies* issue dedicated to Francophone studies, Farid Laroussi and Christopher Miller classify the inclusion of Francophone literatures as "the most significant change in the field of French studies since the theoretical and feminist revolutions of the 1970s" (1). Non-metropole literatures and cultures could not simply be appended to the existing canon; they necessitated a reassessment of the entire discipline. Not only did la Francophonie challenge the assumption of one culture, one nation fundamentally structuring the study of French in the United States,¹ it also troubled the relationship between French inside and outside the hexagon. As Reda Bensmaïa highlights, the very idea of la Francophonie "complicates *both* French literature *and* the so-called "Francophone" literatures, which were defined by a relation to the "center" -- French literature -- and that these literatures were *in the margins*, not to say entirely marginal" (Bensmaïa 20, emphasis in original). Yet as this *Yale French Studies* issue shows, this restructuring of French studies is contested and far from complete. The final five essays, the entire third section, "[offer] an overview of the tensions, ambiguities, and insights of French and Francophone studies" (5). Given these continued debates, the study of la Francophonie is perhaps better thought of as a series of questions rather than an established canon or institutional discipline. Mireille Rosello argues for this understanding of la Francophonie in her contribution to the journal. Rather than working to stabilize la Francophonie into a standardized definition, she calls instead for the pursuit of its "unhoming" properties. "I am suggesting that 'Francophone studies,' as a discipline, can be imagined as a type of unhomeliness, a form of consciousness or hermeneutic sensitivity" (129). While this approach does have certain pitfalls (Rosello mentions teaching solely Swiss-born Rousseau in the single Francophone literature class on campus), an open-ended, uncanonized

approach to Francophone literatures provides an opportunity. Not only does it permit exploring the full range of "French" languages and cultures; more importantly, it enables us to perceive and teach beyond the discipline's arbitrary boundaries and framing principles.

It is as "unhoming" that Franco-American literature finds its place in French and Francophone studies today. The term Franco-American refers specifically to people of Quebecois and Acadian heritage living in the United States. There are Franco-American communities scattered throughout the United States: some trace their origins back to initial French exploration, some to the Acadian deportation, many more to the great waves of French Canadian immigration that occurred in during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this article, I will focus only upon those New England communities. This focal point allows me to rely on the strengths of my own expertise, and to focus on those communities with whom I work. Depending upon the state, Franco-Americans constitute from ten to twenty five percent of New England populations.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.³ Composed of rural Acadian settlements in northern Maine that date back to the eighteenth century⁴ and communities of French Canadians (both Quebecois and Acadian), most of whom emigrated to industrial New England towns in the late nineteenth century, these Franco-American communities constitute the largest concentration of French speakers in the United States. Up until quite recently, however, these Franco-American communities were not seen as a legitimate field of study. At The University of Maine, for example, even though French is the most commonly spoken language after English in Maine (and has been for over one hundred years), and a significant community of native speakers lived in the adjacent town ("French Island" in Old Town, Maine), The University of Maine's language department was called the

Department of *Foreign* Languages and Classics and showed no interest in the Francophone community on its doorstep.⁵ This pattern is not unique. Most industrial towns in New England have substantial Franco-American populations, and French scholars are just now beginning to recognize these Francophone communities in their backyards and among their student body. But more important than the simple addition of this until recently ignored literature and culture is the "unhoming" to both French and Francophone studies that Franco America occasions. The study of Franco America allows us to ask different questions and approach the broad spectrum of French literature in new ways.

One of the first Francophone topics the inclusion of Franco-American literatures troubles is that of postcoloniality. Francophone studies are intimately tied to postcolonial theory. For example, in their introduction Laroussi and Miller claim, "We have not attempted to account for the *francophonie* of European nations like Belgium and Switzerland, which are not former colonies of France and therefore not part of the same problematic" (1). Postcolonial theory is the epistemological framework for much research on Francophone literature in the United States,⁶ and any addition of new literatures cannot just ignore this institutional fact. Yet while every project requires delimitation, bracketing out those French speaking cultures that do not fit the theoretical rubric does not seem to be an ideal solution either. This question of postcoloniality also confronts Quebecois and Acadian literature. While it is true that French Canadian settler societies were colonized by Britain and have suffered discrimination at the hands of the Anglophone majority, they do not fall into the same category as African or Asian colonies, and their inclusion into Francophone studies has generated substantial debate (see for example issue 35 of *Québec Studies*, dedicated to Québec and Postcolonial theory). One solution to Quebecois and Acadian literature's difficult fit into the established paradigm is to insist upon their

