

## Franco America

'You have a memory of having forgotten'

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*Nothing is lost, no gesture in the universe goes un-retained.*

– Franco-American novelist **Clark Blaise**

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The moose is not paying attention. His stuffed head, high on the pine-panelled wall of the conference room, has an abstracted air, while professor Barry Rodrigue of the University of Southern Maine, speaking beneath his gaze to 20 or so fellow geographers and historians, ventures a prophecy.

"I predict in 50 years there will be a continental union of North America that will encompass Canada, Mexico, the United States and the Caribbean," he says. "I think there will be... a federation forced by globalization and the economy. In this continental fusion, I see French, English and Spanish as three core languages."

English, it goes without saying. Spanish, of course. But French?

"One of the problems in the United States is that French North America is not on the radar screen of the American Anglos," Rodrigue admits. "We don't exist."

This is why he is arguing at this symposium of academics, mostly from Quebec and the United States, for the publication of a new, English language textbook. It would be aimed at a general, as well as an academic, audience, and it would deal with the language, culture and history of the North American *francophonie*, the realm of the French on this continent.

"For those of us who teach Franco-American studies, it's absolutely imperative that we have these materials available," Rodrigue says. "We have a whole continent at stake."

Sounds like a call to arms, here in a rafting resort deep in the heart of the Maine woods. Sure enough, Rodrigue and two of his colleagues in the room, Dean Louder and Eric



Waddell, professors at Laval University, have drafted a "manifesto." A very ambitious manifesto it is, a continent-wide battle cry for *francophonie*. It begins by admitting certain realities. Only two per cent of North Americans speak French; and the political power base of French is limited to the province of Quebec.

But the authors are not discouraged. "Our mission," they write, "is to bring the Franco-American experience from the margins to the centre of North America." The goal is to "ensure that Franco-America establishes its place as an equal partner, with an Anglo-America and a Hispano-America, in the construction of the continent of the 21st century."

*How many times have I heard, "Oh, I'm French, but I don't speak French." That's okay. Frank Sinatra was Italian, but he didn't speak Italian.*

– Dean Louder

If anybody can lead the charge, it's Louder and Waddell. The night before, in the resort lounge, Yves Frenette, a historian at the University of Ottawa, directed my attention to the two men. "It took a Mormon from Utah (Louder) and a Yorkshireman (Waddell) to discover the potential of French North America outside of Quebec as a subject of study," he said.

Louder was born in Park City, Utah, in 1943. When asked how he ended up in Quebec City, Louder responds, "I remember in the eighth grade, the English assignment was studying (Longfellow's poem) *Evangeline*. I think I was the only one in the class who thought it was interesting. It kind of hooked me then and there."

Longfellow's *Evangeline* is a woman exiled from her North American French homeland in Acadia who becomes a bona fide American. Louder is a man who voluntarily leaves his American homeland in Utah to become a bona fide Quebec francophone.

The second step in his journey took place at age 19, when he was assigned – on the strength of one year of junior high school French – to France for his mandatory stint as a Mormon missionary. That brought his French more or less up to par.

Returning to the United States, he completed his doctorate in geography at the University of Washington. At that time, the late 1960s, Quebec was expanding its university system and desperately looking for Ph.D.s. Louder, then married and the father of two children, went to Quebec City to take a look at Laval. He arrived in the middle of the October Crisis.

"Rather than being frightened away, I was fascinated," he recalls. "I remember distinctly looking out of my room at night and seeing these Canadian army troops guarding the doors of government buildings. All the stuff we had learned in American civics classes – 'When in the course of human events, etc.' – was still fresh in my mind, and here this was actually happening, a people struggling for its independence from another. I didn't understand exactly why, but I thought this would be worth a few years here to figure this out."

A "few years" turned into 37.

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Five years after arriving at Laval, Louder launched the course that would determine the rest of his academic career. It was called "The Geography of French Minorities in North America." Students had to do two things. The first was to research members of their family who had left Quebec.

"Students initially said, 'We don't have anybody who has left Quebec, we've always been in Quebec City or Chicoutimi, or wherever,' " Louder says.

"It was very obvious that there had been this amnesia that had set in. Inevitably, they quickly found uncles or aunts who had left Quebec. Very frequently, these students would begin to correspond with them. They'd ask, 'Why did you leave?' and 'What did you find when you got there?' and 'Do your children still speak French?'"

"There's probably not a French-speaking Quebec student who doesn't have relatives who have left Quebec."

