IDENTITY DISCOURSE IN THREE FRANCO-AMERICAN LIFE HISTORIES FROM THE U.S. FEDERAL WRITERS' PROJECT

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Abstract

This project explores the social construction of ethnic identity among Franco-Americans, the descendants of French-Canadian immigrants to the northeastern U.S.. The method of critical discourse analysis is described and applied to three life narratives compiled in 1939-1940 by the U.S. Federal Writers' Project. A review of theories of ethnicity is provided. The history of French-Canadian immigration to the northeastern U.S., the ideology of *la survivance*, and issues of acculturation and assimilation are discussed. The project concludes with reflections on how the life narratives might inform a postmodern Franco-American ethnic identity.

The life histories compiled and transcribed by the Folklore Project of the Federal Writers' Project of the U.S. Works Progress (later Works Project) Administration (WPA) from 1936-1940[1] provide a wealth of material about the lives of ordinary Americans of various backgrounds, ripe for critical analysis of the discursive construction of cultural identity, especially ethnic identity. Clary-Lemon has shown "how national and immigrant identities are discursively constructed through the use of oral histories" (6). The immigrant life histories discussed here show how three individuals discursively constructed their identities as they related their stories to the interviewers.

According to the Library of Congress, "[t]he Writers' Project staff variously described the life histories as *life sketches*, *living lore*, *industrial lore*, and *occupational lore*. The narratives were meant to reflect the ordinary person's struggle with the vicissitudes of daily living" (emphasis in original). The texts set forth the everyday struggles of the interview subjects, sometimes vividly, serving as snapshots of how they saw themselves in American society and how they characterized themselves in relation to other groups from whom they considered themselves distinct. In short, the texts put forth a discourse of identity in which the interview subjects, sometimes quite consciously and sometimes not so consciously, recount their sense of themselves and their community to the interviewer-writer.

In this project I will undertake a critical-reflective discussion of the stories of three unrelated individuals of French-Canadian descent in the northeastern United States whose stories were part of the Folklore Project: textile worker Philippe Lemay and grandmother Mrs. L, both

[1] According to the U.S. Library of Congress, "[t]he Federal Writers' Project was created in 1935 as part of the United States Works Progress Administration to provide employment for historians, teachers, writers, librarians, and other white-collar workers. Originally, the purpose of the project was to produce a series of sectional guide books under the name *American Guide*, focusing on the scenic, historical, cultural, and economic resources of the United States. Eventually the new programs developed and projects begun under the Federal Emergency Relief Administration were absorbed by the writers' project. ... The Federal Writers' Project was administered at multiple levels--from the central office in Washington, D.C., and also from regional, state, and district offices."

from Manchester, New Hampshire, and David Morin, a mill worker from Old Town, Maine, who later managed a billiard hall[2]. Roughly 900,000 French-speaking Canadians left Québec for the United States between 1840 and 1930, settling in the northeastern United States (Bélanger 2000, Weil 9). By 1949, it was estimated that 2,000,000 to 2,500,000 French Canadians and their descendants were living in the U.S. Over the years, the descendants of the French-Canadian migrants to the northeastern U.S. came to be known as Franco-Americans (Laporte 1949)[3]. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 2,349,684 individuals reported French-Canadian ancestry and an additional 8,309,666 reported French ancestry; it seems safe to assume that some of the latter are also of French-Canadian descent[4]. Together, the three stories discussed here serve as windows into how cultural identity was discursively constructed among individuals of French-Canadian descent in the northeastern U.S. in the early twentieth century, with the inclusion of Mrs. L's story illustrating how different elements may have entered into identity construction for women and men. The project will conclude with some autoethnographic reflections.

The main purpose of the U.S. Federal Writers' Project was to provide work for unemployed writers during the Great Depression (Doty 2, Library of Congress "Web Guide"). However, the writers involved in the Project ranged from individuals who would go on to notable literary careers to unemployed individuals from other industries with no writing

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[2] Philippe Lemay's story is available at http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=wpa1&fileName=18/1804/18040142/wpa118040142.db&recNum=0&itemLink=D?wpa:6:./temp/~ammem_aon3::%23180401420001&linkText=1;
Mrs. L's story is available at http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=wpa1&fileName=18/1803/18030113/wpa118030113.db&recNum=0&itemLink=D?wpa:5:./temp/~ammem_UEW8::%23180301130001&linkText=1; and
David Morin's story is available at http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=wpa1&fileName=13/1312/13120607/wpa113120607.db&recNum=0&itemLink=D?wpa:3:./temp/~ammem_DLjr::%23131206070001&linkText=1.

[3] Following Richard (2008) as used herein the term "French Canadian" refers to the French-speaking populations of Québec and other Canadian provinces. "Franco-American " refers to individuals of French-Canadian birth and/or background in the United States.

[4] http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/c2kbr-35.pdf

background. For example, Doty mentions that Robert F. Grady, the Irish-American individual who interviewed Old Town, Maine's Franco-Americans (including David Morin whose story will be discussed below) was an unemployed weaver in a local woolen mill, not a professional writer, and not a member of the Franco-American group whose members he interviewed, although Grady lived among the Franco-Americans and claimed to understand their culture (Doty 51). Louis Paré and Victoria Langlois, the individuals who interviewed Philippe Lemay and Mrs. L., respectively (whose stories will be discussed below) and other Franco-Americans in Manchester, New Hampshire were themselves Franco-American (Doty 4). It is important to note that the different backgrounds of the interviewer-writers might have affected how stories were elicited from the subjects and jointly constructed by the subjects and the interviewer-writers (Marcus and Fischer 57). In the cases of Philippe Lemay and Mrs. L. in Manchester, New Hampshire, the interviewer-writers were also Franco-American and thus the subjects may have felt that they could speak freely with someone of a similar background. We cannot know to what extent meanings were negotiated between the subjects and the interviewer-writers, but it seems safe to assume that some negotiation had to take place. Marcus and Fischer remind us that "experience has always been more complex than the representation of it that is permitted by traditional techniques of description and analysis in social scientific writing" (43). Thus, the life histories are not merely historical documents to be taken at face value but are also discursive constructions representing negotiation between the subject and the interviewer. The interviewers, although they are often mostly invisible, are present in the stories along with the subjects.

As well, it is important to note that the Franco-American life histories were part of a larger wave of American ethnographic cultural criticism that took place in the 1930s during the

Great Depression (Marcus and Fischer 125). Along with the Folklore Project, the WPA commissioned other works of documentary realism such as case-worker reports on the unemployed, picture books on the "human experience", folklore recordings, history guidebooks and other social science writing in a documentary mode (125-126). Thus, the interviewer-writers of the life histories did not simply go out looking for subjects in order to transcribe their stories as freely told to them; rather, the compilation of the stories was part of a larger effort to "document" what it meant to be "American" in the 1930s and presumably this goal informed how the interviewer-writers crafted the final pieces. Berkhofer suggests that when doing history "political and moral biases are inherent in choice of subject, viewpoint, frame of reference, and perhaps even selection of evidence" (140). The life histories can be read as attempts to document cultural history as it was happening. Interestingly, according to Marcus and Fischer, Stott (1973) credits the WPA projects with "allowing America to discover itself as a culture" (Marcus and Fischer 126), suggesting that prior to that time there had not been an identifiable need to do so.

One of the problems, however, with documentary material such as the life histories is that after it is gathered and presented, over time, it often comes to be viewed as more or less self-explanatory empirical evidence, and the ideological component becomes buried (Marcus and Fischer 127). Berkhofer states that forms of "realism [like the WPA projects] tr[y] to bridge or conceal the gap between its form and its subject – to give the illusion of reality through its form" (58). The descriptive style of the life histories serves to "conceal the gap", if one does not think to look for it.

After they were compiled the Franco-American life stories would lay dormant until they were collected in a volume by Stewart Doty entitled *The First Franco-Americans: New England*

Life Histories from the Federal Writers' Project 1938-1939. Doty's volume was the first publication in book form for a general audience of the Franco-American life histories. Prior to release of Doty's book, the Franco-American stories were archived in the Library of Congress and accessible only to walk-in archival users. Doty points out that when his book was published in 1985 most available accounts of French Canadians in the U.S. were filtered "through the perceptions of New England francophone elites of priests, lawyers, doctors, and newspaper people" (1). Doty saw his book as a way to give voice to the ordinary people whose diversity of thought and opinion were effectively silenced in the prevailing élite accounts. He claims that the life histories are probably some of the earliest first-person accounts of ordinary Franco-Americans collected in one place (3). According to Doty the life histories are significant because they "are simultaneously contemporary with the 1930s and push the collective memory back to the last of the 19th century" (4). In Doty's words, they "draw a composite view of the lives of ordinary Franco-Americans from the Great Migration to the United States [i.e., the large-scale migration of French Canadians to northeastern U.S. industrial centers from 1840 to 1930] in the late nineteenth century to the Great Depression of the 1930s" (5-6). The life histories offer an opportunity to explore the developing discourse of Franco-American identity in the early twentieth century through the first-person accounts of individuals whose lives were lived within that collective discourse.