postcoloniality (relying on Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin's definition of postcolonialism as the study of all cultures affected by imperialism); another is to deny their place within Francophone studies because they are not postcolonial enough (as many collections of Francophone literature do, omitting this literature in their collections). One can easily find examples of both. Yet this "unhoming" afforded by French Canadian literature can also be seen as an opportunity to question our theoretical presumptions, ensuring that the tools we are using to understand not oversimplify but attend to the differences of histories and material contexts that continue to shape Francophone cultures. In a similar way, Franco-American literature brings into focus limitations of the current theoretical framework, encouraging us to develop new paradigms that can help us understand all French speaking communities.

One of the major causes buttressing postcolonial theory's place in Francophone studies is the institutional demand for "diversity." The inclusion of African and Caribbean literatures responds to the multiculturalism goals of many US institutions. The study of these literatures ensures that students' exposure to the complexities of race is not limited to the United States context. Yet like all diversity work, this inclusion also runs the risk of naïve essentialism, especially if race remains a 'non-white' issue, the problem solely of persons of color. While postcolonial theory is not solely about race, nonetheless, this highlights an important difficulty of studying Francophone literature. If one attends to the more "sociological" aspects of writing (questions of identity, history, colonialism, etc) only in reference to Francophone literatures, one continues a system of hierarchy that sees Francophone works as local manifestations of a particular culture, not works of art which transcend their place of production like "French" texts. Here again, the inclusion of Franco-American literature offers a possible intervention into this trap. Franco-American literature provides counterpoints and counterexamples, allowing us to

look at the role of whiteness within the context of la francophonie and introduce these issues into the exploration of home, the meaning of language, racial identities, the weight of traditional gender roles, the relationship to France and to Quebec, and immigration into a new society.

In addition to these concerns of postcolonialism and diversity, la Francophonie also brings about a renewed focus on the role of language. "To define a literature as 'Francophone' is to draw attention to its language" (Jack, 15). This focus on language is appropriate because it is what defines the entire field. Franco-American literature presents a complex picture of French. It is on the one hand a marker of authenticity in that ethnic community. On the other, Franco-Americans are attuned to the hierarchy that has designated their language as parochial. Franco-American literature -- in French or in English --explores the complexity of this issue. In Franco-American literature, the written French word in itself does not signify the ethnic subject and his world. Rather, language is a material that writers manipulate to signify the ethnic subject and his/her world.

Finally, Franco-American literature contributes to another facet of la Francophonie: the need to increase enrollments in French classes. Many see the inclusion of Francophone texts as a way to bring more students into the classroom. It allows faculty to explore issues that resonate with an increasing number of students who either come from Francophone countries or can identify with the issues discussed in Francophone literature. Here too, especially in the Northeast, Franco-American literature makes sense. Mary Louise Pratt calls for us to acknowledge the role of heritage languages. "*Local heritage communities must be engaged.* Probably nothing has greater potential for revitalizing and revalorizing the study of languages than the multilingualism that exists among us at this moment. It is a massive resource that we foolishly resist capitalizing on" (115, emphasis in original). While most young Franco-

Americans no longer attend French-only parochial schools or speak French at home, many have grown up with Francophone relatives. The inclusion of Franco-America into the curriculum might be one way to attract these students into French classrooms. In addition to its attractiveness to French heritage speakers, Franco-American experience offers meaningful insights into the American story. French Canadian immigrants did not travel far from their homes. Their pattern of immigration strongly resembles the borderlands configuration most often associated with the twentieth-century immigration of Mexican Americans. Franco-American immigration combines nineteenth-century experience with twentieth-century patterns. The study of Franco America can contribute to a new understanding of the history of American immigration.

Including Franco-American literature into the study of la Francophonie allows us to "ask different questions." It encourages exploring the full range of literatures and cultures that the idea of la Francophonie allows and avoids the trap of naïve multiculturalism that foregrounds only the non-European other. While Franco America has much to offer Francophone studies, it is strapped by an institutional framework that does not recognize it. This Franco-American community is often referred to as the "silent minority." Dyke Hendrickson calls his study of this community *Quiet Presence* and Joan H. Rollins includes an article on Franco-Americans in her book *Hidden Minorities*.⁷ Franco-Americans are rarely included in literature dedicated to the teaching of ethnicity or on studies of ethnic communities in the United States. The classic pedagogical text, *Teaching Strategies for Ethnic Studies* by James Banks provides resources and lesson plans for most of the white ethnicities – German Americans, Italian Americans, Irish Americans. It barely mentions Franco-Americans. This "silence" is translated into our institutions of higher learning. For example, there is no Library of Congress designator