The second requirement was an expedition to a French enclave outside of Quebec, in Canada or the U.S. One year, for example, they went to Port au Port, a French-speaking town in Newfoundland.

"That expedition proved there was literally French spoken from coast to coast," Louder says. There was no shortage of French-speaking places outside of Quebec to visit in the 23 years he taught the course.

Joining Louder in the venture was his colleague, Eric Wadell, born in 1939. Wadell, a graduate student at McGill, received his Ph.D. in geography based on research in Papua New Guinea. Like Louder, Wadell was captivated by the restless spirit of late-'60s/early-'70s Quebec.

"You would sit in these *boîtes à chansons* where everybody would listen in total silence to singers like Pauline Julienne singing the lyrics of the song. It was very powerful in terms of collective energy and cultural creativity – a very intense period. I was very marked by it."

Researching French communities outside Quebec was a natural extension of this fascination, but Wadell and Louder soon found that their Quebecois colleagues were less than enthusiastic about the project. "I once had a colleague quite angry about this," says Wadell. "He said, 'It's finished, this story, don't talk about it anymore!' Then a few weeks later, he brought us a photograph of his grandmother, who had been born in Boston."

What Wadell and Louder were charting was a Quebec outside of Quebec, and a Canada outside of Canada. By so doing, they earned the antagonism not only of Quebec separatists but Trudeau-style Canadian federalists. For the one group, Wadell and Louder were violating the borders of a sovereign Quebec. For the other, they were violating the borders of Canada.

"There's a lot of money for this kind of geographic research," says Wadell, "but the research must be about Canada."

In similar fashion, Americans were not always thrilled to be informed of French-speaking communities in their midst. It violated the myth of the melting pot. Rodrigue cites indifference on the part of his own colleagues. "We're treated like exotic beasts in a zoo. Anyone dealing with French North America is not considered by colleagues or the public to be part of mainstream academia."

Wadell explains: "Part of the dilemma of dealing with French America and trying to make it visible and known is that it's not simply an academic statement. It's a cultural statement – a cultural statement that has some political irritations attached."

Louder doesn't care. Retired from Laval, he has been criss-crossing Canada and the United States in a GMC camper for the last 2 1/2 years, revisiting the sites of his fieldwork, renewing acquaintances, and incidentally dropping in on his eight children

and 13 grandchildren. He and Waddell are also working on a textbook (in French) on their area of study, and for this text Louder is writing brief "chronicles" of his latest journeys.

They're like postcards from places such as Frenchville, Pa., and French Gulf, Calif., and Gallipolis "Home of the Gauls" Ohio. Gallipolis, it turns out, was settled by refugees from the French Revolution. Unfortunately, they were swindled by the company that sold them land, and eventually they drifted away. A huge wooden fleur-de-lys in the town square, however, honours their memory.

Louder, who asks parish priests and small-town postmasters to tell him who still speaks French in their locality, discovered a French-speaker in Frenchville, a town settled by the French in 1835. "He said he was the last person in town to speak French, except for his brother," Louder says. "He said the two of them would speak French when they didn't want their wives to understand."

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Much in this world does vanish, of course, and yet what Abraham Lincoln calls the mystic cords of memory possesses amazing tensile strength. Louder tells a story about visiting his parents in a retirement community in Mesa, Ariz., where they played pinochle with a couple named Vic and Mel (for Melanie). Vic's last name was Hamel.

Louder asked Vic when his family left Quebec. Vic, not sure, said he was from California. No, no, Louder said, nobody's *from* California.

Vic then allowed his family came from Kansas. Cloud County? Louder asked. Around Clyde and Concordia? Vic was startled. Yes, he said.

And where did your family come from before that? Louder asked. Illinois, Vic replied. From St. Anne? Bourbonnais? Again, Vic was startled. Yes, he said.

In this way, Louder traced Vic's family back to St. Ignace, Que., hop scotching from French community to French community across the continent.

*Weak and fragile is a kingdom with one language and custom.*  
– **Stephen I of Hungary** (977-1038)

Much of what Louder and Waddell – and American counterparts such as Rodrigue and Melinda Marie Jette, a historian at a college named Franklin Pierce of New Hampshire – attempt to do is simply to reveal the secret history of the places they study.

Jette's French ancestors lived in the Willamette Valley of Oregon in the mid-19th century, intermarrying with the local Indians, building thriving settlements based on hunting, trapping, farming. Then the Americans came. After a few years, the original French and Metis civilization, populated by 100 families, disappeared virtually without a trace. The same thing happened in Wisconsin, Illinois, Missouri, Arkansas – a myriad other places in the West.