While Doty's volume is a valuable resource, there are at least two problems with it as a data source. One problem is that Doty edited the stories, sometimes heavily. For example, some interviewers tried to render the French accents of the subjects accurately in their text, which Doty found patronizing. Thus Doty edited the accented text into what he considered standard English, despite the fact that readers may have found the original accented text an interesting example of

language usage and researchers may have found the accented text valuable for the other information it might convey such as class or personality markers. As well, Doty removed references to the interviewer in cases where the life history was more of a conversation between the interviewer and subject, preventing an analysis of how interaction between the interviewer and subject might have affected the final text (Gee, "Discourse Analysis" 44), and thus masking the joint construction of the story by the subject and the interviewer-writer. In several cases Doty combined more than one interview with a subject (such as David Morin) into a single narrative, a problematic editorial choice for researchers who might wish to analyze linguistic patterns and the flow of ideas. For the above reasons and to ensure credibility, this project will use as its data source the original textual material available digitally at the Library of Congress website, rather than the material in Doty's book. Another problem with Doty's treatment of the stories is that he largely ignores the ideological circumstances under which the WPA projects were undertaken. Doty discusses the stories as if they are self-explanatory empirical evidence, ignoring the fact that the WPA might have had a larger "Americanizing" agenda in commissioning them (Senier 356, 361). Doty somewhat simplistically romanticizes the stories as "significant historical documents", ignoring not only the ideological factors involved in their creation but his own editing of them!

My methodology in discussing the life histories will be an eclectic approach to critical discourse analysis in which I draw on the work of Wodak (2008, 2002), including Wodak's work with De Cillia (1999), van Dijk (2002, 1997, 1995), and Gee (2004, 1999). Van Dijk avers that discourse studies should provide integrated descriptions of three main dimensions of discourse: (1) how language influences beliefs and interaction, or vice versa; (2) how aspects of interaction

influence how people speak; and (3) how beliefs control language use and interaction ("Study" 2). For Wodak, "three concepts figure indispensably in all [critical discourse analysis]: the concept of power; the concept of history; and the concept of ideology" ("Introduction" 12). According to Gee "[t]here are many different approaches to discourse, none of them ... uniquely 'right'" ("An Introduction" 5). The approach to discourse analysis undertaken here will "combine aspects of sociopolitical and critical theory with rather general (usually thematic) analyses of language not rooted in any particular linguistic background or theory" (Gee, "Discourse Analysis" 20) and will take to heart Wodak's admonition that critical discourse analysis should make "opaque structures of power relations and ideologies manifest" (Kendall 3). The discussion will be "more philosophical, speculative or impressionistic" than "empirical" (van Dijk, "Study" 24). Wodak suggests that being critical in discourse analysis includes "not taking things for granted, opening up complexity, challenging reductionism, dogmatism and dichotomies, [and] being self-reflective" (Kendall 2007, 17). It also includes "opening up alternative readings (justifiable through cues in the text[])" and "making ideological positions manifested in the respective text transparent" (32). The discussion will not parse linguistic usage and structures in detail but will suggest what the subjects' narratives say about the ideologies prevalent at the time and how they affected members of the Franco-American community.

The Franco-American life histories are narratives. "Narratives are important sense-making devices. People often encode into narratives the problems that concern them and their attempts to make sense or resolve these problems" (Gee, "An Introduction" 134). As Berkhofer puts it, "[n]arrative ... constructs a context by connecting what seems unrelated into a story" (37), and even more interesting for our purposes "narratives ... create their facts as much as facts create the narrative" (52). The discussion will be attentive to what Gee calls *meaning potential* –

"a range of possible meanings that [a] word or structure can take on in different contexts of use" ("Discourse Analysis" 21). Simply put, words do not always mean the same thing. When, where and how something is said all make a difference, producing what Gee calls a *situated meaning* in context ("Discourse Analysis" 28-29). Situated meanings come together to result in social practices that create *socially situated identities* (38).

Context, or what Gee calls the *frame problem,* is important to critical discourse analysis:

> No matter how much of the context we have considered in offering an interpretation of an utterance, there is always the possibility of considering other and additional aspects of the context, and these new considerations may change how we interpret the utterance ("Discourse Analysis" 30).

Context is nearly limitless (Gee, "An Introduction" 54), and there are many ways to contextualize the stories of Philippe Lemay and Mrs. L and David Morin, depending on how broad we choose to draw the context. Thus, any conclusions one may attempt in this project are necessarily provisional. As Gee says, we will deal with the frame problem by trying to show that the aspects of context considered are the important and relevant ones for the analytic purpose ("Discourse Analysis" 32, "An Introduction" 88).

Citing Hacking (1986), Gee sees discourses as "distinctive ways people talk, read, write, think, believe, value, act, and interact with things and other people to get recognized (and recognize themselves) as a group or distinctive kinds of people" ("Discourse Analysis" 39). Gee is careful to clarify that by "distinctive kinds of people" he means "distinctive socially situated identities" (39). That is, differences among groups are viewed as the result of power relations in society, not the result of any "essential" difference (in the philosophical sense) between "kinds" (for lack of a better word) of people (42). As Tannen notes, "to describe differences is not to

ascribe them to either biological or cultural sources" (12). In other words, "[i]n some ways, we are all the same. But in other ways we are all different" (29). Similarity and difference can exist among individuals and collectivities simultaneously.

The discussion will also be informed by Van Dijk's socio-cognitive model of critical discourse analysis. Van Dijk's model is based on the assumption that cognition mediates between society and discourse (Wodak 2002, 18). It involves attention to the mind of the subject (van Dijk, "Multidisciplinary CDA" 97). Subjects are not passive, but bring to their interactions "personal as well as social cognition, beliefs and goals as well as evaluations and emotions, and ... other 'mental' or 'memory' structures, representations or processes" (98). Van Dijk's approach adds another level to context, because "besides their customary social definition, contexts also need a cognitive definition in order to account for personal variation and subjectivity and in order to explain how social structures can influence discourse structures 'via' the mind of social members" ("Discourse as Interaction" 16). If there were no cognitive element the same contexts would have the same effect on all participants. "[I]n many ways, cognition is the interface between discourse and society" (van Dijk, "Study" 31). As Wodak (2002) puts it in her description of van Dijk's approach, "[b]oth long-term and short-term memories as well as certain mental models shape our perception and comprehension of discursive practices and also imply stereotypes and prejudices, if such mental models become rigid and over-generalized" (18). This is particularly relevant to a discussion of the life stories.

In addition, the "socio" part of van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach:

> is meant to include both the local, microstructures of situated face-to-face interactions, as well as the more global, societal and political structures variously defined in terms of groups, group-relations (such as dominance and inequality), movements, institutions,

organizations, social processes, political systems and more abstract properties of societies and cultures ("Multidisciplinary CDA" 98).

Socio-cognitive elements inform the subjects' statements of opinion and belief, their statements of what is important to them, what they choose to emphasize in their stories, and what images and representations they point to as important. Van Dijk is particularly interested in unmasking "ideologically biased discourses" involving "positive self-presentation and negative other presentation" (103). As well, van Dijk is interested in "the many forms of implicit or indirect meanings, such as implications, presuppositions, allusions, vagueness and so on" (104). All these elements are useful in discussing the life histories. "[I]mplicit meanings are related to underlying beliefs, but are not openly, directly, completely or precisely asserted, for various contextual reasons, including the well-known ideological objective to de-emphasize *our* bad things and *their* good things" (104, emphasis added). It will be interesting to see how the unstated underlying beliefs of the interview subjects inform their perspective on their personal experience and the wider Franco-American community.

Gee's and van Dijk's ideas will be combined with elements of Wodak's discourse-historical approach, which "attempts to transcend the purely linguistic dimension and to include more or less systematically the historical, political, sociological and/or psychological dimensions in the analysis and interpretation of a specific discursive event" (Wodak, "Introduction" 12). According to Wodak, a critical account of discourse requires a "description of both the social processes and structures, which give rise to the production of a text, and of the social structures and processes within which individuals or groups as socio-historical subjects, create meanings in the interactions with texts ... Every discourse is historically produced and interpreted – i.e., is situated in time and space". An analysis of discourse "should take into account historical

developments of discursive practices (change), intertextuality, and interdiscursivity" ("Aspects" 12). "The historical context is always analyzed and integrated into the interpretation of discourses and texts" (14). For that reason the discussion of the stories will be preceded by a discussion of Franco-American history.

Wodak suggests that discourses about nations and national identities rely on at least four types of "discursive macro-strategies": constructive (aimed at the building of identity), preservative or justificatory (aimed at the preservation and reproduction of identity, or "narratives of identity"), transformative (aimed at changing identity), and destructive (aimed at the dismantling of identity) ("Aspects" 19). The prominence of each strategy will vary depending on the context. This typology is especially useful for purposes of this project because the typology can be applied to the discourse of ethnic identity as well. Wodak's work with De Cillia, et al. (1999) and Clary-Lemon's (2010) application of their work to Irish-Americans are especially informative. The macro-strategies identified by Wodak are not always undertaken consciously. Sometimes "[t]he sources and processes of their own positioning are hidden from people. They are typically not aware of speaking/writing from within a particular discursive formation" ("Aspects" 23). Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach and Gee's notions of situated meaning and cultural models help to make explicit the not always obvious ideological elements of the texts.

