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Immigrants from the North: Woonsocket, Rhode Island Revisited

Jane E Evans, *University of Texas at El Paso*



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Immigrants from the North: Reconsidering the *Québécois* Settlement in Woonsocket, Rhode Island

Culture, the fruit of history, reflects at every moment the material and spiritual reality of society, of man-the-individual and of man-the-social-being, faced with conflicts which set him against nature and the exigencies of common life.

Amilcar Cabral: "National Liberation and Culture" ¹

The idea of culture as a zone of negotiation between the individual and the society in which he lives has become a commonplace of postcolonial theory (Bhabha 2). In considering the history of former colonies, we are inclined, on some level, to see indigenous practices as a means of resistance against the imposition of the colonists' culture (Reed 1). This was certainly the case in eastern Canada: the province of Québec had been largely French-speaking since the time of the first explorers in the 1500s and the influx of fur traders in the following century. When Canada was ceded to the United Kingdom in 1760 (Andrès 30), the *Québécois* people staunchly protected their culture, namely the large, close-knit family, the Roman Catholic faith, hard work, and the French language, against assimilation to the English-speaking newcomers' Protestantism and worldview (Quintal 2-3).

The *Québécois*' struggle to preserve their cultural identity would again be evident at the end of the 19th century, when poor agricultural conditions at home impelled them to seek a better life in the United States as specialized tradesmen and loom operators in American mill towns (Roby 9-15). This paper focuses on the cultural stronghold of the French-speaking settlers, approximately 900,000 in number, who crossed the border from Canada into the New England states between 1850 and 1929 (Roby 7), and gradually imposed their way of life on the native population. The film Les Tisserands du

pouvoir/The Looms of Power (1988) will provide visual clips depicting life in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, in support of my discussion. In the film, an elderly French-Canadian Woonsocket resident, Jean-Baptiste Lambert, recounts the story of his family's emigration from Quebec Province to the United States in the early twentieth century and his subsequent life in Rhode Island.

Woonsocket was one of several mill towns along the Blackstone River that actually recruited Canadian laborers between 1860 and 1929 ("Weaving" 1-2), making Rhode Island the most industrialized American state of the 19th century (Woonsocket 25). Advertisements appeared in local newspapers and recruiters ventured to Québec to encourage emigration directly. The *Québécois* were welcomed by the United States government as well as by family members who had already settled in New England (Roby 17).

In this short clip, we will see the Lambert family as it travels to its new home. The border, in this instance, is completely transparent. The guard, aware of the ongoing industrialization of the New England states, shoos the family across an invisible boundary while bestowing a hearty welcome [Run first film clip here.]. You can see how different things were 100 years ago, when a need for laborers to industrialize America took precedence over other factors, including any mention of national security.

The new arrivals settled into the Social District ("Weaving" 2) a neighborhood of tenement dwellings inhabited by other French-speaking Canadians as well as Irish and other European immigrants (Woonsocket 4). There, they went to work in the nearby textile mills of which several had French owners (Hudson 34).² There were tensions between the Franco-Canadians and the Irish, the two largest ethnic groups, whose

commonality included their workplace and Catholicism. Their shared religion would eventually drive a serious wedge between the two groups, and contribute to the waning of Franco-American culture in the 20th century.

What the immigrants from Québec province found upon their arrival in Woonsocket in the 19th century was a fairly sleepy English-speaking Protestant town in the initial stages of industrialization. Woonsocket's only church between 1719 and 1819 had been founded and built by the Society of Friends, or Quakers. Catholic churches, therefore, had to be built (Woonsocket 26). Precious Blood Church opened in 1881, and St. Ann's Church opened in 1914. There the congregations worshipped in French. By the 1920s, there were six French-speaking Catholic parishes in Woonsocket. (Woonsocket 27)

Faith was the main tenet of the Franco-Americans' attitude towards their new life; family and the French language were viewed as other important components. The French-speaking immigrants to Woonsocket often had their entire families work in the mills, including their children, in order to clear their debts (Hudson 36). They hoped that their stay in the United States would be a short one and that they could soon return home to Quebec permanently. For most of them this was not the case, although they did manage to visit their homeland periodically (Ducharme 3).

This short film clip will give you an idea of what working conditions for the immigrant family such as the Lamberts were like. [Run second film clip here.] From this segment, we can see that both the Lambert children and their parents work in the mill, despite the very real possibility of being mangled by one of the textile looms.

The tendency towards devout Catholicism, a large, self-sufficient family, and the

continued use of their first language made the Franco-Canadians resistant to the Americanization process, at least for the first two generations. This entrenched attitude, having historical roots in the takeover of Canada by the United Kingdom, was called *la survivance*, “survival” (Quintal 2-3). *Québécois* immigrants, proud of their heritage, maintained their distance from other ethnic groups. They were the least inclined to marry outside of their social class and cultural background because it implied the abandonment of their values, instilled for centuries (Brault “Overview” 82).

