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“A Man Without a Country”: Experiences of Francophone Migration during the Quiet Revolution

Abstract

There are numerous studies on shifting Francophone-Anglophone relations during the Quiet Revolution, and migration studies tend to focus on Anglophones who sought opportunity outside Québec (Pettinicchio 2012). However, less attention has been paid to the experiences of Francophones who migrated to English Canada during this period. Undeniably, these people had their own unique political, economic and social motivations for leaving Québec at this time. Their adopted communities brought experiences of cultural assimilation and language loss, which have been previously explored in relation to First Peoples in Canada and the indigenous groups of other countries (e.g. Hallett et al. 2007; Wanhalla 2007).

Using the oral history of a Francophone whose family migrated from Québec to British Columbia during the 1960s, I reveal the roles of motivation, alienation, assimilation and language in his migration experience. I argue that (1) the motivations of these Francophone migrants were complex, involving not only politico-economic reasons but also social and personal ones, (2) their subsequent experiences of alienation and assimilation were intimately connected to language and were sometimes self-enforced to prevent low-level persecution, (3) this partial assimilation resulted in a lack of belonging in both their original and adopted communities. My informant’s narrative cannot speak for all interprovincial Francophone migrants, but it does provide insight into the intimate nuances and complexities of the situation that are often overlooked in generalized statistical approaches.

Keywords

migration, alienation, assimilation, language, Francophone, Anglophone

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"A Man Without a Country": Experiences of Francophone Migration during the Quiet Revolution

Jessie K. Tougas

There are numerous studies on shifting Francophone-Anglophone relations during the Quiet Revolution, and of these migration studies tend to focus on Anglophones who sought opportunity outside Québec (Pettinicchio 2012). However, less attention has been paid to the experiences of Francophones who migrated to English Canada during this period. Undeniably, these people had their own unique political, economic and social motivations for leaving Québec at this time. Adopting new communities brought experiences of cultural assimilation and language loss, which have been previously explored in relation to First Peoples in Canada and the indigenous groups of other countries (e.g. Hallett, Chandler, and Lalonde 2007; Wanhalla 2007).

Using the oral history of a Francophone whose family migrated from Québec to British Columbia during the 1960s, I reveal the roles of motivation, alienation, assimilation and language in his migration experience. I argue that (1) the motivations of these Francophone migrants were complex, involving not only politico-economic reasons but also social and personal ones, (2) their subsequent experiences of alienation and assimilation were intimately connected to language and were sometimes self-enforced to prevent low-level persecution, (3) this partial assimilation resulted in a lack of belonging in both their original and adopted communities. My informant's narrative cannot speak for all interprovincial Francophone migrants, but it does provide insight into the intimate nuances and complexities of the situation that are often overlooked in generalized statistical approaches.

The Quiet Revolution was a period of intense societal change in 1960s Québec during which the Anglophone elite were supplanted by the Francophone majority (Durocher and Robert 1991:308). Despite being a cultural minority, the Anglophone population had controlled most of the province's economy and political sector since the eighteenth century, while "a large proportion of French Canadians were limited to the lowest-paying jobs by a low level of education and occupational training...[and] were subtly discriminated against at all levels of the economy" (Durocher and Robert 1991:147; Pettinicchio 2012:735). This led to a division of labour along cultural-linguistic lines and created an "internal colony", in which the core Anglophone minority exploited the peripheral Francophone majority (Hechter 1977:32, McRoberts 1979; Pettinicchio 2012:722).

The Quiet Revolution supplanted this system with policies that favoured Francophone citizens over Anglophones, resulting in a mass "exodus" of Anglophones to other parts of the country (Durocher and Robert 1991:598). However, some Francophones also left Québec during this time, and their experiences have been neglected in recent scholarship. Research in migration studies tends to highlight Anglophone migration, while research on cultural assimilation and language loss in Canada largely features First Peoples and international immigrants, but remains virtually silent regarding these Francophone migrants (e.g. Hallett, Chandler, and Lalonde 2007; Pettinicchio 2012).

My research is concerned with a diverse group of people who are nonetheless forced into a single pseudo-ethnic category based primarily on their mother tongue, supporting the idea that "ethnicity is politically constructed" (Pettinicchio 2012:735). For this reason, I chose to collect an oral history

that provides a more nuanced and complex vision of Francophone migration. My informant, François (surname withheld), was a young child when his family of six left Québec for British Columbia in 1967. His recollections shed light on the motivations behind their decision to move, as well as the link between assimilation and language in their subsequent experiences as Francophone migrants in British Columbia.

