

GOSNELL, JONATHAN. *Franco-America in the Making: The Creole Nation Within.* (France Overseas: Studies in Empire and Decolonization.) Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2018. Pp. 347. ISBN-10: 978-0803285279

VERMETTE, DAVID. *A Distinct Alien Race: The Untold Story of Franco-Americans. Industrialization, Immigration, Religious Strife.* Montréal: Baraka Books, 2018. Pp. 388. ISBN-13: 978-1771861496

reviewed by Leslie Choquette, *Institut français, Assumption College*

In his 2016 survey of Franco-American scholarship, historian Yves Frenette distinguishes between periods of “boom” (1961-2001) and “decline” (2002-2015) in historiographical production over the past eight decades.¹ Attributing the twenty-first-century downturn to the waning of ethnic consciousness and lower popularity of social history, Frenette concludes: “It would be surprising for the situation to change and for Franco-America to spark renewed interest on the part of historians.” He may be right: neither author of these two synthetic monographs—*Franco-America in the Making: The Creole Nation Within* (2018) and *A Distinct Alien Race: The Untold Story of Franco-Americans. Industrialization, Immigration, Religious Strife* (2018)—is a historian by training. Both authors, however, have done original research, and their significant contributions, along with Frenette’s current collaborative project on “Francophone Migrations in North America, 1640-1940,” may provide hope that another, perhaps more interdisciplinary boom is in store.

Jonathan Gosnell’s *Franco-America in the Making: The Creole Nation Within* takes an expansive view of its subject, defining Franco-Americans as French-speakers “born in the New World, of French, French-Canadian, Acadian, Native American, African, and Caribbean descent.” The author’s focus, however, is on the United States, where the French constitute a “fifth largest and forgotten ethnic group.” Like geographers Dean Louder and Eric Waddell, Gosnell, a professor of French Studies at Smith College, wishes to excavate the “French cultural residue” that “remains obscured yet present in the industrial centers of New England and on the prairies and in the bayous of south Louisiana.”² In contrast to early-twentieth-century scholars who reified the qualities of an eternal French “race,” Gosnell emphasizes processes of creolization resulting from cultural and racial diversity and hybridity. His first chapter provides a succinct historical survey, after which he examines Franco-American cultural institutions, women’s associations, ethnic literature, and the ethnic press in a series of thematic chapters centered on New England. His final chapter looks at French traditions in Louisiana, which represent a fusion of French, African, and indigenous experiences. In his conclusion, Gosnell writes, “A French life constructed by resolute dreamers has rebuffed dominant cultural forces. Franco-Americans are still in the process of making themselves.”

Throughout the book, however, Gosnell's rhetoric oscillates between pessimism—as in his observation that Franco-America “primarily exists as a collection of wistful ruminations of scholar-advocates”—and hoping against hope for a French cultural renaissance, even claiming one has already occurred. This rhetoric mimics the ambivalent discourse of *survivance*, which alternately celebrates the heroic struggle for cultural survival and mourns its inevitable failure, absent providential intervention.³

The institutional survey of his inaugural chapter belies its full title: “Cultural Institutions and French Renaissance in America.” The institutions of *survivance* with which he begins—parishes, schools, and mutual aid societies—have either disappeared or are no longer ethnically based, never mind francophone; the formerly “Franco colleges and universities” that link “a historic ethnic past and a more hybrid future,” as Gosnell contends, seem only to do so with fragility. At Assumption College, where I have taught for thirty years, the only traces of the French past are inscriptions that no one reads (see Gosnell's photo on p. 64 of his book) and our (admittedly excellent) special collections on Franco-American history and culture. Some current students have French family names, but few of them study French or self-identify as Franco-American.