specifically for Franco-Americans. The term "French Americans" combines those of French and French Canadian heritage and does not include Acadians or Cajuns. This lack of designator makes it nearly impossible for someone who does not know where to look already to discover and learn about Franco-America. This article concludes, therefore, with a select bibliography of sources about and by Franco-Americans of the Northeast. It is not exhaustive but provides key texts for those who wish to learn about and teach Franco America as part of a Francophone curriculum; these texts will also provide entry points for those who wish to do further research on this relatively unexplored Francophone community.

Select Annotated Bibliography

Franco-American Literature in French

Beaugrand, Honoré. *Jeanne la fileuse: Épisode de l'Émigration Franco-Canadienne aux Etats-*

Unis. Ed. Roger Le Moine. Montréal: Fides, 1980. Originally published in 1878 to defend French Canadian immigrants from the criticism they faced for leaving Québec. This text is also available free on line, though this Fides edition has a useful introduction.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/14536>.

Beaupré, Normand. *La Souillonne, monologue sur scène*. Chicoutimi, Québec: Éditions JCL, 2006. A dramatic monologue written in Franco-American French.

---. *Deux Femmes, deux rêves*. Chicoutimi, Québec: Éditions JCL, 2005. This novel tells the story of a mother and daughter's experience of emigration to the United States.

---. *Lumineau*. Chicoutimi, Québec: Éditions JCL, 2002. A collection of myths and legends.

---. *Le petit mangeur de fleurs*. Chicoutimi, Québec: Éditions JCL, 1999. An autobiographical novel about growing up Franco-American in Biddeford, Maine.

Chabot, Gregoire. *Un Jacques Cartier Errant: Jacques Cartier Discovers America*. Orono: U of Maine P, 1996. Three plays, written in Franco-American French with English translations on facing pages.

Lessard-Bissonnette, Camille. *Canuck*. Lewiston, ME: Éditions le Messager, 1936. Reprinted Bedford, NH: National Materials Development Center for French, 1980. Story of a young girl who moves to the United States to work in the mills.

Perreault, Robert B. *L'Héritage: Roman*. Durham, NH: National Materials Development Center for French, 1983. Fictional novel set in the 1970s about a young woman who seeks to rediscover her Franco-American heritage.

Quintal, Claire. *La littérature franco-américaine: écrivains et écritures / Franco-American Literature: Writers and their Writings*. Worcester, MA: Institut français, Collège de l'Assomption, 1992. A collection of literary studies.

Santerre, Richard. *Anthologie de la littérature franco-américaine de la Nouvelle-Angleterre*. 9 Vols. Bedford, NH: National Materials Development Center for French, 1980-1981. Edited collection of the most important Franco-American literature in French.

Therriault, Mary Carmel, Sister. *La littérature française de Nouvelle-Angleterre*. Montréal: Fides, 1946. Good overview of all Franco-American literature up to the 1940s.

Franco-American Literature in English (I have selected only those titles that deal specifically with language issues)

Kerouac, Jack. *Satori in Paris and Pic: Two Novels*. New York: Grove Press, 1988. Kerouac recounts his trip to France for genealogical purposes.

Ledoux, Denis. *Lives in Translation: An Anthology of Contemporary Franco-American Writings*. Lisbon Falls, ME: Soleil P, 1991. A collection of short writings on living between cultures.

Plante, David. *American Ghosts*. Boston: Beacon, 2005. This autobiographical novel explores the impact of growing up in a Francophone community in New England.

Proulx, Annie. *Accordion Crimes*. New York: Scribner, 1996. The main character of the novel is an accordion that passes from one immigrant group to the next. The Franco-American character is both literally and metaphorically orphaned, unanchored to his language or heritage.

Robbins, Rhea Côté. *Wednesday's Child*. Brewer, ME: Rheta P, 1997. This creative autobiography delves into the tensions and pressures of living bilingually and biculturally.

History

Brault, Gérard J. *The French-Canadian Heritage in New England*. Hanover, NH: UP of New England, 1986. This comprehensive overview includes historical, cultural, and sociological information, written for the non-historian.