Van Dijk's insights into the discourse of ethnicity are also relevant. "[T]he ways members of an ethnic group speak among each other are ... related to their position in society, and how they are spoken to and spoken about by dominant group members" ("Discourse, Ethnicity" 145). How people "call" themselves is an important part of "intra- and intercultural discourse" (146). Similarly, "biased discourse is not merely a form of individual talk or an

expression of personal prejudice, but reproduces social systems of ethnic inequality" (148). In Van Dijk's view, individuals are not always consciously aware of how their everyday interactions reproduce the structures of inequality that are required for dominant group members to retain hegemonic control over a dominated population.

Van Dijk's views on ethnicity take Gee's notion of situated meaning ("the meaning a word or phrase is given in an actual context of use" ["Discourse Analysis" 40]) to a deeper level. For Van Dijk, "social and especially ethnic identities influence social practices in general, and discourse in particular" ("Discourse, Ethnicity" 175). Thus, an ethnic Discourse (with a capital "D" in Gee's formulation) is not "merely a reliable expression of cultural identity or ethnic intergroup relations, but also enacts and reproduces ethnic dominance" (175). People come to take for granted their understanding of their "ethnicity", without looking behind it to the larger forces that help shape their understanding. Theories of ethnicity will be discussed in more detail below.

Ideologies as defined by van Dijk "are systems of social cognition that are essentially *evaluative*: they provide the basis for judgments about what is good or bad, right or wrong, and thus also provide basic guidelines for social perception and interaction" ("Discourse Semantics" 248, emphasis in original). For example, ethnic and nationalist ideologies typically categorize people as "us" (the ingroup) and "them" (the outgroups) (248-249). The ideology of *la survivance* prevalent among the descendants of French Canadians in the U.S. around the turn of the twentieth century, discussed more fully below, includes such a polarization, and illustrates the blurred line between ethnic ideology and nationalist ideology. Van Dijk identifies a number of basic features of ideologies: (1) representations of criteria of identity/membership and group access (who gets to be one of us?); (2) typical tasks/activities (what do we do?); (3) goals (what

are we trying to accomplish as we undertake these tasks/activities?); (4) norms and values (against what values are we judging the tasks/activities and goals?); (5) relative position (where do we see ourselves in relation to other groups in society?); and (6) resources (what material or symbolic resources of society do we have access to?) ("Discourse as Interaction" 26, and "Discourse Semantics" 249-250). The ideology of *la survivance* among individuals of French-Canadian descent in the U.S. featured all these elements, as we will see. Because they are socio-cognitive, "these categories and their propositional contents do not necessarily reflect social reality, but are a self-serving ideological construction of it, a self-image of the group and its relation to other groups" ("Discourse Semantics" 250-251). The self-image becomes real insofar as individuals live their lives as if the image is reality.

For van Dijk, "ideologies serve to 'define' groups and their position within complex societal structures and in relation to other groups. It is this prevalent overall *self-definition* or social *identity* that is acquired and shared by group members in order to protect the interests of the group as a whole" ("Discourse as Social Interaction" 26, emphasis in original). Further, "ideologies are developed to coordinate the socially shared representations that define and protect the 'answers' that each group provides to manage ... fundamental social problems and issues in relation to, or in conflict with, those of other groups" (27). When individuals, whether members of dominant or dominated groups, consent (consciously or unconsciously) to the prevalent ideologies they are automatically provided with a "position" in relation to others.

An ideology appears to be "successful" for van Dijk if it functions for group cohesion. The mind of each individual in the group must internalize the ideology for that to happen. Van Dijk avers that "our mind is configured not merely as a function of the bio-neurological systems of the brain or in order to enable the many mental functions of thought, but also and especially as

a function of the social practices and social interaction in which it is acquired, used and changed" ("Discourse as Social Interaction" 29). It complicates matters that individuals can simultaneously be members of different groups with competing ideologies, resulting in contradictions and variations (30). As we will see, Philippe Lemay, Mr. L and David Morin all seem torn between their French-Canadian past and their American present and future. It is important to note that "not only dominant groups, but also dominated groups have ideologies that control their self-identification, goals and actions" ("Discourse Semantics" 245). The ideology of *la survivance* is a powerful example of how an ideology can control the self-identification of a dominated group.

For van Dijk, "as soon as descriptions of events, situations, actions and people imply good and bad qualities of social groups, or involve conflicting interests between groups, discourse will generally be ideological" ("Discourse as Social Interaction" 34). If this is true, then all ethnic discourse is necessarily ideological because it is always structured in terms of an "us" as different than/opposed to/affiliated with a "them" of some sort. Ideology is not always apparent in a text or interaction; it cannot always be "read off", as Van Dijk puts it. It is often hidden and difficult to decipher, because different individuals bring different "intervening factors" and "context models" to a text ("Discourse Semantics" 255).

Before discussing the stories of Philippe Lemay, Mrs. L and David Morin using the methodology described above, we turn now to a look at some theories of identity and ethnicity that will inform the discussion, followed by a brief history of the migration of French Canadians to the northeastern U.S. at the turn of the twentieth century.

The discussion of the three life histories will focus on the subjects' discursive construction of their ethnic identity. de Benoist reminds us that "[i]n pre-modern societies, identity was mainly related to filiations, both in the public and the private sphere. Identity depended on the place attributed to each individual by his birth, his lineage or his group" (9-10). The question of personal identity is a modern phenomenon developed in the eighteenth century "supported by a burgeoning individualism which originated in the Christian valorization of the soul, in Descartes' rationalism, in the privileging of ordinary life and the private sphere, and finally, in Locke's theory, which favors individual free-will over social obligations" (13). Nationalism as we know it today arose at the same time as the question of personal identity: "[N]ationalism seems to be a typical offspring of modernity. But it is not only a political phenomenon. It feeds on imagination, a place where history, culture, religion, popular legends mix. Those elements are all revisited, idealized, transfigured and end up as a coherent and legitimizing narrative" (22, see also De Cillia 150). Nationalism and ethnic identity have in common the fact that they require psychic validation in the individual:

> Being a member of a people, a class, an ethnic group is completely irrelevant if this membership has no meaning for the person. It could determine some thoughts and behaviors, but only subconsciously. It could help others identify the individual, but it will not identify him [sic] in his own eyes (42).

But how does one define "ethnic group"? Werner Sollors offers the following working definition:

> An ethnic group is ... a collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood. Examples of such

> symbolic elements are: kinship patterns, physical contiguity (as in localism or sectionalism), religious affiliation, language or dialect forms, tribal affiliation, nationality, phenotypal features, or any combination of these. A necessary accompaniment is some consciousness of kind among members of the group (Sollors, "Foreword" xii).

Elsewhere Sollors has characterized ethnicity, nationalism and race as "widely shared though intensely debated collective fictions that are continually reinvented" ("Invention" xi). Devereux has called ethnic identity "a label or sorting device" (392). For Hannerz ethnicity is "primarily a social-organizational phenomenon, a matter of drawing boundaries between groups" (418). These views of ethnicity emphasize its fluidity and social construction. Sollors rejects what he calls the traditional way of looking at ethnicity in which ethnic groups are imagined as if they were "natural" or "real" units "always already in existence" that yield "an essential continuum of certain myths and traits", and which are concerned with "preservation and survival, which appear threatened", where assimilation is the foe and conflicts are seen to emerge from outside the world of the particular ethnic group ("Invention" xiii-xiv). Sollors acknowledges that on the surface this "traditional" way of looking at ethnicity has currency, but when examined more closely it becomes clear that ethnic groups are "part of the historical process", "eminently pliable and unstable", constantly changing and redefining themselves (xiv). He hastens to add that looking at ethnicity as an invention should not take away from the very real ethnic conflicts and ethnic consciousnesses that exist. Rather, it should "enrich our understanding of the ethnic phenomenon as well as of specific texts" (xv).

Viewing ethnicity as a social construction ("invention") requires an acknowledgement of the importance of language, and with language comes symbols. Herbert Gans identified the

importance of symbols to ethnicity when he discussed the expressive function of ethnicity: "Expressive behavior can take many forms, but it often involves the use of symbols -- and symbols as signs rather than as myths. Ethnic symbols are frequently individual cultural practices which are taken from the older ethnic culture; they are 'abstracted' from that culture and pulled out of its original moorings, so to speak, to become stand-ins for it" ("Symbolic" 9). Socially constructed ethnicity is thus expressed through symbols. Gans notes that

> [w]hile people *can* construct or invent their own ethnicity, the materials which they use in doing so have to come from what they know about their own or another ethnicity. Moreover, since acculturation and assimilation continue to take place, what they know differs from what their parents or other ancestors knew (Gans, "Epilogue" 453).

Michael Novak suggests that subconscious psycho-social elements outside the individual's control must be acknowledged when considering the social construction of ethnicity: "Emotions, instincts, memory, imagination, passions, and ways of perceiving are passed on to us in ways we do not choose, and in ways so thick with life that they lie far beyond the power of consciousness (let alone of analytic and verbal reason) thoroughly to master, totally to alter" (cited in Sollors, "Foreword" xvii). Novak would say that while the individual is an active agent in the construction of her or his ethnic identity there are inherited aspects, differing from person to person, that cannot be ignored. Novak's characterization adds depth to the "cognitive" part of the "socio-cognitive" element so important to van Dijk.