Ironically, rather than claims about the present, the strength of this chapter lies in Gosnell's historical research, particularly on an institution rarely associated with the French-Canadian diaspora: the Alliance Française. Ironies abound. Founded in Paris in 1883, this republican, secular, and colonialist institution flourished among conservative, Catholic Franco-Americans in New England mill towns through the first half of the twentieth century. The association's goal of promoting global French usage provided common ground with advocates of *survivance*, who also hoped to use French cultural prestige to overcome stereotypes and improve their social status. Antoine Clément, editor of Lowell's French-language newspaper in the 1930s, called the town's Alliance chapter “an instrument of culture for all of our elite,” adding: “elevating the prestige of Franco-Americans in the eyes of other American groups who surround them, that is the objective....” Of course, as Franco-Americans aged, assimilated, and moved out of mill towns, these Alliance branches began to disappear. (Worcester's dissolved formally in 2002.) Today's branches in larger urban areas concentrate on language teaching and have little to do with Franco-Americans. Curiously, this chapter does not discuss the only Franco-American institutions that continue to attract members, albeit older ones: local genealogical societies.

In chapter three, “Women's Social Clubs and the Transmission of Culture,” Gosnell shifts to participant observation, sharing his experience attending the meetings of several Franco-American women's associations in Massachusetts. These clubs all once belonged to an umbrella organization called the Fédération Féminine Franco-Américaine, which, at its height in the 1950s, coordinated 110 societies with over 47,000 members. Until its dissolution in 2001, the “Fédé” emphasized women's contributions to *survivance*, promoting their role as keepers and transmitters of French language and culture, both in the home and in public. Like the Fédé, the Cercle des Dames Françaises also no longer exists. Founded in Springfield in 1930, it disbanded in 2007, after Gosnell had begun his research. With its mission “to encourage French cultural life

and correct spoken language,” the Cercle des Dames Françaises appealed to the wives and daughters of the local Franco-American elite. Concerned with etiquette and decorum (members addressed each other as “Madame” and used the formal *vous*), it sponsored debutante balls through the 1980s. Members expressed their transnational and translingual ethnic identity by opening meetings with “La Marseillaise,” “Ô Canada,” and “The Star-Spangled Banner,” in that order; however, by the early 2000s, their published newsletter contained many French mistakes.

The two extant clubs are the Cercle Jeanne Mance de Lowell, founded in 1931, and the Association des Dames Franco-Américaines in Chicopee, established in 1953. The Cercle Jeanne Mance, which originally had affiliates in Worcester and Woonsocket, resembled the Cercle des Dames Françaises in its devotion to ethnic uplift; it fostered “study of the French language, religion, sciences, and literature.” It persists in its efforts to conduct club business in French, but conversation turns to English after official business concludes. When I gave a talk to the club last spring, I noticed a generational shift not mentioned by Gosnell: the oldest members knew French, but most of their middle-aged daughters did not. Nonetheless, they decided I should speak to them in French, which retains its symbolic value as a marker of ethnicity, a legacy of the ideology of *survivance*. The Association des Dames Franco-Américaines, with a more working-class membership, focuses more on leisure activities like card games, though it also raises money for college scholarships. Meetings begin in French with a prayer, the (translated) Pledge of Allegiance, and the singing of “Ô Canada,” with linguistic help from cue cards, before switching to English. French is now a foreign language, although its limited and imperfect use remains meaningful. The ethnic social club, Gosnell concludes, “is all that remains of the extensive organizational structure within Franco-American communities.” It is difficult to see this as an example of Franco-America in the making.

The ensuing three chapters on Franco-American literature, French-language newspapers, and French culture in Louisiana are less original, since they are mostly based on materials familiar to specialists. The chapter on literature, without trying to be exhaustive, examines an assortment of twentieth-century works in French and English as a lens through which to understand Franco-American experience. In both languages, Gosnell argues, “autobiographical fiction is the genre of choice in Franco-American letters, addressing concerns about cultural, social, economic, and political realities.” His claim that “writing Franco culture through the medium of English constitutes an original contribution” is more dubious. Couldn’t this be said of United States ethnic literatures in general—Jewish and Italian, for example, as much as French-Canadian? To my mind, what is unique to Franco-American writers in English (some of them, anyway) is their intense anxiety about language loss, a hangover from *survivance* ideology. If Franco-American identity is constructed solely through French language, Catholic faith, and French-Canadian cultural traditions, then language loss becomes an existential problem rather than a natural adaptation to new social realities.