Chartier, Armand. *Histoire des Franco-Américains de la Nouvelle-Angleterre, 1775-1990*. Sillery, Québec: Septentrion, 1991. An English version was published in 1999, under the title *The Franco-Americans of New England: A History*. Tr. Robert J. Lemieux and Claire Quintal. Manchester, NH and Worcester, MA: ACA Assurance and Institute français of Assumption College. This cultural history pays particular attention to individual Franco-Americans and Franco-American literary production.

Gerstle, Gary. *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1989. This study of labor influence and union building in Woonsocket, Rhode Island focuses on the cooperation and tensions between the Franco-Belgian secular artisan elite and the French-Canadian Catholic traditional working-class.

Ramirez, Bruno. *Crossing the 49th Parallel: Migration from Canada to the United States, 1900-1930*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2001. A French version was published in 2003, under the title *La Ruée vers le Sud: Migrations du Canada vers les États-Unis, 1840-1930*. Tr. Pierrot Lambert. Montréal: Boréal, 2003. This immigration study focuses on the borderlands between Canada and the United States, and compares Anglophone and Francophone migrations patterns and processes.

Richard, Mark Paul. *'Not Foreigners but Americans': The Negotiation of Identity by French-Canadian Descendants, Lewiston, Maine, 1860-2002*. Forthcoming from Michigan State University Press. This book-length study emphasizes the active and reiterative performance of Franco-American identity.

Roby, Yves. *Les Franco-Américains De La Nouvelle-Angleterre, 1776-1930*. Sillery, Québec: Septentrion, 1990. This authoritative social history examines French Canadian immigration and the subsequent formation of French Canadian communities in the United States.

Weil, François. *Les Franco-Américains, 1860-1980*. Tours: Belin, 1989. This is a concise description of Franco-America immigration and settlement in context of United States social history.

<http://www2.marianopolis.edu/quebechistory/index.htm>. The Quebec History Website offers a short overview of Franco-American history; more importantly, its editor has posted numerous publications on Franco-Americans.

Interdisciplinary Collections

Albert, Renaud S. *A Franco-American Overview*. 8 vols. Cambridge, MA: National Assessment and Dissemination Center for Bilingual/Bicultural Education, 1979. An interdisciplinary

collection, though outdated, nonetheless covers important topics often not covered elsewhere (for example, Acadian immigrant communities in the United States).

Louder, Dean R. and Eric Waddell, eds. *French America: Mobility, Identity, and Minority Experience Across the Continent*. Tr. Franklin Philip. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State UP, 1992. These two editors published in French sixteen of the seventeen essays that comprise this collection under the title *Du continent perdu à l'archipel retrouvé: le Québec et l'Amérique française*. Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1983. In both, they explore the breadth of Francophone communities throughout the North American continent.

Louder, Dean R. *Le Québec et les francophones de la Nouvelle-Angleterre*. Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 1991. Interdisciplinary collection of articles.

Poteet, Maurice and Régis Normandeau, eds. *Textes de l'exode: recueil de textes sur l'émigration des Québécois aux États-Unis, XIXe et XXe siècles*. Montréal: Guérin, 1987. This collection of primary source documents focuses on Quebec perspective of French Canadian emigration from Canada.

Quintal, Claire, ed. *Steeple and Smokestacks: A Collection of Essays on the Franco-American Experience in New England*. Worcester, MA: Institut français, 1996. Professor Quintal translates and republishes key articles from the series of titles she has edited through the years.

Media resources

L'Arbre de la mémoire. In French. Dir. Suzanne Guy. Synercom Téléproductins, 2000. Part of the "Francophonies d'Amérique" series distributed by Source Distribution, this film

interviews Franco-Americans today, from Madawaska to Rhode Island about their ethnic identity.

"Les Franco-Américains du Maine." In French. *Zone Libre*. Société Radio-Canada. September 2001. <http://radio-canada.ca/actualite/zonelibre/01-09/franco.html>. This episode explores the recent attempts by Franco-Americans to relearn their heritage language.

Jack Kerouac's Road: A Franco-American Odyssey. In French with English subtitles. Also available in French under the title *Le Grand Jack*. Dir Herménégilde Chiasson. National Film Board of Canada, 1989. Part documentary, part drama, this film presents the life and work of Jack Kerouac, one of the most prominent Franco-Americans.

Reveil: Waking up French. In English. Dir. Ben Levine. This self-distributed film focuses on language reacquisition in several Franco-American communities.

