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ERIC E. PETERSON

DIVERSITY AND FRANCO-AMERICAN IDENTITY  
POLITICS

*As Barry Rodrigue suggests, there are many definitions of Franco-American identity. In this article Eric Peterson explores these multiple meanings which, as he points out, are rooted in the ways different groups interact. If cultural differences are to serve our society as a source of flexibility and creativity, we must learn to appreciate diversity in our daily interactions.*

The renewed controversy over immigration in recent years challenges the value of “diversity” and “ethnic identity” in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Scholarship on these issues has vacillated over the decades. Traditionally, Americans believed that assimilation into the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture and the eradication of ethnic difference was an ideal goal. More recently, scholars like Gregory Bateson have argued that diversity and difference among social groups is not only inevitable but desirable. Bateson believes that a healthy ecology of human civilization requires “diversity in the civilization, not only to accommodate the genetic and experiential diversity of persons, but also to provide the flexibility and ‘preadaptation’ necessary for unpredictable change.”<sup>2</sup> However, this view of ethnic identity is not based on a definition of difference as the possession of specific ethnic, racial, or national attributes. This article focuses on issues of identity based on relationships between groups. As Kobena Mercer states, “identities are not found but *made*;...they are not just there, waiting to be discovered in the vocabulary of Nature, but...culturally and politically *constructed* through political antagonism and cultural struggle.”<sup>3</sup>

**T**raditionally, scholars assumed that assimilation was a desirable goal. The concept, however, did not mean the same thing to everyone. Iris Marion Young identifies a “conformist ideal” and a “transformational ideal” of assimilation.<sup>1</sup> A recent column by George Will on immigration illustrates these two views. The conformist view denies the reality of social groups. Will identifies an “anti-assimilationist impulse” as coming “primarily from those native-born intellectuals who believe America is a sick, racist, sexist, exploitative, oppressive, patriarchal, etc. society into which no self-respecting person would wish to assimilate.” It is important to note that by “native-born” Will does not mean American Indian. He uses the term to refer to the descendants of European immigrants, in contrast with current immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and Asia. In other words, Will conveniently ignores the “anti-assimilationist impulse” of European colonists who did not attempt to assimilate into existing American Indian cultures between 1607 and 1890. Indeed, they attempted to destroy them. Will assumes “America” to be an intact, already existing culture. As he states, “Debate should begin with this premise: America...is a culture”

The conformist view sees social group identity and advocacy simply as a means to gain special privileges that would be otherwise unobtainable. Affirmative action programs are criticized for promoting “quotas” and “reverse discrimination” as privileges for specific social groups – what in Will’s argument is called an “entitlement mentality.” The conformist view does not deny that individuals possess a particular ethnic ancestry. Rather, it sees such ethnic ancestry as past, and not present, as part of each person’s background and not their daily life. Hence no one particular ethnic group “exists” in the sense that it defines identity in everyday life.

In Maine, where approximately 35 percent of the population claims French, French-Canadian, or Franco-American ancestry, the conformist view pervades the dominant culture of mass media, schools, and business. With the exception of a few communities and sections of the state, a visitor to Maine would

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be hard pressed to learn of even the existence of Franco-Americans. As Denis Ledoux points out, when one drives down a Maine highway there are plenty of signs proclaiming “Yankee Grocer,” “Yankee Carwash,” or “Yankee Housebuilder”; “Obviously being Yankee is something to...announce publicly.” Similar signs proclaiming Franco-American identity are non-existent.<sup>5</sup> Major state newspapers or television broadcasts rarely draw attention to Franco-American heritage or culture. When Franco-American identity is noticed, it is in such stories as the yearly Acadian Festival: coverage which reduces the festival to the status of other “similar” events such as lobster, egg, blueberry, or potato festivals. Another group of stories on Franco-American identity occurs in isolated reports on the discrimination and harassment of Francos, which plays into the conformist view that social group identity is merely a means for gaining unfair advantage through legal manipulation.

The transformational view, on the other hand, accepts the existence of social groups but denies their desirability. Those who accept the transformational view acknowledge particular ethnic heritages, but see their continuation as undesirable. This perspective is epitomized in the view of the United States as the “melting pot,” wherein ethnic group identity is to be dissolved into a homogeneous “national” identity.