In the following video clip, we will hear from Evelyne Lambert on the concept of *survivance* “survival,” as she tries to explain it to the mill doctor, Dr. Fontaine, following her husband Valmore’s death. [Run clip here.] As Evelyne points out, the pillars of the Franco-American’s life are home, work, and religion, with no place for aspiring to another kind of existence.

A second segment from Les Tisserands du pouvoir/The Looms of Power equally illustrates the idea of the Franco-Americans’ *survivance*, or survival. In these scenes, the Lambert daughter, Madeleine, has fallen in love with the mill owner, Jacques Roussel. Jacques has gone to the Lamberts’ house to ask Madeleine’s brother for her hand in marriage. Whereas Evelyne displays some interest in Madeleine’s welfare, her son Baptiste’s abrupt reply demonstrates his loyalty to his historical as well as economic roots. Let’s take a look at this portion on the film. [Run third video clip here.] The expression on young Baptiste Lambert’s face speaks volumes: we perceive that he considers his sister’s marriage to the mill owner, who is French besides, to be a serious betrayal of their family.

Not only did the French-Canadians display their solidarity at home, they also

carried it into the public sector. As early as the 1880s, they had petitioned the Catholic diocese of Providence, Rhode Island to establish French-speaking parochial schools for their children. St. Ann's School was opened in 1891. St. Charles School for boys was opened in 1904 (Bacon 28); the teaching staff for the two schools consisted of religious brothers and nuns, respectively, who had been educated in France (Brault "Achievement" 267).

The Franco-Canadian parents believed that a French-speaking, religious education would safeguard two main aspects of their culture, that is, language and faith (Hill 1). In terms of language, parental expectations were more than met: personal anecdotes from former pupils of this educational system divulge that the young people proudly maintained their French-Canadian accents despite hearing perfect French from their teachers every day (Tisserands).

French-Canadians in Woonsocket also published newspapers in French: La Tribune, beginning in 1895 (Sorrell 344-45), and La Sentinelle, as of 1924 (Sorrell 343). It was in the francophone newspapers that information about French families and working conditions elsewhere in New England could be found. French served as both the language of business, of schools, and of the home. These details led Bessie Bloom Wessel to proclaim Woonsocket "The most French town in America" in 1931 (No page given; quoted in Brault "Overview" 82). Even journalist John Gunther commented on the "adhesiveness" of French-Canadians in Woonsocket because of the French spoken there in the 1940s, when he made his road trip throughout the United States (465).

The cultural influence of the Franco-Canadians on the city-government level helped to assure that their main holidays would be celebrated. Aram Pothier, born in

Quebec, was the first Franco-Canadian to be elected mayor of an American city. He served as Woonsocket's mayor from 1894 to 1896 (Bacon 19), and later as Governor of Rhode Island between 1909 and 1918, and 1925 and 1929 (Woonsocket 30). The annual St. Jean-Baptiste's Day on June 24th, a celebration of the patron saint of Quebec, marked the Woonsocket calendar from 1860 into the 1940s (Bacon 16); the entire town of Woonsocket celebrated Mardi Gras during the 1950s (Crowley 159).

National organizations helped to protect Franco-Canadian culture as well. There were over 300 such organizations in the United States in 1900, mostly concentrated in New England (Hudson 37). The St. Jean-Baptiste Society, for example, founded in 1837, made the promotion and preservation of the French language its objectives (Bacon 16). The St. Jean-Baptiste Society also sponsored a life insurance program for Franco-Canadian mill workers beginning in 1900 and became a successful life insurance company (Thomas 145). Similarly, the Club Marquette, dedicated to improving the lives of Franco-Canadians, instituted banking services and then the Marquette Credit Union in 1944. Consequently, Woonsocket was one of the first American towns to establish credit unions (Thomas 149).

At its heyday, Woonsocket attested to the synergistic nature of immigration: the Québécois from the north had brought in a new language and customs; they had industrialized New England; they had created a Catholic stronghold in the area where Catholicism had not existed one hundred years before; they had transformed the region's banking system. It was during Woonsocket's most successful period as a Franco-American city, however, between 1920 and 1950, that the seeds of its cultural destruction were sown.

From 1923 to 1928, the francophone Catholics of Woonsocket accused the diocese of Providence of misappropriating funds from its congregations (Bouley 86). The former were convinced that Bishop Hickey and the diocesan priests, most of whom were Irish-American like the bishop, had an unspoken agenda to close the French-speaking Catholic schools in the area in favor of English-speaking ones, thereby undermining Franco-Canadian culture in the United States (Bouley 87).

The francophone newspaper, La Sentinelle, founded by Elphège Daignault, published the Franco-Americans' views, in addition to articles calling into question the legality and even the constitutionality of the diocese's actions (Bouley 87). Locally, Elphège Daignault worked to stir up emotions. He instructed his fellow townsmen to refuse to pay their church offering to the Holy Family Church as a way to protest the school issue (Bouley 88). By impeding the accumulation of necessary funds, the French-speaking Catholics hoped that the school project could be derailed, or at least delayed.