Gosnell describes New England’s French newspapers (there were nearly 250 of them from 1868 to 1995) as “an informative road map to Franco-America and its inhabitants,” given “their purposeful representation of the needs and desires of the Franco-American community.”

But these claims need to be narrowed: what the newspapers really provide is a road map to *survivance* ideology, as interpreted by the Franco-American elite. This is not to diminish their importance. The newspapers' "affirmations of simultaneous French cultural and American national identity" reveal a concept of citizenship that divorces national allegiance from language, religion, and culture. In this vision, strongly contested by American nativists, Franco-Americans were *loyaux mais Français*.⁴

Gosnell's final chapter focuses on the creolized francophone world of Louisiana music, food, and folkways, whether performed or written. He acknowledges that branding—commercialization of Louisiana's multicultural French heritage as "spicy, exotic, sexually promiscuous"—contributes to its persistence, regardless of authenticity. Celebrity chef Emeril Lagasse markets his "Bayou Blast" condiment for its "Cajun heritage" and "zest as a Creole seasoning," as though Cajun and Creole were the same thing. How many of its purchasers realize that Lagasse, who is of French-Canadian and Portuguese ancestry, grew up in Fall River, Massachusetts?

For Gosnell, a self-described Francophile curious about the French-speaking world, the story of Franco-Americans is not his story, yet he discovered its telling to be "quite personal." His evident sympathy for his sources, whether in person or on the page, leads him largely to adopt their perspective. Perhaps a more dispassionate look at Franco-Americans today would focus on "symbolic ethnicity," a sociological theory to which Gosnell briefly refers in his discussion of social clubs, but does not elaborate.

Among white Americans today, ethnic identity tends to be chosen rather than ascribed, and it does not require deep engagement with the language or traditions of the original culture.⁵ Symbolic ethnicity, however, may be more problematic for Franco-Americans than for other white ethnics because for more than a century, Franco-American leaders defined ethnic identity solely in terms of *survivance*, effectively excommunicating anyone who assimilated. In its attempt to bring attention to Franco-American history and identity, David Vermette's new book, *A Distinct Alien Race: The Untold Story of Franco-Americans*, addresses similar issues surrounding cultural survival.

First, let me say simply that this is a terrific book, the best synthesis of Franco-American history written to date. Prompted by the author's own curiosity about his ethnic background, it aims to illuminate "a forgotten episode in U.S. immigration and labor history," one that has left a legacy of approximately ten million Americans. Vermette's narrative addresses main themes in U.S. history including industrialization, cross-border immigration, the contested nature of American citizenship, and the process of assimilation, while providing new insights into social and economic conditions in Québec sending communities. While comprehensive, it uses the history of Brunswick, Maine (Vermette's father's hometown) and Vermette's own family history as a touchstone, to ground major themes in a specific case. Both the research and prose are wonderful (Vermette is a writer, researcher, and editor by profession). Everyone with an interest in Franco-Americans should read this book.

A Distinct Alien Race consists of four parts, each divided into multiple chapters: “From Ships’ Captains to Captains of Industry”; “The Other Side of the Cotton”; “The Reception of Franco-Americans”; and “Tenacity and Modernity.” Unlike previous historians of Franco-Americans, Vermette begins his story not with the farmers of rural Québec, but with the New England merchants who created the textile industry that would employ them. Families like the Cabots invested in textile manufacturing “as a way out of their dependence on risky overseas trades” in both the Atlantic (sugar, slaves, privateering) and Pacific (tea, opium). Pooling capital to reduce their risk, they created the first integrated factory in the U.S. in Waltham in 1814, and the first mill town in Lowell in 1823. To prevent development of a permanent working class, they recruited their labor force among single New England farm girls (who were Protestant and literate), providing them with housing and educational opportunities. Most worked in the mills for no more than five years.