Motivation

While Pettinicchio's (2012) analysis of census data primarily deals with Anglophones migrating out of Québec and Francophones remaining in Québec during the Quiet Revolution, he did draw some conclusions about Francophones who left the province as well. Scholars in migration studies suggest that, in general, "educated, professional individuals with high incomes are more likely to migrate because they are aware of the conditions at the place of origin relative to conditions elsewhere and can afford the costs of migrating" (Pettinicchio 2012:723, see also Gimpel and Schuknecht 2001; Irwin et al. 2004; McInnis 1971; Ritchey 1976; Stone 1974; Trovato and Halli 1983). However, the micro-level census data analyzed by Pettinicchio (2012) indicate that in 1960s Québec, "highly educated Francophones [were] less likely, not more likely, to emigrate" (733). Interestingly, the opposite is true for the Anglophones in Pettinicchio's sample—that is, highly educated Anglophones were found to be more likely to emigrate (733). Thus, one might argue that during this period in Québec history, Anglophones conformed to the archetypal image of migrants, whereas Francophones challenged it.

This phenomenon was a result of the "Francization" of Québec's economy during the 1960s (Durocher and Robert 1991:598). Because this economic reform "led to the rise

of the French bourgeoisie," these Franco-phoné élite had more reason to remain in Québec than the Francophone underclass, who sometimes sought more opportunities elsewhere (Durocher and Robert 1991:598). Meanwhile, because the Anglophone upper-class were being displaced by the Francophone bourgeoisie, they had a particularly strong reason to emigrate to more Anglophone areas of Canada (Pettinicchio 2012:720).

My informant, François, echoed some of these findings in our interview. He identified his migrant parents as belonging to the underclass of Francophones in Québec:

My dad was working for the city shoveling snow in winter and sweeping streets the rest of the time. Our family of six lived in a two-bedroom apartment and rented out one room for income. My mother had the other bedroom and the rest of us were in the living room. My dad had no education, prospects or money. ... My mom suffered from terrible depression and was frequently in bed. She had a bit more education (grade 9), but no ability to work, and no money. (personal communication, March 26, 2013)

He also iterated a general class division between Francophones who migrated and those who stayed. Referring to the economic state of those who left, he said: "At first, I thought I only knew poor French people because my parents were poor French people. As I grew older, it became obvious that the other kind did not exist [outside of Québec]" (personal communication, March 25, 2013). Moreover, he claimed that his experience suggested to him that "the highly educated and moneyed classes of Francophone Québec did not leave the province [during the Quiet Revolution]" (personal communication, March 25, 2013).

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François argued that the economic disadvantage in Québec was probably the main reason why poor Francophones migrated west from Québec during this time (but theory, not practice, informed this generalization): "If I'm right that, in B.C., we find mostly poor Francophones who left during the QR [Quiet Revolution]...it would be hard to imagine causation owing to much other than pocketbook reasons" (personal communication, March 25, 2013). Thus, François viewed low socio-economic status not only as correlating with migration in this context, but as causing it, as well.

One of the limitations of Pettinicchio's (2012) research is that it "did not speak directly to possible individual-level motives for leaving Québec" (728). Thus, it is useful to look at oral histories to complicate oversimplified theories and gain insight into the many nuanced reasons for migration. While François admitted that economic conditions played a large role in his family's decision to move, he identified other factors at work, such as family connections. At the time of their migration, François' father had most of his extended family living in a small town in British Columbia. François recalled:

By April 1967, my dad, at least, had had enough of the QR [Quiet Revolution]'s fomenting aspects, as noise of violence was now spreading. However, I think my dad was looking for a reason to move back to the relative comforts of [the small town in British Columbia], where his parents and brothers (though not his sisters [who were in Manitoba]) were located. (personal communication, March 25, 2013)

This passage suggests that the political climate was more of an excuse to justify

their departure than the real motivating factor; rather, the desire to rejoin family appears to be the stronger motivation. François revealed that the reason his father needed another excuse to move to British Columbia is because his mother was apprehensive about leaving Québec. When they did move, she had a difficult time adjusting: "My mom was homesick, couldn't speak English, had her entire family in Québec" (personal communication, March 25, 2013). He remembers his parents arguing over whether to leave the province and he believes that, in this regard, his mother's wishes were bypassed in favour of his father's.

Another factor that influenced their decision to move was the social upheaval that was happening in Québec at the time (see Durocher and Rocher 1991). François mentioned that prior to the Quiet Revolution, his parents had learned to depend on the institutions of church and state being almost indistinguishable. By the 1960s, this system was being challenged and breaking down before their eyes. As a result, "social norms, previously well defined, were now in upheaval and not reliable" (François, personal communication, March 25, 2013). Moreover, François recalled that as the Quiet Revolution gave way to the Québec sovereignty movement, they began to hear of the kidnappings and murders by political extremists like the Front de libération du Québec (FLQ). He remembers this being what tipped the scale for his father: "I heard him say both then and later that once the FLQ was rising that was reason enough to leave" (personal communication, March 25, 2013).