For Franco-Americans in Maine, the transformational view is not merely an external force; pressure for assimilation also comes from within the Franco community. In describing these pressures, D. Poulin writes that:

Most French-Canadian-Americans of my generation spent the better part of our adolescence and early adulthood working hard at negating and trying to erase all traces of our French-Canadian heritage. First the accent, then the language, then the faith, the customs and the “manners.” We were “White Niggers,” hell bent on becoming categorically assimilated.<sup>6</sup>

The attempt to erase ethnic differences is not accidental, but forms an important part of the assimilation ideal.

The ideal of assimilation devalues difference in a two-step operation. First, the ethnic identity of privileged groups is assumed to be “American” and therefore neutral and universal. Second, non-privileged groups are seen as “modified Americans” and are identified by such labels as Franco-American, Native-American, or African-American. Their assimilation involves the negation and stripping away of anything which marks their uniqueness. The uniqueness of privileged groups, by contrast, remains “unmarked” and unaltered.

The devaluing of difference exploits ethnic groups as a means to establish dominant-group identity. Ethnic groups function as a resource by which an “us” can be defined and a stable identity maintained. However, such thinking threatens society, Bateson argues, because it pits the survival of privileges for specific groups against a cultural environment of multiple groups. And any civilization that destroys its cultural environment, in order to maintain a particular system of privileges, threatens its own existence. Thus, the opposition of privileged identity and multicultural environment is a false opposition in that the destruction of a multicultural environment entails the destruction of the privileged system which it supports. As Bateson remarks, “*the creature that wins against its environment destroys itself.*”<sup>7</sup>

**T**he challenge of developing a critical perspective on multiculturalism requires rethinking the meaning of difference and identity.<sup>8</sup> A recent incident involving a radio broadcast illustrates the importance of not merely celebrating “essences” or excluded groups in society. In 1992-1993, the Holocaust Human Rights Center, the Association Canado-Amricain, and other groups protested a radio comedy routine broadcast by WBLM of Portland. The broadcasts featured a Franco-American character called “Frenchie,” who spoke with a pronounced accent and told jokes or stories. The Holocaust Human Rights Center claimed that the broadcasts were examples of bigotry and prejudice. They singled out one skit, in which “Frenchie” had difficulty in counting record albums, as particularly offensive. The radio station management

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claimed that the “Frenchie” character was not derogatory because the person who played him was a Franco-American. They authenticated Frenchie because he possessed a specific ancestry, which in turn constituted his identity. One could argue that “non-authentic” groups – such as the Holocaust Human Rights Center – had no basis for questioning the radio station. How could a non-Franco-American know better than a Franco-American what is derogatory?

Rather than define difference according to static categories such as ancestry, Young suggests a relational understanding of difference based on interactions among groups and institutions. She emphasizes group affinities rather than a listing of specific characteristics or a common ancestry.

Membership in a social group is a function not of satisfying some objective criteria, but of a subjective affirmation of affinity with that group, the affirmation of that affinity by other members of the group, and the attribution of membership in that group by persons identifying with other groups.<sup>9</sup>

The affinities which differentiate Franco-Americans in Maine illustrate such a relational understanding. Let us briefly explore six of the multiple and heterogeneous borders which mark out Franco-American identity: language, class, gender, age, religion, and schooling.

While language initially may appear to be an easy difference to use in identifying Franco-Americans, such a singular emphasis repeats the errors of categorization. After all, not all Francophones are Franco-American, and not all Franco-Americans are Francophones. A recent incident at Bates College illustrates how language cannot be separated from other forms of affinity. Bates College President Donald W. Harward issued an order to suspend the practice of asking employees not to speak French if a non French-speaking employee was nearby. Harward commented that “evidently, isolated practices, developed over a

decade ago, were initiated in several service departments for the positive intention of being courteous.”<sup>10</sup> Typically, speaking French, in and of itself, is not seen as a problem in colleges – especially when most schools go to great lengths to encourage student enrollments in language courses. In this case, however, it was not the use of French by students or faculty that was at issue, but the language used by service employees. Until Harvard’s intervention, class clearly distinguished the group whose language required control.