As Horace Kallen put it, in a rather sexist early twentieth century way, "whatever else [an immigrant] changes, he cannot change his grandfather" (78). Kallen called the French Canadians of the northeastern United States, "clinging to French for so many generations and maintaining, however weakly, spiritual and social contacts with their mother country", one of the populations

for whom "their national self-consciousness is perhaps the chief spiritual asset" (83), suggesting that this "clinging" was what largely defined them as a group.

Of course, ethnic identity is only one element of personal identity, albeit a very important one for many people. Gleason suggests that "if pinned down, most of us would find it difficult to explain just what we do mean by identity" (460). Gleason sees a split between theorists of identity, who "differ most significantly on whether identity is to be understood as something internal that persists through change or as something ascribed from without that changes according to circumstance" (468). That is, in the case of ethnic identity, is it "something primordially given or optionally cultivated"? (469) What makes the examination of identity confusing is that we are accustomed to hearing it talked about in both ways identified by Gleason, and the contradictoriness often passes us by (471). In the discussion of the Franco-American stories below we will try to be attentive to these contradictions and to what they might mean for the individuals involved, keeping in mind de Benoist's reminder that "[i]dentity is fundamentally of a narrative and auto-narrative nature. Its real subject is the narrator" (44).

Clary-Lemon offered the following concise synthesis of Ricoeur, Martin and Hall's work on identity, a useful typology for the discussion of the Franco-American life histories:

> (1) Identity is a discursive construct often revealed in the stories people tell about themselves and others and in relaying memories of the past.
>
> (2) Identities are always provisional, undergoing constant transformation, and seen in relation to the Other.
>
> (3) Cultural or national identities are fragmented from within as from without, and exist as a negotiation of competing stories about similarity and difference (9).

This perspective on identity discourse is an excellent way to approach the three Franco-American life histories because in the three texts the subjects tell us about themselves and how they experienced what they saw as their transformation. By comparing the three stories we can see that members of the Franco-American community were not necessarily united in their perspectives on what it meant to be a descendant of French Canadians in the United States.

Having discussed the features of identity discourse that will inform the discussion, we turn now to a brief history of the migration of French Canadians to the northeastern U.S. at the turn of the twentieth century. It is important to review this history to provide context for discussion of the Franco-American life histories because "[i]mmigration forces a redefinition of an original collectivity, a reassessment of their collective representations of the past, visions of the future, relationships with other groups, and significance of various lines of social differentiation" (Clary-Lemon 10). French Canadians could not simply move from Québec to the United States and maintain their way of life. In Québec they were mostly farmers and in the United States they would be mostly industrial laborers. This change in livelihood would prove to be a major factor in how the immigrants and their descendants came to construct their personal and collective identities.

Abulof identifies three phases in the development of French-Canadian identity in Canada, which are relevant to the discussion of the descendants of French Canadians in the United States because they place the emigrants' arrival in the U.S. in the context of the identity discourse they brought with them from Québec. Abulof identifies the first identity phase as beginning with the French colonization of *la Nouvelle-France* in the sixteenth century, continuing through the failed *Patriotes* Rebellion in 1837/1838, and ending with the Union Act of 1840 and Lord Durham's

report targeting the French for gradual assimilation. According to Abulof's analysis during much of the first phase there was no sense among French Canadians of ethnic identity as it is conceived today because the French "enjoyed absolute demographic hegemony" and were the numerical majority (240). Abulof considers the *Patriotes* Rebellion of 1837/1838 to be "the first national expression of the emerging *Canadien* ethnicity", after which the "all-encompassing ideology" of *la survivance*, discussed more fully below, became the community's organizing principle in reaction to having been militarily subdued and to the demographic diminishment experienced with the arrival of increasing numbers of non-French speakers in Québec (241).

French-Canadian identity became defined primarily as resistance to assimilation into English Canada. It was during this second phase that the massive emigration to the northeastern United States took place, worsening the demographic diminishment in Québec. The second phase continued in Canada for over 100 years until the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s, leading Abulof to conclude, sweepingly, that "[t]he French-Canadian community joined modernity too late for its own preservation" (244). Abulof sees much of the second phase as pre-modern, and it is during the first half of this pre-modern phase that large-scale emigration to the northeastern United States took place. Richard points out that after 1860 French Canadians increasingly opted to emigrate to the United States rather than to rural western Canada (13). All it took was one day's travel to get to the mill towns of New England (Green, MacKinnon and Minns 2005). French-Canadian identity in the United States would evolve in ways that distinguished it from the evolution of francophone identity in Canada (Richard 67), and by the latter part of the twentieth century Franco-Americans would "share very little of Québec's new identity and nationalist orientation (Langelier 478).

Almost one million French Canadians left Canada for the United States between 1840 and 1940 (Weil 9). By the turn of the twentieth century the migration was in full swing. The Québec government was so concerned about the exodus that it paid newspapers in the province to publish propaganda articles in an effort to slow the emigration (Richard 154). Most French Canadians settled in the New England states (Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Rhode Island) and in eastern New York State, within a reasonable distance of the Canadian border. One million French Canadians may seem small in the context of the forty million immigrants to the United States in roughly the same period (Morawska 187), but the impact on the host communities was magnified because of their geographic concentration; French Canadians mostly stayed in the northeast, unlike other immigrant groups. Beginning in the 1890s French Canadians residing in the U.S. came to be known as Franco-Americans (Richard 71).

The rapid industrialization of the northeastern U.S. – combined with ready railroad access -- drew new arrivals from all over Québec. The many railroad links facilitated travel back and forth between Canada and the U.S. French Canadians were particularly attracted by the promise of full employment in the textile industry, and recruiting in Canada was cheaper for the American industrialists than recruiting in Europe. The decline of the farm-based economy in Québec is often cited as one of the main reasons for the migration. According to Podea,

> New England manufacturers gave French-Canadian workers a ready welcome... Factories adopted the practice of sending recruiting agents to Québec and entire families and parishes were transported to New England. Many are the accounts of desolation in Québec's deserted villages (368).

In addition, the group's high fertility rate contributed to its rapid growth after arrival in the U.S (Gossage and Gauvreau 379). After families established themselves in their new environment they often helped other relatives and townsfolk migrate to join them (Hareven 109-110), a process known as *l'émigration en chaine* (chain migration) (Tilly 88).

According to Grosjean, "[f]or a long time [the French Canadians] were considered the most unassimilable [sic] of all immigrant groups..." (94), a perception that remained even during later efforts of the Franco-American élite to encourage U.S. citizenship and patriotism. At the same time they encouraged citizenship, the élite wanted people to "preserve" their French-Canadian language and culture. Podea pointed out that, unlike European immigrants, French Canadians did not sever bonds with the land of their birth. Migration from Québec to the U.S. was different because Québec adjoined the northeastern U.S. and visits, newspapers, and education in the province were reasonably accessible if people had the resources and desire to take advantage of them. Thus, the French Canadians continued to be exposed to society and politics in Québec at the same time as they were adjusting to their new circumstances in the U.S. The easy movement across the border differentiated French Canadians from other immigrant groups at the turn of the twentieth century (Richard 57). The apparent dual loyalty puzzled many native-born Americans, and provided contrast to other immigrant groups who did not have such ready access to *la mère patrie* (mother country).

In trying to understand the everyday life experience of the French Canadians in the U.S. (which was the ostensible goal of the Folklore Project in interviewing the individuals whose stories are discussed below), an important point to remember is that the textile mills in the towns where French Canadians settled depended heavily on female and child labor. Often entire families worked together in the same factory (Hareven 114) because wages were so low that it

was nearly impossible for a man to support a wife and children on his wages alone. Thus, more often than not, women and children worked along with the men who were the titular heads of their household – and sometimes *instead* of the men, because the men were often the first to be let go during periodic cutbacks at the factories because of their higher wages. Women and children often confronted disapproval from the élites in their community, especially clerics and journalists, because of their factory work.

Doty claims that the institutions created by the Franco-American élite (i.e., French-language hospitals, orphanages, parish schools, credit unions, and fraternal and mutual benefit societies, and newspapers) –as important as they were – were not as central to the lives of ordinary people as the two institutions of the family and the workplace (13). This is understandable considering the long hours worked in the mills and the fact that entire families often worked together; individuals were lucky if they had time for anything other than holding down a job and keeping their family together. This reality suggests that perhaps the everyday importance of the institutions created by the élites has been somewhat overstated in conventional histories of the Franco-Americans, the majority of which histories have been written by the élites (Richard 33).

The French-Canadian élite in the U.S., following the lead of their counterparts in Québec, actively promoted *la survivance,* an organized effort at French-Canadian ethnic survival in North America focused on language retention, strict allegiance to the Catholic Church, parochial schools, and ethnic social organizations. *La survivance* disproportionately conferred on women the task of preserving the "spiritual distinctiveness" of French culture, a distinctiveness largely located in the home (Langellier 60). Langellier explains that responsibility for the performance

of ethnic identity "falls heavily on family women who create and maintain the rituals, myths, stories and images upon which the enchanted, ethnic family has come to depend" (57).