As industrialists embarked on an aggressive program of expansion, native-born workers no longer sufficed. After 1845, the turnover to an immigrant labor force was rapid; the new workers were primarily Irish and French-Canadian, many of the latter recruited by mill agents. From the 1840s through the 1920s, nearly a million French Canadians left Québec for the United States. By 1901, no less than 37% of the French-Canadian population lived south of the border.⁶

Vermette’s discussion of French-Canadian migration to New England in “The Other Side of the Cotton” is very rich, encompassing why the movement happened, who the migrants were, and what their lives were like in the United States. Taking on the hoary stereotype of the “unenterprising, stagnant peasant,” he shows that it had less to do with reality than with ideology on both sides of the border. In Québec, the stereotype helped clerical elites portray French Canadians as a continuation of Old Regime France; in New England, it justified the othering of French-Canadian laborers. Using Canadian census records, Vermette examines several communities on the south bank of the St. Lawrence, linked by chain migration to Brunswick, Maine. He finds not parishes “dying on the vine,” but small communities making their way toward late-nineteenth-century modernity. He concludes: “it was not economic *stagnation* but a measure of *dynamism* that put pressure on the poorer classes of Québec in the nineteenth century. As competition in the agricultural sector increased, farmers retooled their operations or moved to non-agricultural occupations. Some were able to make these transitions while others were not. The changes in agriculture and the growth in the Québec economy divided more sharply the fortunes of those who made this transition from those who did not.”

Surveys of French Canadians in the United States confirm that the story of “the indebted farmer coming to the mills to reestablish the family farm” (a staple of *survivance* ideology) is not the dominant story. Most immigrants were already working for wages in Québec or were unemployed. Many belonged to rural families but neither inherited the family farm nor managed to purchase one of their own. According to Horace Miner’s anthropological study of a lower St. Lawrence village in the 1930s, day-laboring families were less observant Catholics and were looked down upon by their neighbors. They were “more individualistic,” “less under paternal

dominance,” and highly mobile. During the *grand exode*, they were obviously willing to ignore the clerical elite’s agitation against emigration. It is unlikely that most intended to return.

Migration from Québec to New England fits the model of international migration generally, as understood by economists. All four main drivers were present: differential in wages (at least a third in this case); prior migration (clusters of French Canadians all over New England by the end of the Civil War); a large per capita youth population; and relative affordability of relocation (thanks to the railroad system and liquidation of existing assets). As migratory movements go, this one was not unique.

Once in New England, French Canadians provided a cheap labor pool consisting of men, women, and children over the age of eight or nine; the family continued to function as an economic unit modeled on the subsistence farm. Contrary to stereotype, they were not particularly docile. In Brunswick, there were at least four strikes at the Cabot Mill in the 1880s, involving children, women, and men. All were a partial or total success for labor. Although Vermette does not discuss unionization, doing so would only strengthen his argument. In the 1930s, French Canadians flocked to industrial unions despite clerical opposition, turning towns like Fall River, Massachusetts and Woonsocket, Rhode Island into bastions of organized labor.⁷

As immigrants moved into the textile industry, “a certain social stigma” began to be ascribed to mill workers, and mill owners largely abandoned paternalism for profit. In Maine in the 1880s, overcrowded tenements, poor sanitation, and high rates of disease and mortality characterized neighborhoods around the mills, which were identified not by occupation or class but by ethnicity as “French quarters” or (to their inhabitants) *Petits Canadas*.

Despite the immigrants’ evident poverty, relatives in Québec imagined the *oncle des États* as rich, a phenomenon Vermette finds somewhat puzzling. This semi-mythical character probably derives from the French literary trope of the *oncle d’Amérique*, an image combining great wealth with falsity and illusion. Pierre Force has located the origin of the dual image in the historical experience of French immigrants to Saint-Domingue; as the island went from cash cow of the Caribbean to impoverished if independent Black nation, French colonists both made and lost enormous fortunes.⁸ I suspect the same ambiguity may once have been associated with the *oncle des États*. Though New England was no El Dorado, Franco-American shoemaker turned industrialist Tom Plant (1859-1941), who began his career as a boy laborer cutting ice on the Kennebec River, struck it rich and constructed a vast estate on the shore of Lake Winnepesaukee, only to lose everything in the Great Depression.⁹