After inciting his fellow Woonsocketers to fight, Daignault traveled to Rome in order to have an audience with the Pope once the Rhode Island State Supreme Court had declared Bishop Hickey's appropriation of funds constitutional. At the Vatican, Daignault was told that he and his cohorts in the States would be excommunicated from the Church if they did not desist from challenging the bishop's decisions. This included no longer publishing La Sentinelle. To reverse their ex-communication, Daignault and his supporters quit their protesting. This was known as the Sentinelliste Affair (Bouley 87-89).

A portion of Les Tisserands du pouvoir/The Looms of Power represents the end of the Sentinelliste Affair. A fictionalized version of Daignault, Dr. Fontaine, listens to

the Cardinal's pronouncement at the Vatican, in support of a fictionalized Bishop Hickey, "Monseigneur Kenney." [Run fourth video clip here.] "Losing" the Sentinelliste Affair proves that the handwriting was already on the wall in the 1920s concerning the eventual assimilation of the Franco-Canadians to the American culture.

The merging of several factors in the 1940s through 1960s would propel this movement forward: the Second World War, the closing of many textile mills, the advent of television, and intermarriage³ (Poitras 126; Bacon, Crowley, Mulcahey 199-200).

With the closing of the French-speaking parochial schools, francophone Catholics were forced to attend the English-speaking parochial or public schools. The authorities forbade pupils to speak French in class. Consequently, Franco-American children came into direct contact with others having different ideas on religion and a host of other subjects ("Weaving" 5). At the end of high school, many young men from Woonsocket were drafted into the military service. These young men traveled and as a result, understood different ways of life, as did their loved ones to a lesser extent (Hill 6).

Out of necessity, military wives took on more hours at the mills during their husbands' absences. Work was readily available to them. For example, the Guérin and Belmont Mills were contracted to manufacture textiles for the army. Other clothing manufacturing mills received contracts as the war progressed (Poitras 117-21). But this period of economic boon dried up with the end of World War II. In August 1955, two hurricanes damaged thirty-one textile mills. By the end of the 1950s, Woonsocket's textile industry had collapsed as mills closed forever or relocated to the southern states, where thread and cotton fabrics could be manufactured less expensively (Crowley 142-46).

Also in the 1950s, intermarriage between the third generation of Franco-Americans and other ethnic groups became more prevalent. In this way, the French language that one had spoken at home was often abandoned in favor of English. Intermarriage could also take the members of the younger generation physically away from their cultural roots. Earlier, we saw the Franco-Canadian Lambert family's negative reaction to daughter Madeleine's decision to marry a Frenchman. Even though mill owner Jacques Roussel is a rich francophone, he still does not qualify as "one of them."

Some of the information on intermarriage and other matters of interest to young people reached Woonsocketers via radio and television. With time, the number of French-language broadcasts were greatly reduced or even lost (Woonsocket 46). This very fact precipitates the protagonist's bizarre behavior in Les Tisserands du pouvoir/The Looms of Power.

Jean-Baptiste Lambert has just learned that the last French-language television channel in Woonsocket will cease broadcasting. To him, this change represents one final vestige of his Franco-Canadian culture put to rest. He has seen the fabric of his city change during the course of the twentieth century and his more than eighty years of life. He largely addresses his protests to the young people around him, reminding them of their Franco-Canadian heritage. From the journalist who first catches his attention, to the slightly older policeman keeping an eye on the crowd, Lambert makes his plea that the youth not forget where their families originated. In some instances, he asks questions for reflection about whether or not other townspeople would want to re-explore their cultural heritage. Although some people dismiss Lambert as crazy, others are thoughtful about what he says.

This portrayal of the grandchildren of immigrants as curious about their grandparents' lives rings true. In my own family, my father and his brother stopped speaking German, the native language of their immigrant parents, once they started attending New York City schools. It was up to my sisters and me as second-generation Americans to study our grandparents' language and ask about their culture of origin.

To sum up, we have seen the flourishing of Woonsocket, Rhode Island, thanks to the influx of immigrants from Quebec Province in Canada over a period of approximately 100 years. Although the French language died out during the third generation of descendants from the original Franco-Canadian immigrants, other examples of how these "new Americans" changed the life around them are still visible today, through the Roman Catholicism in New England, the success of credit unions in the region and now nationwide, and the prosperity of life insurance companies throughout our country, to name just a few. We can only guess at what the great contributions of our recent immigrants from the Americas to "the south" will be after the third generation.

Notes:

¹ Amilcar Cabral, "National Liberation and Culture," Ed. P. Williams and L. Chrisman in Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader. (New York: Columbia UP, 1994) 61.

²According to Nancy E. Hudson, the first French mills were operated by the Lepoutre, Tiberghien, and Desurmont families (34-35).

³ For the third generation of Franco-Canadians [2nd generation Americans], intermarriage with other ethnic groups ran as high as 35% (Wessel 82).

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