In general, the French-speaking Catholic clergy, the self-appointed official spokespeople for all French Canadians in their sphere of influence, preached that the very survival of the French-Canadian people depended upon a woman's proper performance of her prescribed gender roles as wife and mother; at the same time, they preached against the evils of working outside the home. The story of Mrs. L, discussed below, eloquently conveys one individual's perspective on this notion. French-Canadian women newly-arrived in the U.S. often went from working in the home in Québec to putting in long hours at the factory with their husbands and children – quite a culture shock. In addition, this shift from the home to the workplace likely created internal conflict for women as they faced disapproval of the élites (priests, journalists, etc.) of their community. Meanwhile, men who were not the sole or main breadwinners of the family could no longer easily claim a special status in the family. Takai describes in some detail the cognitive dissonance that must have resulted for such men as they experienced "the gap between the harsh reality of daily life and the normative ideology of the male breadwinner" (122). These issues of gender are important to keep in mind when discussing the life histories, because they can help explain the different attitudes of Philippe Lemay, Mrs. L and David Morin in describing their experiences.

After the turn of the twentieth century French Canadians arriving in the United States would find increased efforts to "Americanize" newcomers. Ricento studied texts from the period 1914-1924 in which American politicians and intellectuals tried to encourage the "Americanization" of immigrants. Ricento identifies how "the English language came to be strongly associated with American identity" during this period (614). The dark side of the

"Americanization" efforts was an increase in nativist cultural hostility, exemplified by the rise of the Ku Klux Klan in New England, who made Catholics their target (Richard 127). The mainstream "Americanization" efforts and populist nativism impacted the everyday lives of the Franco-Americans and influenced how they saw themselves. Richard discussed the ethnic tensions and conflicts resulting from the "Americanization" efforts and nativist pressures, pointing out that they contributed to a rift in the community between those who would emphasize *la survivance* even more strongly and those who would increasingly abandon the French language in an effort to better fit in (86, 102, 132). One way the élites coped with the conflict and tension was to encourage naturalization as a way to show that Franco-Americans were "loyal" Americans, and to secure for them the rights of citizenship that would ensure the ability to freely practice their religion without interference (Richard 160).

The stories discussed below show how three individuals, two men and one woman, experienced the transformation of their personal identity, and how they saw the transformation of their collective identity from French Canadian to Franco-American, after the move from Québec to the United States. These particular stories were chosen because they provide different perspectives on the personal and collective transformation experienced by all immigrants, yet they show how the personal and societal upheaval of the migrant experience can be experienced differently based at least partially on the different circumstances and internalized viewpoints people bring to the experience.

<u>Philippe Lemay</u>

Eighty-three year-old Manchester, New Hampshire, textile worker Philippe Lemay was interviewed by Louis Paré, a fellow Franco-American. The manuscript is credited as "reported"

by Louis Paré (2)[5]. Lemay both distances himself from and identifies with French Canadians when he says that "*they* [French Canadians from the province of Québec] kept on coming until now *we* [Franco-Americans] are 35,000 strong, 40% of the entire population of [Manchester, New Hampshire]. *Ours* is said to be the largest single nationality group" (2, emphasis added). Philippe Lemay sees his story as a case study of the French-Canadian textile worker in general, "how he came, lived, worked, played and suffered until he was recognized as a patriotic, useful and respected citizen, no longer a 'frog' and 'pea soup eater', a despised Canuck... it's the story of all French Canadians who settled in New England mill towns" (2). Lemay's story is an example of a transformative narrative of identity (De Cillia 161).

Lemay identifies religion as important to the migrants: "Here and wherever else they went, they didn't forget their duty to God: the churches, schools and other institutions they built testify to that" (3). Again, Lemay distances himself from his forebears by using *they*. In keeping with the stereotypes, he criticizes the early migrants' commitment to the U.S.: "But their duty to the country that was feeding them, that was another thing. They didn't like to become citizens and feared it for more than one reason. They couldn't speak English, and that, let me tell you, was a big handicap... Most of them hadn't come here to stay" (3).

Lemay mentions how the French-language press encouraged people to become American citizens so that they could pressure local officials to pay attention to their concerns, even though many people feared becoming citizens (3). Lemay considers the community's eventual willingness to consider taking out American citizenship a turning point: "*Our* people began to realize that their ideas against being naturalized were wrong. They saw the privileges as well as the duties..." (3, emphasis added). Lemay credits newspaper owners for encouraging the change

[5] Page citations to the life histories are to the "image" numbers of the original manuscript in the Library of Congress archives, accessible electronically at the locations specified in footnote 2 on page 3).

in attitude. Lemay's statements confirm the lack of consensus in the Franco-American community about the value of citizenship identified by Richard (80-81), and show how cultural or national identities can be "fragmented from within as from without" (Clary-Lemon 9).

Much of Lemay's narrative focuses on his work experience. Clearly his identity is tied up closely with his work. Sometimes it is difficult to determine if Lemay is talking about his own life or Franco-American life in general. For example, he says "all those who were old enough went to work without waiting to take a much needed rest" (6). He started work in the Lowell, Massachusetts, textile mills at the age of eight, and then moved with his family to Manchester, New Hampshire.

Lemay mentions what he calls the "homesickness" of older French-Canadian immigrants in Manchester. To Lemay's way of thinking, the older immigrants who returned to Québec once or twice a year "were still farmers like their ancestors had been, and they wanted to get something out of those farms, some of which had been in the family for many generations" (15). Indeed, Lemay casually mentions that his own parents returned to Québec when he was a teenager (14), leaving him and his siblings in Manchester. There is no explanation of why his parents returned to Québec or why he and his siblings chose to stay. The implication is that his parents were not willing to leave behind farm life and that Lemay and his siblings were not willing to give up the way of life they had come to know in the U.S. This illustrates the provisional nature of identity (Clary-Lemon 9); what it meant to be French Canadian had come to mean something else for Lemay and his siblings than it did for their parents.

Perhaps the departure of his parents contributed to his increasing identification with his work. Even though Lemay seems to distinguish his generation from older people such as his parents, in that Lemay's generation apparently did not feel the urgent need to return to *la mère*

patrie in the same way as the older generation, at the end of his story Lemay is proud to say that in retirement he drove his car to Canada three times, saying "I haven't forgotten my birthplace where father, mother and others of my family are buried" (12-13). This shows that even though Lemay clearly now sees and feels himself an "American", he still retains a sentimental attachment to *la mère patrie*.

Lemay recounts how the older workers in the textile factory would spontaneously return to Canada when they got homesick, opening up opportunities at the mill for younger workers to showcase their abilities. Lemay relates his experience as the first French Canadian in an area of the mill where the overseer "didn't want any Frenchman working" (15). He credits his hard work ethic for changing the overseer's mind, claiming more French Canadians were hired in that part of the mill after the overseer saw how hard Lemay was working. Lemay worked his way up to being the first French-Canadian overseer at the mill (16). His sense of pride is clear in this story, and he sees his rise up the ladder to overseer as "another step ahead for the French Canadians" (17), claiming that "Americans" and "Irish" were angry that a French Canadian would get such a job, thinking "themselves the only ones entitled to the job of overseer" (17). To the "Americans" and "Irish" it was a scandal that a Frenchman should be their overseer. Lemay considers himself a trailblazer for French Canadians in the Manchester mills, going on to mention several other French Canadians who moved up the ladder after him.

During his discussion of ethnic tension in the mills, Lemay refers to French Canadians as "my nationality group", clearly distinguishing himself from the "Americans" and the "Irish". He acknowledges that he "had a good chance to get even with those who hate him" (18) (i.e., the "Americans" and "Irish" in the mill who resented his promotion) but he did not take the opportunity. He claims his supervisors did not understand his lack of desire for revenge,

implicitly contrasting his willingness to forgive and forget with what he sees as the prevailing climate of vengefulness. This is a recurring theme for Lemay. He emphasizes several times his lack of desire for vengeance, imputing the quality to French Canadians in general who he said "held themselves as they had done whenever they had been made to suffer" (38) (i.e., not fighting back when persecuted). One wonders if Lemay is simply projecting onto the entire community his own way of handling persecution; however, his claim is in keeping with Langelier's characterization of Franco-Americans as "quiet and unassuming" (477) and not prone to openly showing anger and resentment to outsiders.

Even as he expresses pride in his French-Canadian background and solidarity with those of his "nationality group", Lemay makes a point of saying how, as overseer, he treated everyone in the mill fairly, telling his own supervisor about someone who worked under him: "[h]e doesn't have to be one of my people, Mr. Super. If he's all right, I say so, and that's justice. Go ahead and try him out and find out what a fine man he his" (19). He talks about the positive reputation French Canadians had among "the bosses" (24-25). It is interesting to note Lemay's basically positive opinion of working conditions in the mills. Perhaps his attitude was more positive because, unlike many others, he was able to work his way up the ladder. He claims that "[o]ur American overseers were always fair and just to us and it is fair and just to admit it" (25), describing special projects he and other French Canadians were entrusted with (26). He expresses skepticism about the 1922 strike in the Manchester mills, saying his sympathies went out to the workers who suffered because of the strike (not because of the working conditions!) (27). Lemay's main sympathy is with management; he speaks disparagingly of "strike agitators" (5). This contrasts sharply with Mrs. L's description of the same Manchester factories, as we will see below.

Lemay's work experience contrasts with the defeatism identified by Langelier as part of Franco-American psychology. Langelier claims that Franco-Americans rarely held positions of authority at work and "set limited goals. They settled for less and had to be content because the best reward of all, paradise, could be attained if they had been faithful in the fullest sense of the word to Mother Church" (479). Children were "raised to be honest, loyal, and hardworking" (482), but not to expect much from life.