"Seguin rencontre Kerouac." *Les Archives de Radio-Canada*. Société Radio-Canada. March 1967. http://archives.radio-canada.ca/IDC-0-72-55-126-21/inoubliables/arts_culture/jack_kerouac_entrevue. In this interview conducted in French, Jack Kerouac speaks of his childhood and his writing.

"Les Tisserands du pouvoir." Dir. Claude Fournier. Canada/France. Malofilm Communications. 1988. A historical drama that follows one family as it moves from Canada to New England to find work.

Testimonies and Oral Histories

Hareven, Tamara K., and Randolph Langenbach. *Amoskeag. Life and Work in an American Factor-City*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978. This documentation of the role of family in industrial work concludes with the transcription of select oral interviews.

Lafleur, Normand. *Les "Chinois" de l'Est ou la vie quotidienne des Québécois émigrés aux États-Unis de 1840 à nos jours*. Montréal: Leméac, 1981.

Langellier, Kristin M., and Eric E. Peterson. *Storytelling in daily life: Performing narrative*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple UP, 2004. A study of storytelling practices in Franco-American families based on recent oral interviews.

Rouillard, Jacques. *Ah les États! Les travailleurs canadiens-français dans l'industrie textile de la Nouvelle-Angleterre d'après le témoignage des derniers migrants*. Montréal: Boréal, 1985.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/wpaintro/wpahome.html>. Transcriptions of oral interviews done with Franco-Americans as part of the Federal Writers' Project are posted on The American Memory Website at the Library of Congress. Selections from these interviews are also collected in C. Stewart Doty, *The First Franco-Americans: New England Life Histories from the Federal Writers' Project, 1938-1939*. Orono, ME: U of Maine, 1985.

Women's Experiences

Moran, Willian. *The Belles of New England: The Women of the Textile Mills and the Families Whose Wealth They Wove*. New York: St. Martin's, 2002. This popular history of the New England textile mills emphasizes the French Canadian and Irish women who worked in them.

Waldron, FlorenceMae. "The Battle over Female (In)Dependence: Women in New England Quebecois Migrant Communities, 1870-1930." *Frontiers* 26.2 (2005): 158-205.

Waldron, FlorenceMae. "I Never Dreamed it was Necessary to Marry!: Women and Work in New England French Canadian Communities, 1870-1930." *Journal of American Ethnic*

History 24.2 (2005): 34-64. Waldron's articles explore the way gender inflected women's immigration and acculturation experience.

<http://www.fawi.net/>. This website of the Franco-American Women's Institute publishes an ezine of recent writings and houses extensive links and resources for the study of Franco-American women.

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- Bouvier, Leon F. "The French-Canadians of New England," in *Hidden Minorities: The Persistence of Ethnicity in American Life*. Ed. Joan H. Rollins. Lanham, MD: UP of America, 1981.
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- Laroussi, Farid and Christopher L. Miller. "Editors' Preface: French and Francophone: The Challenge of Expanding Horizons." *Yale French Studies* 103 (2003): 1-6.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "Building a New Public Idea about Language." *Profession* (2003): 110-119.
- Rosello, Mireille. "Unhoming Francophone Studies: A House in the Middle of the Current." *Yale French Studies* 103 (2003): 123-132.

¹ This assumption was not restricted to the United States of course. One needs only to think of the schoolchildren in colonial schoolhouses who learned about "Nos ancêtres, les Gaulois." For the purposes of this article, I will speak only of this assumption in regards to U.S. French studies.

² According to the United States census, respondents claiming French/French Canadian ancestry constituted 28% of Vermont, 27% of New Hampshire, 25% of Maine, 20% of Rhode Island, 14% of Massachusetts, and 11% of Connecticut populations. All ancestry totals come from Table QT-02 of the 2000 census at <http://www.census.gov/> .

³ Using data from the 2000 United States census, the Modern Language Association shows that French constitutes 70% of languages other than English spoken in Maine, 44% in New Hampshire, and 45% in Vermont. All language statistics come from the MLA language map at <http://www.mla.org/map>.

⁴ These original Acadians were quickly joined by Quebecois settlers; the community in northern Maine is of mixed heritage, even though they continue to call themselves Acadian.

⁵ It changed its name to "Department of Modern Languages and Classics" in the early 1990s.

⁶ This is not the case in France or Quebec. Vincent Desroches explains in his edited edition of *Québec Studies*, "la critique postcoloniale est pratiquement absent au Québec ou en France, à l'exception notable des travaux de Jean-Marc Moura" (3).

⁷ 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" (viii).