While shared language is often assumed as the difference which marks inclusion and exclusion in a group, other differences may supersede language in articulating affinities. For example, when a Franco-American woman applied for membership in Le Club Calumet of Augusta – a club whose stated goals are the promotion of French culture and language – her application was rejected on the basis of gender.<sup>11</sup> The effort by Le Club Calumet to exclude women is part of a larger historical struggle of social clubs to control privilege through membership. Such rules reject women, as well as members of “other” social groups. They assume that one group, in this case men, set the criteria for group membership, and this group can “promote” French culture and language. Ironically, as Labbé points out, the Club ignores arguments within the Franco community that “women have been and are the principal transmitters of the culture and language.”<sup>12</sup> What this example illustrates is the failure of categorical criteria (as in men of French ancestry) as a way to define difference.

For some Franco-Americans, Anglo culture is a substitute for a culture which they think is too conservative. “Teenage rebellion” provides Franco youth a way to emphasize other affinities, such as age, and displace those of their parents and community. Another example of how “rebellion” can be articulated in different ways can be seen in the use of “Frog” by the University of Maine Franco-American Center. The Center initially used “Frog” in its telephone number as a strategy to reclaim the power of naming.<sup>13</sup> This strategy, which recalls other renaming efforts such as “black is beautiful” and “gay pride,” is

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effective because it operates in a specific college-aged community, in a specific historical context. When separated from this context, the term “Frog” is viewed as an ethnic slur, rather than a renaming. For example, “Frenchie” challenged critics from the University for being hypocritical: they criticized his perpetuating “dumb Frenchman” stereotypes when they themselves used the word “Frog.” The danger of rebellion is that it may reinforce reactionary rather than revisionary efforts.

One of the institutional affinities which structures Franco American communities is the Roman Catholic church. As a physical entity in Franco American communities, the church is often the largest building and tends to dominate the landscape, as well as the culture. J. Dufresne refers to this cultural, as well as religious domination in his comment that

We French kids were not eager to succumb to the American Protestant ideals of prosperity, ambition and acquisitiveness. Those were the days of Franco-Catholicism when we believed that poverty was a badge of holiness, a condition to be embraced and not one to be ashamed of.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, not all Franco-Americans are Catholic; nor do all Catholic Franco-Americans interpret the structuring features of Roman Catholicism favorably. In fact, priests may have acted as agents of assimilation during periods of immigration. For example, parish priests facilitated name changes (“Levesque” to “Bishop,” or “Boisvert” to “Greenwood”) so that Franco men would have an easier time finding employment in the mills of Maine. Some Franco-American women chose not to affiliate with the Roman Catholic church because of its sexism and male domination.

As with the church, schools and schooling occupy an ambiguous place in Franco-American culture. M.A. Perry points out that many early schools were associated with parishes because public schools refused to teach French. While separate schooling has the advantage of maintaining an emphasis on the French language, parochial schools also may emphasize Catholic



teachings more than Franco-American culture. Perry also points out that educational separatism may reinforce attitudes of ethnic superiority in the struggle to maintain cultural survival.<sup>15</sup> But not all Catholic schools fostered Franco-American culture. Levesque describes a grade school in the St. John Valley that prohibited the use of French in fifth and sixth grade classes.<sup>16</sup>

The focus on language, class, gender, age, religion, and schooling should not obscure the importance of other parts of Franco-American cultural life – such as work, music, dance, and food. But as discussion of these examples illustrates, there are no common or unitary meanings for language, class, gender, age, religion, and schooling that might define a Franco-American difference. The differences which mark Franco-American identity are not based in an “essence” or a common “experience.” Rather, “Franco-American” names a terrain of contested affinities and commitments which shape participation of members within the social group and in contrast to other social groups.

**A** relational definition of difference challenges assumptions about the ideal of assimilation and the meaning of identity. However, relational affinities must be defined carefully to guard against romanticizing idealized and undifferentiated “folk” communities. This romanticism can be found in metaphors used to describe social identity: “Building bridges,” “tearing down walls,” “or being blind to difference” suggest that difference is an obstacle, something to be abolished. As a model for community, this romantic ideal perpetuates a “metaphysics of presence” in attempting to deny the lived differences among persons.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, a relational definition uses difference to understand how groups define themselves in taking social and political action.