Alienation, Assimilation and Language

François emphasized how far—both geographically and culturally—British Columbia is from Québec when he asserted that, for Francophone Québécois, "B.C. might as well be Mars" (personal communication,

March 25, 2013). As a result of being immersed in a distant alien culture, he experienced a stark visibility and audibility in his new community. When I asked him to speak about how he stood out as a Francophone in British Columbia, François dove into a telling story:

When we first moved here, my dad took me to kindergarten on my first day wearing his black fedora and his black overcoat with his black suit and his black shoes with a white shirt and tie. As if he's going to a Montreal Canadiens game. And I'm dressed up as well in my finest Sunday clothes. We go into the basement of St. Joseph's Elementary, walk across the concrete gym floor to Mrs. Winter's class. It's dark, we knock on the door, and all the kids are there already, so I'm going to be a spectacle—there's no hiding.

And I can remember the kids sitting on the carpet, and there's Mrs. Winter who looks to me to be 150 years old, and she says, "What's your name?" but I couldn't understand her. I look up at my dad and he says [in French] "She wants to know what your name is." And I go, "François." All the kids start laughing, my eyes start welling up with tears. I'm five. Then she goes, "We'll call you Frank." I looked at my dad, trying to understand what is happening. More laughter, more tears. The next thing I recall is her asking my dad something that he answered with "Fernand," so I assume she asked for his name. Then she goes, "You'll be Frank, too." More laughter, and my dad turns to me, and says, "C'est rien, ils sont anglais" ["It's nothing, they're English"].

That's how audible I was upon moving. I was very audible. I don't believe I was very visible, but I believe my dad was. Because he looked different to me than all the other Anglos. When we had relatives visit, I thought, "they look like my dad, too." I'm confounding relatives with Francophones. The way we dressed made us visible. The way we dressed was how French Canadians dress. It's more formal. You dress up to go to the Eaton Centre or the hockey game. So that's how you were visible. (personal communication, March 31, 2013)

This story reveals not only how their family was identified and categorized as a minority group, but also how they began to be assimilated. Saturating his oral history is the idea that "language is intimately connected to assimilation" (François, personal communication, March 31, 2013). Like many indigenous groups, this assimilation process occurred primarily in schools (see Marker 2009; Cavalcanti 2010). The schoolroom is where François was forced to adopt an English name, and this is where he began to lose French not only as a language, but also as a culture, a history, a source of role models and pride:

There's no question that my Anglophone education in B.C. brainwashed me. All of my cultural heroes, historical heroes, sports heroes, musical heroes, the romantic history, as well as the kinship to a land were all English. I can remember very distinctly as I'm going through school, we're talking about literature and I realize that everything we read is either Canadian or British. In my mind, that includes Aesop—I'm thinking about him as an English person. By the time I get to

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Grade 8 English, I'm also hearing about American literary people, but no Francophones whatsoever. (personal communication, March 31, 2013)

Here, François emphasizes how French Canadian culture and Francophone individuals were omitted from his education in British Columbia, while Anglophone counterparts took their place. However, he also asserts that while his classes sometimes acknowledged French events or Francophone people, these history lessons were firmly rooted in an Anglophone perspective:

When we study in Social Studies 8, I can remember we did the French Revolution. I can remember I was hearing this for the first time in my life. I'm thinking about it because we're learning about it in terms of the impact it had on the English world. Probably the most notorious Franco-Manitoban is Louis Riel—and he's a criminal. We study him as a criminal and we study how the development of English Manitoba "dealt" with him and the Red River Rebellion. (personal communication, March 31, 2013)

This implies that a more Francophone-centered curriculum would have studied how the French Revolution impacted Francophones, while portraying Louis Riel and the Red River Rebellion as a positive resistance to Canadian Confederation. However, this Francophone perspective was replaced with an Anglophone one in his experience at school, thus contributing to his assimilation. Similarly, Marker (2009) and Cavalcanti (2010) view the foreign, dominant education system as playing a major role in assimilating indigenous populations. However, unlike the Coast Salish in B.C. and the Asheninka in

Brazil, who both challenge these colonial institutions, François believes that he was "the biggest culprit" in his own assimilation (personal communication, March 31, 2013).

Upon migrating, François and his siblings realized right away that they could avoid bullying by getting rid of their "French badges" and assimilating into mainstream Anglophone society (personal communication, March 31, 2013). They did this by introducing themselves by their English names, never speaking French in public, imitating Anglophone accents from television, dressing like their Anglophone peers, and replacing Francophone habits and idioms with English ones. Thus, because standing out meant being bullied and lightly persecuted, he made no attempts to resist assimilation; instead, he did his best to encourage it.