Vermette’s part three, “The Reception of Franco-Americans,” looks at two waves of nativism affecting French-Canadian and other immigrants to the U.S.—in the 1880s-1890s and the 1920s-1930s. Much of this nativist discourse is depressingly familiar, although it also included a large dose of anti-Catholic paranoia. (The title of Vermette’s book comes from an anti-French screed of 1889.) One of the most original parts of this section deals with the late-nineteenth-century Protestant crusade to convert French Canadians in New England. According to the missionaries, there were 10,000 Franco-American converts by the early 1890s, a thousand of them Baptists. Although conversion was a taboo subject among Catholic Franco-Americans, I

always suspected that it was widespread. My great-grandfather Choquette married a Franco-American woman in Woonsocket's Presbyterian church (after at least one divorce, to be sure). My grandfather Choquette became a nominal Universalist and dedicated Freemason after working as a chauffeur for a minister in the 1920s. I grew up in the 1960s on the Rhode Island-Massachusetts line, where the local Baptist congregation included descendants of both English Canadian immigrants from Nova Scotia and French Canadians. Now I know why.

Two main aspects of the later wave of nativism—the New England Ku Klux Klan (with 523,000 members in the 1920s) and the Vermont Eugenics Project (253 sterilizations of “degenerates” in the 1930s)—have given rise to monographs, used by Vermette to good effect.¹⁰ I was struck by a detail in the Vermont Eugenics Survey, which labeled one allegedly degenerate family as “the Gypsies.” Descended from a Québec immigrant, this “Gypsy Family” was “of mixed ancestry with apparently very strong doses of Indian and Negro.” Several years ago, I was surprised to see my grandfather's family described as Gypsies in a Woonsocket newspaper article from the first decade of the twentieth century. (It detailed a domestic incident requiring police intervention.) I had assumed the term referred to their homelessness, since the article says they were squatters, but if family oral history can be believed, they were also part “Indian.”

Even American liberals were not immune to nativist ideas in this period. Vermette discusses the controversy ignited by labor reformer Carroll D. Wright's characterization of “the Canadian French” as “the Chinese of the Eastern States” in 1881. When Franco-American leaders protested, he convened a hearing at which speaker after speaker came forward to testify to the upstanding citizenship of French-Canadian immigrants. Vermette describes their rebuttal, but not Wright's reaction. During the hearing he listened intently, interrupting only occasionally to ask a question. Afterwards he admitted he had been flat-out wrong. He wrote: “it is very gratifying to know that a wide and rapidly growing movement has arisen among the French Canadians within the past few years, towards becoming citizens, fully identified with us as a permanent and honorable part of our people [...] [I]t is now the settled policy of the Canadian French, who come among us, to come as permanent residents, and to be Americans. Although this movement is recent, yet it is accompanied by such laudable endeavors to acquire a knowledge of our institutions, and to take active and intelligent part in our national life, that doubtless our best wishes concerning them will be realized...With such aspirations and purposes as were manifested at the hearing, complete assimilation with the American people is but a question of time.”¹¹

Among Franco-American leaders committed to *survivance*, Wright's apology provoked even greater outrage than his original (double) ethnic slur, but his prediction proved true. In the last part of the book, “Tenacity and Modernity,” Vermette tackles the question of assimilation that was anathema to the elite. As subsequent generations of Franco-Americans moved out of mill work and ethnic enclaves in search of better education, jobs, and higher economic status, they followed the same assimilationist path as other white American ethnics. Vermette concludes that “ours is a story of *cultural* survival despite *language* loss.”