Lemay openly admits that he preferred work to education, describing how his father wanted him to go to school but Lemay would go to the mills instead (19-20). His father would punish him but Lemay would continue to skip school and work in the mills, justifying it by saying the family needed the money (20). It is interesting to read this together with the statement that Lemay's parents returned to Québec when he was sixteen. This shows how some people in Lemay's generation embraced the way of life they found in the U.S., while others (including many in the older generation) rejected it and jumped at the chance to return to Québec.

Lemay provides details about the community's leisure activities, most of which were family events. Even as people chose to become politically American, they nevertheless maintained certain French-Canadian traditions in everyday life, such as singing songs of Old Québec, square dancing and round dancing and playing games with family and friends (29-30). These activities can be seen as perpetuation strategies (De Cillia 160), attempts to keep elements of French-Canadian culture alive in the U.S.

Lemay describes the segregation in town between the Irish and the French, and the conflict over language. According to Langelier the Franco-Americans "tend[ed] to see the Irish as arrogant and brash" (479); Lemay claims "[the Irish] wanted us to speak the English among ourselves when we only knew French, and it made them mad because we didn't" (33). Even

though the most direct route from their houses to Church went through the Irish neighborhood, people would take the long way around just so they wouldn't have to endure beatings during the walk (34-35). Lemay recalls the "days of petty persecution, beatings, rock-throwing, swill-slinging and tragedy from Irish people" who "had forgotten – or didn't know – that French Canadians had taken into their homes many orphaned children of Irish immigrants to Canada and brought them up as their own" (33). Again, in a defeatist mode, Lemay claims the French didn't fight back against Irish persecution (34).

Lemay cannot brush off the history of ethnic tension easily when he talks of his friend Jean-Baptiste Blanchette, who was murdered by a group of Irish youths while speaking French on the street with some friends late one night, the Irishmen calling Blanchette and his friends "frogs" and telling them to "talk United States" (36-37). Lemay is disturbed that people could have "struck [Blanchette] down in this awful manner just because he was talking to fellow-countrymen in the language that was most natural to him, his mother tongue. I can't understand now, after almost sixty years" (40). Lemay claims no one sought revenge but "[a]s always we suffered in silence with the hope that some day our right to live peacefully in America would be recognized. We had so much confidence in God and in this adopted country of ours" (41). Here again Lemay is identifying simultaneously as French-Canadian and Franco-American, and engaging in the defeatism identified by Langelier (479).

Earlier in the story Lemay sums up his view of why "our people" left Canada for the U.S., perhaps referring to "our people" in recognition of the interviewer-writer's own French-Canadian background:

> Why did our people leave Canada and come to the States? Because they had to make sure of a living for their family and themselves for a number of years, and because they

> greatly needed money. The wages paid by textile mills was the attraction. ... Most of them hadn't come here to stay. What they wanted most was to go back to their Canadian farms with the money earned in the textile mills (3).

As for what has kept the community together, Lemay says "[t]he church, the school, the [fraternal] societies and the press are what have kept Franco-Americans alive as a group. Let them all disappear, and we go into the famous American melting pot" (21). Lemay's prediction would come true over the next two decades.

Mrs. L

Mrs. L, a grandmother in Manchester, New Hampshire, was interviewed by Victoria Langlois, a fellow Franco-American. Langlois sets the scene for the recounting of Mrs. L's story by explaining how she came to know her through Mrs. L's granddaughter. Langlois "could feel that [Mrs. L] was a person who had deeply imprinted her ways of understanding life in the minds of whose with whom she had lived" (3). This statement points to the joint construction by the subject and interviewer of the narrative to follow (Marcus and Fischer 57). Mrs. L seems to have an ethereal, perhaps spiritual, quality for Langlois: Mrs. L "talks slowly, quietly, giving you the impression that she looks in a mirror which reproduces images invisible to you..." (4). The mother has a special place in Franco-American culture (Langelier 481), and the grandmother even more so (484), and perhaps Langlois, as a fellow Franco-American, brings to the interview of Mrs. L. her own conceptions of what it means to be a Franco-American grandmother.

At the time of the interview Mrs. L. had lived in the U.S. for over fifty years, having arrived at the age of eighteen (in the 1890's), and she "remember[s] what happened then as if it was yesterday" (4). Before her family left Québec for the U.S., Mrs. L accompanied her father to the village store to buy the train tickets and take care of other business in preparation for their

departure. Mrs. L says she'll "never forget this hour" (4). The storekeeper, Mr. B., "seemed greatly distressed" when he learned of Mrs. L's father's plans to move to the U.S. to join his brother to work in the cotton mills. Mr. B chastises Mrs. L's father, saying he will

> make [his] children into slaves, spending their days behind thick, dirty walls, bound to some looms in the terrific and incessant noise. From six o'clock in the morning until six o'clock at night they will be driven by some blind power, and then, they will fall back into their beds, in some crowded rooms, in order to gather enough strength to begin over again, the next day (5).

This description of life in the mills contrasts sharply with the more positive description of Philippe Lemay. According to Mrs. L, Mr. B called the mills "something inhuman, almost infernal" (5). Mr. B goes on to say: "You and yours do not belong there, Joe. *We are a rural race* ... if the Americans want to enlarge *their* manufacturing industry, very well, but *our people* should not be ensnared by *them* (5-6, emphasis added). Mr. B's statements are examples of how linguistic strategies are used to construct nations and national identities (De Cillia 151). "The discursive construction of nations and national identities always runs hand in hand with the construction of difference/distinctiveness and uniqueness" (De Cillia 153). Mr. B sets up a clear and unbridgeable distinction between *us* and *them.*

De Cilla points out that "[t]he construction of national identity builds on the emphasis on a common history, and history has always to do with remembrance and memory" (154). Thus, Mr. B goes on to remind Mrs. L's father that his "ancestors have opened this soil, have tilled it, have lived on it and now sleep under it" (6). Mr. B does not understand why Mrs. L's father would be "willing to see his children spend their lives for the profit of these capitalists who draw hard gold from sweat and blood" (6). Mr. B laments that in the U.S. the children will be "driven

like cattle; they will be 'foreigners', they will be 'immigrants'" (7). Nevertheless, Mr. B wishes Mrs. L's father well, and encourages the young Mrs. L to "come back soon and marry an *habitant*" (7).

Mrs. L tells Langlois that "this scene has stayed in my mind as one of the most vital of all my life ... Perhaps it is from that moment that the idea germinated in me that it is of the greatest importance for a human being to adapt himself so as to be an integral part of the country where he lives his days" (7-8). Mrs. L does not explain exactly what she means by this but goes on to say that it was a mistake for her younger siblings to go to work in the factories at such a young age because they are all dead now. She recalls with fondness the summers when her parents would send the children to visit relatives in Canada because "the mills were so hot that it was almost impossible to breathe inside them" (8). While visiting her relatives in Canada Mrs. L learned to *travailler au métier* (weave on a handloom). The implication is that Mrs. L found in this activity a connection with a better way of life left behind in the store that day with Mr. B. Mrs. L's attachment to the activity can be seen as an example of a preservative or perpetuation strategy, one of the "macro-strategies" identified by De Cillia, et al., as part of the discursive construction of ethnic identity (160-161).

Mrs. L married at the age of twenty-two. Her explanation for working in the mills until that time is that "[g]irls were meek and submissive then; they did not have much to say about the arrangement of their lives... [she] was glad to start doing the real and only – so I have always believed – job for a woman, to be a wife and mother" (9). It is interesting that Mrs. L sees working in the mills as in some way deviant, as if she would have married at a much younger age had she been given the chance. This feeds into the stereotypes about gender relations in Catholic

immigrant communities, but does not acknowledge the fact that many women welcomed working in the mills as an alternative to traditional family life (Waldron 159).

Langlois asks Mrs. L if she learned to speak English during her early years in the U.S. Mrs. L explained how she learned to read English before she learned to speak it, but only after she had been married for a while. Mrs. L sees her first years of marriage as "a beautiful and serene recess after a hard day's work" (9-10). It was only after she returned from a trip to Canada where she was embarrassed that she could not speak English that she started to seriously try to learn it (10). Mrs. L describes learning English almost as a revelation: "[W]hat a great feeling it was to understand what people were saying, in the streets, in the stores, everywhere!" (10). Mrs. L was starting to engage in the "dismantling" strategy identified by De Cillia and Wodak (161).

After the birth of her first child Mrs. L "awoke to many new and unknown feelings" and "felt [her]self literally 'taking root' [in the U.S.]" (10). Mrs. L "resolved that [her] children would know primarily the language of [the U.S.] – their own" (11). Mrs. L's statement illustrates the importance of language in the construction of identity:

> These children born and brought up in an English-speaking country must speak English correctly and without any accent; they must be permitted and not reprimanded for speaking English at home, not only with their playmates; they must be given good English books to read, so that their vocabulary will be constantly enlarged, so that they can penetrate the soul and know the works of the greatest Americans, who have made this country the greatest of all the world (11).

This strong conviction about the importance of English, not to mention the professed might of America, is in opposition to the stereotypical characterization of the ideology of *la survivance*

that focuses on the preservation of the French language as the guarantor of the distinctiveness of the Franco-American community in the American melting pot. Mrs. L. implies that French must be left behind if English is to be mastered, or at the very least, that English must be emphasized strongly over French in all circumstances so that English emerges as *la langue maternelle*.