François stopped to explain to me how, even though as a child he felt the bullying was being directed at him personally, he realized later that he was actually being persecuted as a political group during the Québec sovereignty movement:

What you should know is this is all against a backdrop of what people are reading in the newspaper about what's happening in Québec. Québec is becoming a violent, radical place. And this is how I ended up hanging on to my Francophone roots. You would have Anglophones reacting to what was going on in Québec by castigating all Francophones, whether or not they were separatist. They were putting Francophones (or "the French" since Francophone wasn't a category yet) in all the same category, whether they were Québécois, Manitoban, separatist, nationalist, migrants, whatever. ... I was still part of that identifiable group, and those

[Anti-French] sentiments are being expressed *despite* the fact that I'm there [in Penticton, hence not a Québécois separatist]. (personal communication, March 31, 2013)

This narrative also reveals that he was unable to completely assimilate, despite his best efforts. He remembered coming to this realization as an older child:

I learned how poorly we were doing at that [blending in] when we were in the neighbourhood, age 10, and my brothers and I are chasing these two kids called the Lemkes. We learned they belonged to this group called the Ukes. So we were in their yard, yelling at them, calling them Ukes because other kids were doing that, too—we had no idea what a Uke was. The mom comes to the door: “What are you boys doing calling my boys Ukes? How'd you like it if I called you a frog?” We'd never heard the expression before. We were dumbfounded. I remember staring at her, processing what it might mean. And then we learned, everyone knows we're Francophones! (personal communication, March 31, 2013)

Even now, as an adult that never returned to live in French Canada, he feels that he still does not fit in with Anglophones. He has kept up all the “fitting in” strategies he employed as a child—all except the name “Frank,” which he abandoned as an adult in favour of “François.” His surname, too, he continues to pronounce as a French name instead of an English one (interestingly, his brothers have continued with the English versions of their first and last names). This practice suggests that François wants to maintain at least some of his Francophone identity; but while he

might consider it a small token of that identity, Anglophones consider it to be much more significant, according to his experience. He insists that using his French name results in Anglophones quickly identifying him as an Other in social interactions: “As soon as I say my name, either I am signaling or they believe I am signaling, that I'm a Francophone. Thus, I'm not one of them” (personal communication, March 31, 2013). These reactions suggest that his assimilation was only ever partial and that he never became completely invisible or inaudible (see Wanhalla 2011).

Furthermore, François feels that he is “not accepted in Québec as anything but an Anglophone due to my upbringing post-departure. ... I'm an outsider in Québec like how everyone who leaves Québec is expected by the Québécois to lose their [French] language ability” (personal communication, March 31, 2013). Here he revealed the English language to be a double-edged sword: both the key to his successful assimilation in B.C. and now the cause of his alienation in Québec. Ultimately, this meant that François did not belong anywhere: “I am a foreigner in Quebec and I'm a foreigner in B.C.... a man without a country. And that expression is not unique to me” (personal communication, March 31, 2013).

According to Hallett, Chandler and Lalonde (2007), the threat of losing one's language—and by extent, one's culture—is “more real and more pressing” for Aboriginals than immigrants (393). They argue that this is because immigrants have a homeland full of native speakers whereas aboriginals do not. And while it is true insofar as the existence of Québec and France has guaranteed the continued existence of the French language (unlike Aboriginal languages on the verge of extinction), this provides little consolation to the individual migrant. For

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François, the survival of the French language in Québec is not very relevant; what concerns him more is that learning to speak English has directly infringed on his sense of belonging in Francophone society. After all, what good is it for Québec to be filled with Francophones if they do not accept him as one of their own? Meanwhile, the Anglophone community has not completely accepted him either, even after his diligent efforts to assimilate himself into their society.

Conclusion

This article incorporates original oral history into the existing research on Francophone Canadians, migration studies, cultural assimilation, and language loss. François' recollections as a Francophone in an Anglophone society highlight his family's experiences in each of these areas of research. In sum, what I am arguing in this article is threefold: (1) the motivations of these Francophone migrants were complex, involving not only politico-economic reasons but also social and personal ones, (2) their subsequent experiences of alienation and assimilation were intimately connected to language and were sometimes self-enforced to prevent low-level persecution, (3) this partial assimilation resulted in a lack of belonging in both their original and adopted communities. Although François' oral history is not as generalizing as census data, it provides an eye-opening, in-depth account of a migrant family. When compared to other oral histories, this account may reveal surprising similarities or differences that scholars have not yet discovered. Therefore, more oral histories should be collected in order to conduct a collaborative comparison of Francophone interprovincial migrants during the Quiet Revolution.

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