Who would remember these people? Who would stop to think that the medical-services sector of Oregon, the largest private employer in the state, is based almost entirely on institutions founded by French nuns, riding through the wilderness on horseback to raise money for their fledgling hospitals?

Jette's Willamette family ended up in Portland, Ore., running a hotel. What they lost, it seemed, remained truly lost. "You have a memory of having forgotten," is the way Jette

puts it. "My family had a memory of having lost the memory of being French Canadian."

For many of the descendents of the French in North America, the past is like a dream they can't quite retrieve but still troubles their waking hours.

That's not the end of the story, or of the ironies of history. "Once you have become assimilated, then you have the luxury of studying history," Jette says.

Born Barry Henry Roderick, Barry Rodrigue was given to understand by a great uncle that his family was Scottish. Inspired by that piece of misinformation, he learned to play the bagpipes – a talent he still possesses – and studied Gaelic as a teenager.

Years later, he discovered the truth through family research, and promptly went to the local courthouse to change his name to Rodrigue, the original spelling.

Among other things, he walked the traces of the old Canada road through the state of Maine, where his French ancestors travelled in 1828, to become sailors and fishermen and foundry workers and loggers. Because they arrived earlier in the state than the relatively well-documented French Canadian mill workers of the late 19th century, the Rodrigue family past was also a secret history.

Is this any different from Polish-Americans or Greek-Canadians investigating their roots?

"There's a difference between Polish or Greek or Italian immigrants and the French," Jette says. "They don't have the deeper, larger links with the discovery and conquest of this continent, or the intimate connections with Native American life. You can't tell these histories and leave out the French."

The Chinese and Italians and Irish and Poles and Greeks, for one thing, did not spread across the continent founding towns and settlements in the way the French did.

Nor is there a political entity on the continent that the descendents of these immigrants can go to, to study the language, to immerse themselves in a culture. Quebec may not loom as large as Mexico, but it's there, with its fiercely guarded language, and it makes a world of difference in the new emerging North America.

Speaking French is not the only badge of identity for Franco-Americans. "There are things more visceral than language," Louder says. In southern Michigan, Franco-Americans celebrate their heritage with muskrat dinners during the winter – in memory of their Catholic forebears, two and three hundred years ago. These forebears were trappers who convinced themselves it was lawful to eat muskrat on Friday because the animal was "aquatic."

The ritual may seem small or trivial, but depend on it – the Franco-Americans of southern Michigan will be having their muskrat dinners one hundred years from now, and it will mean something important to them.

Regarding the speaking of French in North America, Louder admits a paradox. "French language use is diminishing outside of Quebec, that's for sure," he says. But, he adds, "In many ways, French has more strength and visibility in North America than it ever has before."

The paradox has to do with Rodrigue's new continental union, and new economy. Increasingly, French is included in the labelling of commercial products and instruction manuals.

**B**ut there are more profound political changes in the offing that offer intriguing possibilities for the survival of *francophonie*. These were signalled in a recent speech by California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, who compared his state to "the ancient city-states of Athens and Sparta."

In a Feb. 10, *New York Times* article, University of Maryland professor of political economy Gar Alperovitz suggested the speech heralded a new decentralization of America.

"The United States is almost certainly too big to be a meaningful democracy," Alperovitz wrote. "Sooner or later, a profound, probably regional, decentralization of the federal system may all be inevitable."

Alperovitz quoted the late writer and former diplomat George Kennan, who prophesied the breaking up of the United States into "a dozen constituent republics." California, Alperovitz wrote, was clearly prepared to lead the way. Next in line would be New England.

An autonomous New England would certainly be extremely sensitive to French, bordering as it does on Quebec and containing a still sizable minority of French speakers within its own borders. *Francophonie* in New England, and probably in Louisiana, would enjoy a brighter future in this newly regionalized and decentralized continent.

*Francophonie* in other areas of the United States, inspired by their example, might revive as well. In the process, Americans would find it increasingly difficult to deny the existence and culture of this third "core language" within their borders.

"The world we live in is a world of many voices," says Waddell. "If there's any place that needs many voices, it's America."

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*The writer, Star books columnist Philip Marchand, is a French-Canadian-American-Canadian; born in Pittsfield, Mass., of Quebec ancestry, he now lives in Toronto as dual citizen.*