After the birth of her first child, Mrs. L "looked forward; I was always proud of my French ancestry, but I 'acclimated myself artificially.' I did not wish [the children] to live in the past; you cannot go very far nor advance very fast if you look behind you" (11). Mrs. L had internalized the notion, by no means undisputed, that speaking English is a crucial part of what it means to be "American". Mrs. L had committed herself to the "dismantling", and eventual "destruction" of her French-Canadian ethnic identity (De Cillia 153). As Stuart Hall says, "[n]ational cultures construct identities by creating meanings of 'the nation', with which we can identify; these are contained in stories that are told about the nation, in memories which link its present to its past and in the perceptions of it that are constructed" (201, cited in De Cillia 155). This is equally true of ethnic identities. Mrs. L seems to think that one identity (i.e., French or *Canadien*) must be left behind to take on another (i.e., American). French becomes simply "ancestry" while English is the present and future. There is no suggestion that both can live together in the same person, place or time. It would seem that for Mrs. L *la mère patrie*, or even *la langue maternelle,* cannot survive in the heart of her children if they are to be truly "American". As Richard describes, this attitude was by no means universal in the Franco-American community, but it was prevalent enough to contribute to a strong preference for assimilation over acculturation as the years wore on (214-215).

At the end of the story Langlois asks Mrs. L if her father regretted leaving Canada for the U.S. Mrs. L responds that she does not know but that "the feeling of loneliness, of being a

stranger, of being nothing but an obscure cog in a gigantic machine, must have put a bitter taste in his mouth" (11). This statement comes shortly after her statements about the importance of her children feeling fully American, and the implication is that she does not want her children to feel the loneliness and sense of separateness that she believes her father experienced. Mrs. L adds that her father never sought American citizenship. In the Franco-American community naturalization as an American citizen was seen as commitment to the U.S., confirmation that one was here to stay (Richard 38, 78-80). For some, especially the older generations, the emotional attachment to Québec was too strong to take that step. Mrs. L says that her mother "lived her life watching for the postman" for letters from relatives in Canada, implying that her mother never felt at home in the U.S. either.

Langlois ends the story on an ethereal, spiritual note similar to how it began, with Mrs. L, speaking of her emigration to and life in the U.S., averring that

> there must be a meaning to it; there is a meaning to every thing that happens in life; only we don't always understand it ... Now, I know I have been talking too much ... You see, old folks have a way of thinking aloud; you come to see me and I give you a page of my history ... We who are almost out of the picture are sometimes pleased to realize that we are still in the background ... (12-13).

Once again one cannot be certain what Mrs. L means by her statement, but it seems to illustrate once more the tension between old and new identities. By being "almost out of the picture" but "still in the background", Mrs. L acknowledges her transitional place in the evolution of Franco-American identity. While in her mind her children are clearly "American", Mrs. L's French-Canadian ancestry will always remain in the "background" of her children's lives through Mrs. L's powerful influence on them identified by the interviewer at the beginning of the story.

David Morin

David Morin was interviewed by Robert F. Grady, the Irish-American individual who conducted all the WPA interviews of Old Town, Maine's Franco-Americans (Doty 51). David Morin was born in Québec in 1870 and immigrated to Old Town, Maine, in 1882, with his parents and siblings, twenty-five people in all (1). Morin started out working in a box mill and later became the manager of a billiard hall before retiring for health reasons. At the time of the interview Morin was married with six children of his own. According to Grady his "[c]hief interest seems to be in his home and children" (1).

Morin mentions that "[t]here were no immigration laws when we came here. They haven't had those very long, you know" (3). Morin remembers the agents sent up to Quebec by the factory owners to solicit workers. Morin doesn't speculate on what changed between his arrival (1882) and the time of writing (1939) to precipitate the immigration laws. The history of nativist anti-immigrant sentiment and the hardships of the Great Depression linger silently behind his statements. According to Morin the mill owner used him as an interpreter because all the workers spoke French (3). The language barrier apparently allowed for some quiet subversion because Morin describes a situation where a young girl ruined a yard of cloth and the boss asked Morin to "give her hell" in French and tell her it came from the boss (3-4). Morin says he talked to the girl for a while but didn't "give her hell" and the boss was none the wiser. Instead, "when that son of a b---- [the boss] got out of the way [Morin] helped her fix her machine" (4).

Morin explains how in the early days the migrants did not intend to stay in the U.S. They would go back and forth. According to Morin "[w]hen they come over here now [1939] they stay" (4). For himself, Morin says he has returned to Canada only once since he has been in the

U.S., and that was twenty-five years ago "on a vacation trip" (5). Morin seems to have committed himself to the U.S. shortly after his arrival, pragmatically making the best of his circumstances and adopting English as soon as he was able. The "Americanization" campaign that emphasized the importance of English took root in him (Ricento 614).

The following anecdote illustrates how Morin sees language as the most important difference between the U.S. and Québec:

> The French are proud of their language. They speak only the purest French in Québec. I went to school up there only a few years, but I went to night school in Salem [Massachusetts]. After they go to school up there a few years they study English. The people can read it pretty well, but they have a hard time to understand it in a conversation. French is all you hear up there. If a Frenchman comes down here and starts a business he has to learn to speak English, and if any one goes in business up there he has to learn French. It doesn't make any difference if he's an Irishman or a Swede. There are plenty of French in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia and they're more apt to be able to speak English over that way (6).

Morin relates these thoughts as if he is reporting the news. Behind them are a jumble of assumptions, e.g., the French of Québec is special, you should learn the predominant language of the area in which you settle, people in the U.S. are more educated (or at least, go to school longer) than people in Québec.

As for the decision to take out citizenship, Morin is entirely pragmatic, although influenced by the nativistic climate of the time: "I took out naturalization papers twenty years ago. I hear they're rounding up the French Canadians that haven't, and they're sending them back

to Canada. Serves them right if they don't want to be citizens" (6). Morin is an example of the acculturation that Richard (214-215) sees as a more practical way to encourage *la survivance*:

> I was afraid the kids wouldn't be able to speak French when they grew up. I says to my wife, 'I'll make a trade with you: we'll speak only French in the house until the kids got big. Then they'll be able to speak it. They'll hear enough English outside.' And that was all we ever did until the kids got out of school. When my boy Rudolph went down to the University of Maine he could speak English as well as any one but he could speak French just as well (6).

This is an interesting contrast to the attitude of Mrs. L, who decided it was better that her children simply leave French behind. Morin did not see the need to leave his French-Canadian ethnic identity behind in bringing up his children as "American"; instead, he changed what it meant to speak French. This is an example of the transformative strategy identified by De Cillia and Wodak, an "attempt to transform the meaning of a well-established aspect of national identity into another" (161). Morin sums up his overall attitude rather philosophically:

> My children were born here and brought up here. What would you call them? Are they French, or Americans, or Yankees? What is a Yankee, anyway? The Indians are the only real Yankees, if you come right down to it. Who else has a right to be called a Yankee? I heard a speaker down here a while ago talking on that very subject. He said that the French in Maine are just as much Yankees as any one. Why not? Look back through the histories and you'll see that the French were here just as soon as the English. The only Americans here then were the Indians. Have the descendants of the English any more right to be called Yankees than the descendants of the French? (7)

Although Morin does not phrase it these terms, what he is really talking about is the discursive construction of identity. He is asking, in different words, these questions: How do we define ourselves? How do others define us? Behind those questions are still others: Why do we choose to define ourselves as we do? Why do the definitions of those in power control in those areas of life where the individual is left with little to no agency? Why do these definitions change over time? Underlying all these questions is the use of language to construct, perpetuate, justify, transform, dismantle and/or destroy personal and collective/ethnic/national identity (De Cillia 160).

Roby has argued that World War Two was a pivotal event that irreversibly accelerated the assimilation of Franco-Americans through military service, intermarriage and geographic mobility (372-377, 384-389). Acculturation was losing ground to assimilation prior to the war and the war helped assimilation win out. The stories discussed above provide a look into the lives of three Franco-Americans just before the tide of assimilation became irreversible, having been compiled in 1939-1940. Roby reports that after World War Two low rates of immigration combined with suburbanization of the population (i.e., break-up of the urban ethnic enclaves were Franco-Americans traditionally lived) made it much harder to maintain viable French-language newspapers, schools and churches (353-475), the institutions that had made acculturation a viable alternative to total assimilation. Philippe Lemay's prediction would come to pass.

According to de Benoist "the way one looks at history can never be neutral, because it provides the symbolic representations of one's identity, which defines individuals as social subjects and as free actors. Identity is a story in itself: it is the story of the specific

transformations of one's identity" (48). The stories of Mrs. L, Philippe Lemay and David Morin are snapshots of the transformation of Franco-American identity in 1939-1940. Philippe Lemay sees a proud march from the rural hardship of impoverished French-Canadian migrants to a measure of urban success as Franco-Americans, colored through the lens of his own achievements (although he did foresee the likelihood of total assimilation). Mrs. L experienced a martyr-like melancholic abandonment of her French-Canadian ancestry in an effort to position her children to take full advantage of what she saw as the many possibilities for them as unhyphenated "Americans". David Morin saw, largely without judgment, a fluid, changeable landscape in which one should not become too attached to the labels created and/or imposed by others; he did not invest his own Franco-American identity with emotional meaning beyond the material present, although his attachment to the French language is clear in how he raised his children.