Does one have to be Franco-American in order to advance the interests of Franco-Americans? Does every interest advanced by a Franco-American constitute an expression of an “authentic” Franco-American concern? L. Grossberg argues that such “identity politics” tends to perpetuate the assumption that “people act based on a calculation of their interests, which are rooted in their experiences, which are determined by their identity, which is an

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expression or representation of their place within a system of social differences.”<sup>18</sup> Just because one belongs to a Franco-American community does not mean that one’s commitments will necessarily advance the interests of Franco-Americans. On the other hand, experience (such as the Franco-American experience of Anglo-centrism, or women’s experience of male domination) should not be discarded because there is no simple or direct connection with ethnic identity.

Grossberg questions whether such identity politics can effectively oppose conservative views about immigration and assimilation. Direct experiences which support identity politics do not necessarily lead to political action. As the earlier discussion of the Acadian Festival indicates, a celebration of culture does not necessarily lead to a larger political struggle with the dominant culture. In a similar way, Labbé’s response to the “Frenchie” incident suggests the importance of going beyond cultural action to “engage in and model a public dialogue which goes beyond the personal and intimate, beyond the family.” Such political action is essential, Labbé points out, “if we are to avoid being tourists within our own culture. We must deal with the historical hand we have been dealt. Or we are in serious danger of making up a cultural identity or having it perpetuated for us.”<sup>19</sup>

This concern with political action recalls Bateson’s focus on changing the ways we think about diversity in human civilization. Bateson thought the ecological crisis would stimulate changes in our ways of thinking about diversity and would profoundly alter government, economic structure, and educational philosophy. “We hope that the period of change may be characterized by wisdom, rather than by either violence or the fear of violence.”<sup>20</sup> If diversity is to serve as a source of social flexibility rather than an excuse for violence, we must change our habits of thought about ethnic identity and work to include diversity at both local and global levels. If Franco-American identity is to mean more than a celebration of customs and ancestry – or an excuse for bigotry – we must work to make diversity a productive part of everyday life and our social and political institutions.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Newsweek*, August 9, 1993.

<sup>2</sup>G. Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (New York: Ballantine, 1972), p. 495.

<sup>3</sup>K. Mercer, "Periodizing Postmodern Politics and Identity," in *Cultural Studies*, edited by L. Grossberg, C. Nelson, and P. Treichler (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 427.

<sup>4</sup>I.M. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 165-66; G. Will, "Immigration Argument Complex," *Bangor Daily News*, July 29, 1993.

<sup>5</sup>D. Ledoux, "Franco Jokes Are No Laughing Matter," *Maine Progressive* 7 (April 1993), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup>A. Poulin, "About the Authors," in *Lives in Translation: An Anthology of Contemporary Franco-American Writings*, edited by D. Ledoux (Lisbon Falls, Maine: Soleil Press, 1991), p. 141.

<sup>7</sup>Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, p. 493.

<sup>8</sup>B. Hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), p. 9; Mercer, "Periodizing Postmodern Politics and Identity."

<sup>9</sup>Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 172.

<sup>10</sup>"Bates Ends Rule Against Workers Speaking French," *Le F.A.R.O.G. Forum* 19 (October-December, 1991), p. 8.

<sup>11</sup>N.A. Ellis, letter, July/August, 1991, p. 5.

<sup>12</sup>Y.A. Labbé, "Perspectives," *Le F.A.R.O.G. Forum* 19 (January-March 1992), p. 28.

<sup>13</sup>E.E. Peterson, "Dial 581-FROG: The Struggle Over Self-Naming by Franco-Americans in Maine," in *Culture and Communication*, edited by E. Slembek (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag für Interculturelle Kommunikation, 1991), pp. 185-193.

<sup>14</sup>J. Dufresne, "About the Authors," in Ledoux, ed., *Lives in Translation*, p. 136.

<sup>15</sup>M.A. Pery, "Schooled in the Culture: Parochial Education and French-Canadian Identity," *Le F.A.R.O.G. Forum* 19 (April-May 1992), pp. 19-20.

<sup>16</sup>D. Levesque, "Bewyse, Bewyse!" *Le F.A.R.O.G. Forum* 19 (April-May 1992), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup>Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 231.

<sup>18</sup>L. Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 376.

<sup>19</sup>Y.A. Labbé, "Yvongélisations," *Le F.A.R.O.G. Forum* 20 (January-February 1993), p. 3.

<sup>20</sup>Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, p. 493.