With this final claim I respectfully disagree. If Franco-Americans had successfully made the transition from ascribed to symbolic ethnicity, their immigration story would not be “forgotten” and “untold.” On the question of ethnic invisibility, two factors are really in play: first, the way in which we, as Americans, remember and commemorate our immigration history; and second, the unique trajectory of different ethnic groups as they acculturate and assimilate into American society. Regarding commemoration, there has been increasing awareness in recent years that memory and history are not the same thing.¹² Memory is not false, but it is selective. It tends to focus on the most dramatic episodes, which acquire mythic status, at the expense of the ordinary. Where immigration is concerned, the stories Americans best remember are: first, English Pilgrims arriving on the Mayflower, even though Plymouth was not the first English settlement in North America; second, the Irish potato famine, which killed half a million people and sent another million into exile, from which they nonetheless emerged triumphant; and third, Ellis Island, the New York processing station, described on its website as “the symbol of American immigration and the immigrant experience.” (My great-great-grandfather, who boarded a train in Marquette and got off a few hours later in Burlington, falls into none of these categories.) Different ethnic groups also find their way into the American melting pot in unique ways. How many Americans are aware that the largest ethnicity in the U.S. today, ahead of African American and Irish, is German?¹³ Two world wars fought and won against Germany put a sudden end to German American symbolic ethnicity.

For Franco-Americans, the problem was *survivance* ideology, which also made symbolic ethnicity impossible. The laser focus on *survivance* by Franco-American ethnic leaders guaranteed their eventual irrelevancy and explains why Franco-American ethnic identity is now confined, as Vermette acknowledges, to a “small group of ardent Franco-Americans,” most of whom either know some French or wish they did. Is this a tragedy? Personally, I am less concerned about ethnic identification than historical amnesia; in this regard, I am delighted that scholars like Gosnell and Vermette are doing their best to bring the Franco-American story back to light.

[1] Yves Frenette, “L’historiographie des Franco-Américains de la Nouvelle-Angleterre, 1872-2015,” *Bulletin d’histoire politique*, 24 (2016): 75-103. My translations.

[2] Dean Louder and Eric Waddell, eds., *Du continent perdu à l’archipel retrouvé. Le Québec et l’Amérique française* (Québec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1983); Dean Louder and Eric Waddell, eds., *Franco-Amérique. Nouvelle édition revue et augmentée* (Québec: Septentrion, 2017).

[3] On the dualities and ambiguities of *survivance* ideology, see Gérard Bouchard, *The Making of the Nations and Cultures of the New World*, trans. Michelle Weinroth and Paul Leduc Browne (Montréal & Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2008), pp. 81-86; and Gérard Bouchard, *Les deux chanoines. Contradiction et ambivalence dans la pensée de Lionel Groulx* (Montréal: Boréal, 2003).

- [4] See Mark Paul Richard, *Loyal but French: The Negotiation of Identity by French-Canadian Descendants in the United States* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2008).
- [5] See Herbert Gans, "Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America," *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 2 (1979): 1-20.
- [6] Yves Roby, *Histoire d'un rêve brisé? Les Canadiens français aux États-Unis* (Sillery: Septentrion, 2007), p. 7.
- [7] See, for example, Gary Gerstle, *Working-class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1914-1960* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1989).
- [8] Pierre Force, *Wealth and Disaster: Atlantic Migration from a Pyrenean Town in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016).
- [9] Barry Rodrigue, *A Castle in the Clouds: Tom Plant and the American Dream* (New York: Archipelago, 2014)
- [10] Mark Paul Richard, *Not a Catholic Nation: The Ku Klux Klan Confronts New England in the 1920s* (Amherst & Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2015); Nancy L. Gallaher, *Breeding Better Vermonters: The Eugenics Project in the Green Mountain State* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1999).
- [11] Carroll D. Wright, "The Canadian French in New England," Commonwealth of Massachusetts, *Thirteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of Statistics of Labor* (Boston, 1882).
- [12] See Pierre Nora, *Rethinking France: Les lieux de mémoire*, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999-2010).
- [13] According to the 2010 census. See Liz O'Connor, Gus Lubin, and Dina Spector, "The Largest Ancestry Groups in the United States, *Business Insider*, August 13, 2013.