What all three have in common is this: They illustrate that by the time Québec was ushering in the Quiet Revolution in 1960 to assert its French identity, the Franco-American communities of the northeastern U.S. had essentially lost theirs (Richard 225):

> By the late twentieth century, Franco-Americans had evolved into an amorphous population, one without a clear cultural identity. Language, faith and traditions no longer united French-Canadian descendants as an ethnic group ... For the most part, younger generations increasingly distanced themselves from their ethnic roots (Richard 244).

For Richard, "[c]ontemporary Franco-American identity no longer depends upon the ability to speak French, the practice of Roman Catholicism, or the celebration of French-Canadian traditions, as it had in the past" (247). This begs the question: Upon what <u>does</u> it depend? Franco-American identity "has evolved from an ascribed to a voluntary identification, from

'being' to 'feeling' Franco-American ... [T]oday, cultural identity represents a personal strategy, rather than a group effort as it had in the past" (248). Franco-American identity has become a "symbolic ethnicity" (Gans 1979, 1996).

When French Canadians left Québec for the United States at the turn of the 20th century they did not intend to change who they were; they wanted to make a better life for themselves and their children, the classic desire of all migrants. Often difference does not become apparent until people are thrust into new circumstances. French Canadians, certainly in Canada and at least at first in the United States, came to define themselves as distinct from the English-speakers around them. Even at the age of 83, after a life lived mostly in the U.S., Philippe Lemay is still sensitive to language issues: He says proudly "[a]s you see, we are able to speak English without a trace of accent, and that is natural. I have been in this country so long and the children were all born here" (13). The need to point this out shows the overriding importance of language to identity (i.e., to who we define ourselves to be).

As American as Lemay feels and is (and what is it to be American, anyway, David Morin would ask?), there will always be part of Lemay who is a native French-speaker from Québec, with everything that entails in his particular case because of his unique experiences and insights. He inherited traditions and chose to carry on some of them and leave some of them behind, and he can see the world through two languages, one given and one chosen. That is a unique place in the world. All three stories show how identity is not static – it has no essence and it is changeable. What it means to be "American" or "French Canadian" or "Franco-American" will differ from person to person. Any label (whether assumed or imposed) involves definitions of self and others, definitions based on both shared and contested experiences and shared and contested understandings of the world, ever evolving. Mrs. L tried to remove some of the

complications for her children by leaving much of her French identity behind in raising them, an attempt to actively construct what she thought was a "better" identity for them.

Marcus and Fischer state that

> [F]or many Americans [who are descendants of early twentieth century immigrants], ... assimilation [is] no longer [a] burning issue[] ... What seems to be far more compelling an issue are the deep emotional ties to ethnic origins, which are obscurely rooted and motivated, and which are transmitted through processes analogous to dreaming and transference rather than through group affiliation and influence... (155).

The descendants of French-Canadian immigrants to the U.S. are no longer concerned with how to fit in, or how to distinguish themselves from the host society. Rather, throughout most of the northeastern U.S. they are essentially invisible. Yet emotional ties certainly still exist, "obscurely rooted and motivated" as Marcus and Fischer say. The attachment to ethnic origins can be seen in the strong interest in genealogy among many assimilated Franco-Americans. Others, like this researcher, want to put their present in perspective by investigating what contributed to their past.

The researcher is never detached from the subject of her or his research. According to Wall, "[i]f a researcher's voice is omitted from a text, the writing is reduced to a mere summary and interpretation of the works of others, with nothing new added" (148, citing Clandinin). Etherington identifies autoethnography as a way for the researcher's voice to enter the text, defining autoethnography as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that has been described as a 'blend of ethnography and autobiographical writing that incorporates elements of one's own life experience when writing about others'; a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context" (139-140, citations omitted). Autoethnography is both method and text.

Autoethnographic writing is also a way for the writer to make sense of how their cultural experience made them who they are; it can be a discourse analysis of the self. Insofar as "we come into being within cultural performance, within the (re)productive, collaborative enactment of our lives" (Berry 604), autoethnographic writing creates who we are now as much as it relates who we think we were in the past. This is as true for the researcher as it is for the research subject. If the researcher brings their own experience into the analysis of the experience of their research subject(s), the layers of reflexivity can become endless. The discursive acts of the researcher and the research subject(s) during the research process come together in a text that itself is a discursive act that will enter into future discursive processes as it is included in the discussions of others.

To that end, I did not undertake this project on the descendants of French Canadians in the U.S. disinterestedly. I undertook it as a curious, searching, middle-aged, invisible, self-identified, assimilated Franco-American in the early twenty-first century. Members of my family do not use the term "Franco-American" to refer to themselves. There was no explicit continuous reminder that some of our traditions had their origins in the traditions of French Canada. But my maternal grandfather did convey quiet pride in his French-Canadian background. Interestingly, it was almost as if the Irish-American heritage of my father's side was to be ignored. This was not difficult to do given that I was raised in the household of my Franco-American maternal grandparents, and the ignorance of the Irish-American elements was strengthened by the circumstances under which I came to live with them (a subject for another project). As if to further stress the French-Canadian part of my background, I always had to explain to the teachers and administrators at school why the last name of my "parents" was *St. Hilaire* while my last name was Shannon. No one ever understood the name *St. Hilaire*, no one

knew how to spell it, and it constantly had to be explained. People would ask, "What kind of name is that?" I had been taught to respond, "French-Canadian", but the response itself often led to further questions because many people did not know that there was such a thing as French Canada, and this in a town where many had French-Canadian surnames.

My grandparents raised their children to be hard working and practical, and they did the same for their grandchildren, who over the years would look to them for support and guidance more than they would look to their parents. The importance of education was acknowledged, and educational attainment was encouraged, but we were cautioned not to overstate its ultimate importance. As my grandmother used to say, "if you take a fool and send him to school then what you get is an educated fool". The point was that education in itself was not going to make you a better person. One still needed "common sense" (a term never defined: one was to know it when one saw, felt, experienced it; I have come to think of it more as "intuitive wisdom") and perspective. The point was that the most important things in life cannot be taught in school or university. The authority of my grandparents' quiet stability reinforced this for me. My grandmother left school in the ninth grade to go to work and my grandfather left school in the eleventh grade to help support his family, yet they were two of the most intelligent people I ever met, albeit somewhat naive about how cruel the world sometimes can be. The modest duplex house they lived in for the last thirty-six years of their lives, starting over after a difficult period with the help of my grandmother's sister, was a place to which the children of my generation could always return; the door was always open, someone was always home, and the welcome was always warm, no matter what difficulties may have led us there on some occasions. They always made clear that their first responsibility was to us, and that all they asked in return was just a small portion of the quiet and unconditional love and respect they had always tried to give

us. While they were alive it never occurred to me that these attitudes and behavior had roots in the attitudes and behavior of the migrants who travelled south from Québec in the late 1800s to a small mill town at the confluence of the Hudson and Mohawk Rivers, looking for a better life.

Yet something grabbed me when I started to study the French language at the age of fourteen. I was immediately hooked; I did not think about why that might have been. Perhaps it was the "obscurely rooted and motivated" emotional ties identified by Marcus and Fischer (155). I jumped ahead in the curriculum and spent free time in self-guided study. So much of it seemed to come naturally. However, I became discouraged and frustrated when jumping ahead became difficult and I often fell back on going with the flow of the regular curriculum. At the time I did not connect my interest in and facility for French with my French-Canadian background. I could see that my grandfather was clearly pleased that I was doing well in school, but I did not detect anything different about his attitude toward how I did in French. However, when I asked him if he could remember any of the French he used as a child the response was always something like, "We didn't speak real French" or "The French you are learning is different". Langelier claims that because educated Americans admired only Parisian French the French spoken by Franco-Americans was disdained, becoming a badge of inferiority (479). At the end of the day my grandparents' philosophy was probably closest to Mrs. L's – leave behind what might set you apart so that your children have a better chance to fit in and move up.

People do not intend to change their identity (i.e., who they "are") when they uproot themselves and migrate, no matter how close or how far, to make a better life for themselves and their children. But people do not always take into consideration that who people "are" (who I am/who you are/who (s)he is/who we are/who they are) is at least partially a construction, built around *where* we are (and where we are going), *who* we are with, *what* we do, and *how* we

choose to perceive our experience of places, people and events. It is inevitable that who anyone "is" will change over time.

The journey of the Franco-Americans of the northeastern United States – and the stories of Philippe Lemay, Mrs. L and David Morin – are examples of this discursive construction of identity. Each individual experienced the transition to the U.S. differently, and each left her or his own legacy as a result. In recounting their different lives to the interviewers of the U.S. Federal Writers' Project these individuals left behind traces of a common Franco-American past for those who, like this researcher, might wish to have that past inform their present and future. The early twentieth century Franco-American stories can speak to the invisible, assimilated, Franco-American of today as (s)he recalls (reconstructs?) her or his own past, interacting with the stories in the creation of a post-modern Franco-American identity for the twenty-first century, pondering elusive questions of identity, existence and meaning.

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